# Plural Perspectives in the Social Observation of John Clare

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# Statement of Originality

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# Abstract

My thesis examines social observation in the poetry of John Clare, focusing on his work in the years before he was committed to an asylum in 1837. The project illuminates a plurality of perspectives in his poetry that has not been fully recognized in previous critical studies. It resituates the conventional scholarly approach to Clare, which has been preoccupied by an overly oppositional conception of the 'two cultures' that he inhabited: the oral and the literary. My thesis positions him as an intellectually curious seeker whose poetry is invigorated by his experience of different value systems in both the country and the city. Each chapter considers how Clare develops different strategies of social observation in the context of different discourses, and how he unsettles the validity of various attitudes to human behaviour.

Chapter One, 'Naturalizing Perspectives', offers a new approach to Clare's interest in natural history, by examining its influence on his portrayal of human behaviour, when he adopts the detailed observational habits of the naturalist. Chapter Two, 'Refined Perspectives', shows how he negotiates the influences of poets who represented the social structure of rural life, and poets who were interested in rural subjectivity, in order to identify the distinctiveness of his presentation of customary culture in 'The Village Minstrel'. Chapter Three, 'Female Perspectives', considers his interest in his female readership, and examines how his courtship tales – which have generally been neglected by critics – engage with the concerns about conduct and social elevation that occupied the literature aimed for this audience. Chapter Four, 'National Perspectives', examines how he responds to the ferment of political ideas in his time through his representations of the nation – another area that has been little served in critical studies. My Conclusion considers Clare's later poetry in the asylum and his developing self-consciousness as a social observer.

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# Abbreviations and Conventions

| | |
|---|---|
| *Autobiographical Writings* | *John Clare's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by Eric Robinson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) |
| *By Himself* | *John Clare By Himself*, ed. by Eric Robinson and David Powell (Ashington and Manchester: Mid-Northumberland Arts Group and Carcanet, 1996) |
| *CFTP* | John Clare, *A Champion for the Poor: Political Verse and Prose*, ed. by P. M. S. Dawson, Eric Robinson and David Powell (Ashington and Manchester: Mid Northumberland Arts Group and Carcanet Press, 2000) |
| *Cottage Tales* | John Clare, *Cottage Tales*, ed. by Eric Robinson, David Powell and P. M. S. Dawson (Ashington and Manchester: Mid-Northumberland Arts Group and Carcanet, 1993) |
| *Critical Heritage* | *John Clare: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Mark Storey (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973) |
| Eg. MS | British Library, Egerton Manuscript |
| *EP* | *The Early Poems of John Clare, 1804–1822*, ed. by Eric Robinson, David Powell and Margaret Grainger, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) |
| *JCSJ* | *John Clare Society Journal* (Peterborough: The John Clare Society, 1982–present) |
| *Letters* | *The Letters of John Clare*, ed. by Mark Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) |
| *LP* | *The Later Poems of John Clare, 1837–1864*, ed. by Eric Robinson, David Powell and Margaret Grainger, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) |
| *MP* | John Clare, *Poems of the Middle Period, 1822–1837*, ed. by Eric Robinson, David Powell and P. M. S. Dawson, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996–2003) |
| *NHPW* | *The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare*, ed. by Margaret Grainger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) |
| Nor. MS | Northampton Manuscript, held at Northampton Central Library |

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| *Northampton Catalogue* | [Powell, David], *Catalogue of the John Clare Collection in the Northampton Public Library* (Northampton: Northampton Public Libraries, 1964) |
| Pet. MS | Peterborough Manuscript, held at Peterborough Central Library |
| *Prose* | *The Prose of John Clare*, ed. by J. W. and Anne Tibble (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951) |

References to Clare's poems are cited within the text, where it is not intrusive to do so, by page number or line number as appropriate. The Egerton Manuscripts are cited using folio (fol.) numbers. Citations of newspapers and periodicals only contain page references when the publication provides page numbers.

For the most part, I have not corrected Clare's spelling or punctuation, though square brackets are used to indicate missing words or letters that have been inserted either by the editors of the quoted editions or by myself, for the purposes of clarity. I have not inserted '[*sic*]' into any quotations by Clare. I have included sentence-spaces in prose quotations of Clare, when they are provided in the quoted editions, in order to help the reader. In verse quotations of Clare, I have imitated the layout as provided in the Oxford editions. I use '[*del.* ]' to indicate where a manuscript or edition indicates Clare's deletion of a word; '[*del.* ?]' indicates that the deleted letter or word is indecipherable.

# Introduction

In 1825, John Clare wrote a letter to William Hone, the antiquarian and editor of the *Every-Day Book*, describing various customs of Northamptonshire which might be of interest to Hone and his readers. Before detailing the raucous practices of Plough Monday, Clare added: 'I am sorry to bring a dirty reality so near your poetical description'.[1] Several years earlier, at the beginning of Clare's career, Edward Drury, a local bookseller who guided him in his first attempts at publication, despaired that the poet prized above all his 'dirty verse'.[2] Indeed, in the 1820 poem 'To Captain Sherwill Jun.' (*EP*, II, 64–68), Clare gently mocked his publisher John Taylor's efforts to 'wash' his verse:

> Theres T[aylo]r muses good old chuckey
> That like a carful hen or duckey
> Brought off her brood that long unlucky
> Unhatchd had lain
> & where bad words their plumes did muckey
> Washt out the stain
> (ll. 103–08)

If Clare were to 'wash' his own verse for his readers, it would not be a straightforward procedure. Audience expectations in the early nineteenth century were diverse and inconsistent, placing value on different methods of rural representation: some readers desired reassuring, idealized depictions of village life; some wanted an overseeing, moralistic view on labouring-class behaviour; and some were curious – indeed, titillated – to discover more about the exotic, 'dirty reality' of rural existence. Clare responded to this variety of audience expectations with a variety of poetic strategies.

This thesis examines the plurality of perspectives that Clare uses in his social observation, and so resituates his work – moving away from the overly oppositional 'two cultures' approach which routinely places the poet as torn between the culture of

[1] Clare to Hone (April 1825), in *Cottage Tales*, p. 142.
[2] Drury to Taylor (20 February 1820), in *Critical Heritage*, p. 60.

the country and the culture of the city. Clare inhabited a rural community which itself did not accord with a single set of values, but rather exhibited contrasting and often provocative attitudes to social behaviour. As well as the influences of the Law and the Church, villagers in the early nineteenth century were also attentive to the values of behaviour espoused in their own rituals of rural culture, be they in superstitious practices, rough sports or old tales.

Within this context, Clare presents an especially unusual case: a man who, in addition to his life as a village labourer, was immersed in literary culture – writing and publishing volumes of poetry, visiting London on several occasions, and conversing with notable intellectual and artistic figures of his day. Clare's non-standard upbringing made him more alert than many of his contemporaries – rural or urban – to the existence of disparate value systems. His experiences enabled him to understand alternative, socially conditioned attitudes to humanity and human behaviour, providing their own reinterpretations of 'morality' and acceptable conduct. This awareness is evident in the various poetic perspectives he adopts.

In Clare's poetry, different value systems sit in tension with one another. He is aware of what is at stake in various methods of rural representation, and is able to produce a perspective without fully embracing it – that is, he shows its limitations. Thus, for example, Clare can demonstrate a moral view which conforms to a contemporary polite reader's expectations of propriety, but then displace it – implying that it is a view bound to a particular class, or is indeed merely a provisional viewpoint that only applies to a certain set of circumstances. His pluralist, or indeed fragmented, approach to social commentary critiques the idea that human behaviour can be judged according to a set of universal values, and complicates the Whiggish interpretation of historical change as a linear narrative of progress that follows a single, 'civilizing' code of behaviour, as theorized in the twentieth century by Norbert Elias in *The Civilizing*

*Process*.[3] Clare is continually trying to find space for new ways of seeing and valuing human activity. His pluralism gestures towards his own, divided experience.

**Embeddedness and Disembeddedness**

Clare frequently represents his experience of social conditions in terms that resemble the modern-day sociological concept of 'disembedding', which has been developed by Anthony Giddens in *The Consequences of Modernity*. Giddens conceptualizes a transition from pre-modern, traditional cultures to modern cultures, and describes the effects that these new conditions have on the formation of identity. Giddens depicts this transition as a sudden, violent change rather than a gradual process – he speaks of 'the discontinuities which have torn the modern away from the traditional' – which suggests that modern individuals have irrevocably lost an earlier, pre-modern way of living.[4]

Giddens claims that the transition from the traditional to the modern world involves the 'disembedding of social systems', where disembedding is defined as 'the "lifting out" of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space'.[5] The 'prime condition' for disembedding is the 'separation of time and space'. In pre-modern, traditional societies, place and space largely coincide, since the spatial dimensions of social life are dominated by localized activities. In conditions of modernity, by contrast, individuals foster relations with absent others, beyond face-to-face interaction. Giddens states:

> [...] place becomes increasingly *phantasmagoric*: that is to say, locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them. What structures the locale is not simply that which is present on the

[3] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, ed. by Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom, and Stephen Mennell, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, rev. edn (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000; published in German, 1939), p. x.
[4] Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), p. 77.
[5] Giddens, p. 21.

> scene; the 'visible form' of the locale conceals the distanciated relations which determine its nature.[6]

Giddens argues that, alongside this transition, the nature of reflexivity alters. In pre-modern society, reflexivity is primarily linked to the reinterpretation and clarification of tradition: 'In oral cultures, tradition is not known as such, even though these cultures are the most traditional of all.' In conditions of modernity, however, reflexivity takes on a different character: 'The reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character.' Therefore, in the modern era, tradition has to be defended in the light of incoming information.[7]

Such revision is applied to all aspects of human life in modern societies. Writing, in particular, 'creates a perspective of past, present and future in which the reflexive appropriation of knowledge can be set off from designated tradition'. This modern reflexivity breeds reflection about the nature of reflection itself, and the result is unsettling for the individual: the modern world is 'thoroughly constituted in and through reflexively applied knowledge, but where at the same time we can never be sure that any given element of that knowledge will not be revised'. Reflexivity thus impinges on identity formation in modern societies. As the individual experiences the loss of an 'embedded affinity to place', the construction of the self becomes a reflexive project.[8]

The inclination to think about complex historical change as a clear contrast between stages has precedents in eighteenth-century writing. The 'stadial' theory of history, that was proposed by Adam Smith and John Millar among others, described the progression of human society through successive developmental stages, based upon different modes of subsistence – hunter-gathering, pastoral, agricultural, and commercial – which determine how people behave. Thus mankind moves from

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[6] Giddens, pp. 20, 18–19.
[7] Giddens, pp. 37, 38.
[8] Giddens, pp. 37, 39, 117.

inhabiting localized pastoral and agricultural communities to living in a modern, commercial society in which individuals engage in complex interactions with a range of de-localized influences. A clear contrast between stages is also evident in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who perceived modern society as being corrupted in comparison to earlier, more innocent societies.[9]

Stadial theory prompts the idea that a civilized individual might find a reflection of his or her society in its past existence by observing the structure and behaviour of a less civilized community. This type of perspective fuelled and was supported by the close observation of apparently 'primitive' cultures, located both overseas, as explored by Captain Cook in the South Pacific, and in the historical past, as explored by antiquarians. By the time that Clare was writing, the interest in localized, 'primitive' communities – as a contrast to modern life – was a feature of many literary works. Examples included antiquarian collections such as Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802–03), which 'recovers' songs from the past in order to define the character of the border communities, but also 'refines' these songs according to the civilized tastes of the present day; national tales such as Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800), in which a fictionalized, gentlemanly English editor, who presents and glosses the first-person narrative of a supposedly illiterate Irish servant, demonstrates an enlightened, disdainful view on the contemporary Irish peasantry; and poems such as Robert Bloomfield's *The Farmer's Boy* (1800), which offers a portrayal of village life that infuses the pastoral mode with realist observation.

In contrast to these authors, Clare writes about a community which he still inhabited. He often represents his village of Helpston as having undergone a very sudden change, from the coherent past of his childhood – when it resembles what Giddens would term a 'pre-modern', embedded community – to an uncertain present.

[9] On these eighteenth-century conceptions of historical change, see Ronald L. Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

He expresses this sharp transition with a strong element of nostalgia. Crucially, Clare often shows how the transition impacted upon his sense of identity; therefore, Giddens's theory is useful for approaching his work and the condition of loss that he expresses. Clare points to a split between a lost identity, that takes the appearance of an 'embedded' condition, and his present identity. He continually frames his autobiographical experience according to disjunctive episodes, such as his 'trespass' aged thirteen into Burghley Park to read Thomson's *The Seasons,* and the oncoming of parliamentary enclosure in Helpston.[10] Thus Clare tends to write about a subjective experience of loss, in which material changes appear to affect his sense of identity, in a manner that resembles Giddens's idea of disembedding and its causes.

Therefore, as readers, it is important to recognize that Clare's subjective impressions frame his social observation, rather than reading his poetry as providing purely objective historical detail. The Helpston of Clare's childhood was not a community insulated from the effects of modernity, but rather a place where oral and literary cultures were already intertwined, where literate people might read local newspapers to illiterate people, and where a child like Clare was able to attend school in Glinton (for however short a period). Accordingly, Clare's poetry actually shows different levels of education among the labouring poor, from those who seem illiterate to those who read poetry. However substantial the changes that Clare actually experienced to his material conditions, any absolute split from a traditional culture to a modern one that he offers is necessarily subjective.

[10] For Clare's account of reading Thomson, see *By Himself,* p. 11.

**Outline of Chapters**

John Goodridge sounds an important warning for any scholars of Clare: 'attempts to impose too prescriptive or systematic a critical structure on his work tend to be ineffective. The variety and intellectual omnivorousness evident throughout Clare's writings demand a matching flexibility and openness in his critics.'[11] My approach does not seek to contain Clare under a definite system, but rather to re-contextualize his contradictions and ambiguities – what might be termed his negative capability. The thesis examines his social observation in various contexts, each of the four chapters outlining a different set of discourses in which he participates. Each chapter explores different strategies of social observation, or 'perspectives', that Clare uses in his poetry, in response to these discourses.

The first chapter, 'Naturalizing Perspectives', approaches Clare in relation to changes in the practice of natural history in the period, as scientists turned their gaze towards human behaviour. In particular, the eighteenth-century voyages of exploration led by Captain Cook presented a method of observing 'other' human communities which focused on the cultural context of activities, and coupled this focus with a notable lack of moralizing. The chapter outlines Clare's own interest in natural history, and its influence on his poetry of social observation. In various cases, Clare frames customary behaviour as if it were 'natural' behaviour – placing it within the cultural context of a hermetically sealed community and avoiding moral judgement. This poetic method, resembling a kind of cultural anthropology, allows him to represent some of the darker aspects of rural life, particularly cruelty towards animals. At the end of the chapter, I use this interpretation to attend to his famous depiction of badger-baiting in 'The Badger' –

[11] John Goodridge, *John Clare and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 8.

a work which, I argue, presents a more ambiguous viewpoint than many critics have allowed.

The second chapter, 'Refined Perspectives', considers Clare's long poem 'The Village Minstrel', in the context of two kinds of poetic precedent: those writers, such as Duck, Goldsmith, Crabbe and Bloomfield, who attended to the general social structure of rural life; and others, such as Beattie and Wordsworth, whose work was interested in the development of rural subjectivity, and whose presentation of individual consciousness frequently concealed social structure. Clare accommodates and transforms this dual poetic inheritance to present a distinctive perspective on customary culture in his poem. He narrates the development of a refined protagonist, Lubin, and places him in the context of a vivid rural community from which he is not entirely separate, in order to present boorish, masculine behaviour from a variable distance. Lubin's sympathy for marginalized social groups – be they labourers, shepherds or gypsies – sets up a parallel between his consciousness of his own highly individualized, 'disembedded' state, and the sense of displacement felt by the rural poor following enclosure. 'The Village Minstrel' raises the possibility for Lubin to act as a spokesperson for a variety of social groups in the village, heralding a new form of solidarity.

The third chapter, 'Female Perspectives', approaches Clare's poetry in the context of his female readership. It considers the concerns with conduct, courtship and social elevation that occupied the literature aimed for such an audience – concerns that were propagated in conduct books and then internalized in the poetic tales of Bloomfield and Crabbe. In this context, the chapter examines Clare's courtship tales, written in the mid-1820s, as consciously literary productions. Attending to the historical evidence of labouring-class courtship in this period, it examines how he mediates depictions of rural sexuality for a polite audience. His representation of the experience

of labouring-class females directly appeals to the interests of his middle-class audience, as well as providing a parallel to his own experience as a writer concerned with 'refinement'.

In the fourth chapter, 'National Perspectives', the geographical scope of my study widens, as I approach Clare in the context of the shifting national-political conditions following the battle of Waterloo. Various ways of 'imagining the nation' were possible for a writer like Clare in this period, each valuing different aspects of national experience: the levelling, patriotic celebrations that invoked the nation's military might; the conception of a stable, hierarchical economic order which benefitted all ranks; and the responses to the politically fraught period in the early 1830s, when the 'Captain Swing' rural disturbances occurred in Clare's own locality – responses that might be conservative, such as Mary Mitford's portrayal of the sealed rural community which exemplifies 'Englishness', or radical, such as William Cobbett's identification of an emergent class-consciousness. The chapter considers Clare's participation in this discourse, examining his various attempts to relate his local experience to a national consciousness, and the tensions which arise when he does. His poetry demonstrates increasing scepticism as to whether one can find a unifying idea of the nation; his difficulties also bring forward a sense of increased self-consciousness as a 'local' writer.

The four chapters each present Clare working within the value systems of different discourses: natural history, masculine subjectivity, feminine subjectivity, and ideas of the nation. The perspectives that Clare derives from each of these discourses collectively show his continual struggle to mediate 'dirty reality' for a polite but varied readership. Each allows him to focus upon different aspects of rural life: in the first two chapters, his poetry mediates depictions of violent or boorish behaviour; in the third chapter, it is concerned with sexuality and courtship; in the fourth chapter, it illuminates the politically charged discontent of the labourer. In each case, Clare's poetry shows

how different ways of valuing human behaviour may be held in tension with one another: for example, when the 'naturalizing', amoral view rubs up against a more conventional, moralizing view. Such tensions illuminate Clare's capacity to adopt a perspective while at the same time acknowledging its limitations, and therefore its fictiveness.

The chronology of the four chapters is only partially linear. The central focuses of Chapters Two, Three and Four broadly sit in chronological order: respectively, 'The Village Minstrel' (1821), the courtship narratives of the 1820s, and the political engagement that culminated in 'The Hue & Cry' of 1830. Chapter One, however, covers poetry across this entire time period – the hermetically sealed labouring-class community, as discussed in this chapter, is an image to which Clare continually returns, even while he presents a community porous to outside influences in other poems.

The overlapping simultaneity of the poems in the chapters, however problematic, exemplifies the persistent variety and richness in Clare's poetic project. We struggle to place Clare because he never stood still. What can be identified over this period is a perennial and increasing self-consciousness about the problems involved in social observation. In the latest poems under discussion – 'The Badger', discussed in the first chapter, and 'The Hue & Cry', in the fourth chapter – the difficulty of representing the village community appears to reach its highest pitch.

**Critical Context: Two Approaches to Clare**

My argument resituates the overly divisive 'two cultures' approach to Clare's work which persists among scholars to the present day. Eric Robinson summarizes this

polarity, when he states that Clare is 'poised uneasily between two cultures, the oral culture of his native village and the literate culture to which as a writer he aspired'.[12]

The more long-standing critical approach has emphasized Clare's sense of attachment to his 'native village', by acknowledging the 'local' quality of his work. This tendency is testament to the continuing importance of John Barrell's work on the poet, particularly *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*. For Barrell, after enclosure had irrevocably altered the landscape, Clare had to reassess his own sense of identity and thus crafted a new way of thinking about place. The poet's open-field sense of space gave way to a 'desire to write "locally" [...] that becomes around 1821 and 1822 Clare's main preoccupation'. For Barrell, the local perspective shows the experience of an individual belonging to a particular class in a particular time, who writes about Helpston 'not as it is typical of other places, but as it is individual; and individual not because it is different, but because it was the only place he knew'. Clare achieves this style in his mature poetry, casting off poetic conventions and incorporating local dialect. His refusal to suppress awkward 'local' details within a harmonious landscape means that he cannot countenance any sense of hierarchy among the objects he lists; this, in itself, is evidence of a place-specific sense of fellow-feeling.[13]

This emphasis on the local perspective recognizes Clare as a sophisticated writer, but one who belonged to the bounds of the village, rather than one who participated in literary culture and mixed among other writers in London. Furthermore, the championing of the local vision may be linked to the celebration of Clare's transparent, unmediated expression by other writers: Ronald Blythe has claimed that his

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[12] *Cottage Tales*, p. xvi.
[13] John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730–1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 119, 120. See also John Barrell, *Poetry, Language, and Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

work shows 'the indigenous eye at its purist', and John Ashbery praises his 'nakedness of vision'.[14]

Clare's local perspective has also been loaded with representative, political meaning, particularly as regards enclosure. Seamus Heaney applauds his voice of rural protest, arguing: 'it was the unique achievement of John Clare to make vocal the regional and the particular, to achieve a buoyant and authentic lyric utterance at the meeting-point between social realism and conventional romanticism'.[15] John Lucas identifies a stifled voice of liberty in Clare's work, while Tom Paulin states that the poet's 'language is always part of a social struggle, entangled with and pitched against Official Standard'.[16] In another important critical development, Jonathan Bate and James McKusick have both pointed to the ecological instincts evident in Clare's attention to the 'local' environment.[17]

The second critical approach to Clare's work, and one that has gained momentum in recent years, emphasizes his participation in a literary culture. Timothy Brownlow's *John Clare and Picturesque Landscape* details Clare's engagement with this culture, which left him bearing 'on the one hand, the suspicious glances of his fellow-villagers, and on the other, the officious supervision of his editors'.[18] The essay collection *John Clare: New Approaches* provides examinations of him as a sophisticated writer, aware of the power of the literary market and trying to find a

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[14] Ronald Blythe, *Talking about John Clare* (Nottingham: Trent Books, 1999), p. 49; John Ashbery, *Other Traditions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 15.
[15] Seamus Heaney, 'In the Country of Convention: English Pastoral Verse', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 180.
[16] John Lucas, 'Clare's Politics', in *John Clare in Context*, ed. by Geoffrey Summerfield, Hugh Haughton and Adam Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 148–77; Tom Paulin, 'John Clare in Babylon', in *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), pp. 47–55 (p. 48).
[17] Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991); Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000); James McKusick, *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (Basingstoke and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
[18] Timothy Brownlow, *John Clare and Picturesque Landscape* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 4.

distinctive voice within it.[19] Mina Gorji's *John Clare and the Place of Poetry* and Paul Chirico's *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader* both provide important evidence of his engagement with several literary traditions.[20] Alan Vardy's *John Clare, Politics and Poetry* argues for Clare's artistic agency, examining how his taste for 'old poets' aligned him with writers at the *London Magazine* and radical intellectuals.[21] Just as Vardy indicates the complexity of Clare's political opinions, Sarah Houghton-Walker's *John Clare's Religion* examines the complexity of his religious views.[22]

Various scholarly efforts have been made to reconcile the 'local' and the 'literary' in Clare's work. Bate's biography attends to both of these approaches, detailing the poet's involvement in literary circles, while repeating Barrell's interpretation: 'As Clare matured, his poems became more *local*. Paradoxically, it is through the very quality of locality that he achieves his universality.'[23] Richard Cronin states: 'It is not possible to understand Clare as an English poet amongst other English

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[19] *John Clare: New Approaches*, ed. by John Goodridge and Simon Kövesi (Helpston: The John Clare Society, 2000). In particular, see Bob Heyes, 'Writing Clare's Poems: "The Myth of the Solitary Genius"', pp. 33–45; Mina Gorji, 'Clare and Community: The "Old Poets" and the London Magazine', pp. 47–63.

[20] Mina Gorji, *John Clare and the Place of Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008); Paul Chirico, *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[21] Alan Vardy, *John Clare, Politics and Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

[22] Sarah Houghton-Walker, *John Clare's Religion* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009). Other investigations into Clare's literary exposure include: Eric Robinson, 'John Clare's Learning', *JCSJ*, 7 (1988), 10–25; Greg Crossan, 'Clare's Debt to the Poets in His Library', *JCSJ*, 10 (1991), 27–41; Paul Chirico, 'Writing Misreadings: Clare and the Real World', in *The Independent Spirit: John Clare and the Self-Taught Tradition*, ed. by John Goodridge (Helpston: John Clare Society, 1994), pp. 125–38; Hugh Haughton, 'Progress and Rhyme: "The Nightingale's Nest" and Romantic Poetry', in *John Clare in Context*, ed. by Summerfield, Haughton and Phillips, pp. 51–86; Kelsey Thornton, 'The Complexity of Clare', in *John Clare: a Bicentenary Celebration*, ed. by Richard Foulkes (Northampton: University of Leicester, Department of Adult Education, 1994), pp. 41–56; David Blamires, 'Chapbooks, Fairytales and Children's Books in the Writings of John Clare', *JCSJ*, 15 (1996), 27–53, and *JCSJ*, 16 (1997), 43–70; Robert Heyes, '"Looking to Futurity": John Clare and Provincial Culture' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1999); John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan, 'Clare and the Traditions of Labouring-Class Verse', in Thomas Keymer and Jon Mee, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1740–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 280–95; Simon Kövesi, 'John Clare, Charles Lamb and *The London Magazine*: "Sylvanus et Urban"', *The Charles Lamb Bulletin*, n.s., 135 (2006), 82–93; Roger Sales, *John Clare: A Literary Life* (London and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

[23] Jonathan Bate, *John Clare: A Biography* (London: Picador, 2003), p. 227.

poets, distinguished from them only by a knowledge of the English countryside that they could not match, and neither is it possible to understand him as a villager amongst his fellow villagers, remarkable amongst his neighbours only in that he, unlike them, was able to articulate their common experience.' Cronin concludes that Clare is left in 'an uncomfortable position in which familiarity and estrangement coincide'.[24] Other critics have pointed to his split personality: Elizabeth Helsinger has examined the contradictions inherent in the moniker of 'peasant poet', and Gary Harrison has argued that we should reconfigure Clare not as 'the poet of place', but 'the poet of between places'.[25]

Goodridge and Kelsey Thornton reconfigure Clare's sense of displacement in their view of him as an unsocialized 'trespasser', where the poet's childhood act of sneaking into a private estate, Burghley Park, to read *The Seasons*, stands 'as a rite of passage, marking his entry into the brave new world of literature'.[26] More recently, Goodridge has provided a convincing account of a more sociable Clare in *John Clare and Community*. He figures Clare's sociability as directed towards both village and literary cultures, partaking in various communities. In so doing, Goodridge cautions against too steadfast an opposition between 'refined' and 'rural' communities: 'Clare is often at his most interesting when we see him, not just negotiating between the two communities, but finding the places where they overlap and creatively converge, where he can make his poetry heal the breach between the "real" and the "literary" village'.

[24] Richard Cronin, 'In Place and Out of Place: Clare in *The Midsummer Cushion*', in *John Clare: New Approaches*, ed. by Goodridge and Kövesi, pp. 133–48 (pp. 145–46).
[25] Elizabeth K. Helsinger, *Rural Scenes and National Representation: Britain, 1815–1850* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 141–61; Gary Harrison, 'Hybridity, Mimicry and John Clare's *Child Harold*', *Wordsworth Circle*, 34 (2003), 149–55 (p. 149).
[26] John Goodridge and Kelsey Thornton, 'John Clare: The Trespasser', in *John Clare in Context*, ed. by Summerfield, Haughton and Phillips, pp. 87–129 (p. 88).

The examination of the 'literary' Clare is an emerging field, and, as Goodridge states, 'many more comparative studies between Clare and other writers are needed'.[27]

It is inescapable for any critical reader of Clare, in the light of these studies, not to attend to both local and literary aspects of his work. Ultimately, however, the contours of Clare scholarship still demonstrate an oppositional approach towards the cultures of the country and the city.[28] Clare's own autobiographical accounts have influenced this sense of opposition. His sense of native attachments is evoked in his childhood memory of wandering across Emmonsales heath: 'I got out of my knowledge when the very wild flowers & birds seemd to forget me'.[29] As a published author, he disregards his poem 'The Village Minstrel' for not describing the feelings 'localy enough'.[30] He repeatedly expresses disdain for 'fashion', placing more importance on 'common fame' (which he identified in Byron) than commercial success.[31]

Such remarks must be qualified. The distaste for commercial success is a professed inclination far more common among writers and other artists than many readers of Clare seem willing to believe; nor does an unwillingness to pander to fashion mean that Clare was not aware that the work he did want to write – be it pastoral verse, accounts of popular customs, or tales – might also appeal to a polite audience. Indeed, Clare's very desire to write 'localy' reveals a self-consciousness necessitated in the very acts of writing and publishing. We must reconceive Clare's world as one traversed by the high and low, often in productive collision. As Anne Janowitz states of this period,

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[27] Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, p. 7.
[28] The same dissatisfaction has been expressed by Essaka Joshua: 'The emphasis on the polarization of culture [...] does not do justice to the complexity of Clare's cultural location and, in particular, his self-description', *The Romantics and the May Day Tradition* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), p. 116.
[29] Pet. MS A34, p. 6, repr. in *By Himself*, p. 40.
[30] Pet. MS B6, p. 81, repr. in *By Himself*, p. 114.
[31] See 'Essay on Popularity' (1825) in *Prose*, pp. 206–10. Elsewhere, Clare dismisses his friend Allan Cunningham's opinion of *Poems Descriptive*: 'his observation that Poets should conform their thoughts or style to the taste of the country by which he means fashion – is humbug & shows that he has no foundation of judgment for a critic that might be relyed on'. Pet. MS B5, p. 61, quoted in *Letters*, p. 207n.

'polite literature brushed against plebeian songs and doggerel, and romantic period poetry and poetics record the engagement of registers'.[32]

The evidence of Clare's 'local' feeling appears most compelling within his poetry of natural observation (although some critics have recently emphasized the inescapable effect that reading and writing must have on all acts of perception, including these).[33] However, when humans enter the scene, Clare's apparently unselfconscious, local attachment becomes more problematic. In her essay 'The "Community" of John Clare's Helpston', Sarah Houghton notes a difference between the natural and the social in Clare's poetry: while the natural community is presented as cohesive and harmonious, his representations of the social community in *The Shepherd's Calendar* can only offer an idealized, nostalgic view of a non-existent past, shaded by the poet's awareness of his lessening participation in customary rituals. [34] My thesis furthers the investigation into how Clare's 'local' feeling becomes more problematic in his poetry of social observation.

According to Lucas, when Clare attempts to mediate for a 'polite' audience, 'the strain shows'.[35] My thesis considers this strain as a productive one: polite encounters do not stifle some mythical 'true voice' of Clare, but in fact invigorate his poetry. The poems I consider are sites where the clash of perspectives is most energized and energizing. In attending to these poems as mediating productions which respond to the

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[32] Anne Janowitz, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 4. The interpenetration of high and low cultural categories is also discussed in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

[33] 'It may be, Clare sometimes recognises, that language, and in particular writing, cannot simply record the natural world, for to know a language, and to be able to read and write, is to have acquired a knowledge that informs every act of perception by which the natural world is known.' Cronin, p. 139. See also Timothy Morton, 'John Clare's Dark Ecology', *Studies in Romanticism*, 47 (2008), 179–93.

[34] Sarah Houghton, 'The "Community" of John Clare's Helpston', *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, 46 (2006), 781–802. Mina Gorji also discusses the nostalgia for old customs in The Shepherd's Calendar in 'Clare's "Merry England"', *JCSJ*, 24 (2005), 5–24 (pp. 7–9).

[35] John Lucas, *England and Englishness: Ideas of Nationhood in English Poetry, 1688–1900* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1990), p. 144.

work of other authors, my approach may be located as closer to the second, 'literary'-focused school of Clare readers. In my conception, Clare is not so much a trespasser crossing a definite boundary, as an intellectual seeker – undoubtedly limited by his station and bearing locally centred loyalties, but continually curious about both rural and urban, 'literary' worlds. This is, after all, the poet who wrote to Taylor: 'I wish I livd nearer you at least I wish London w[oud] creep within 20 miles of helpstone'.[36] My study is not so heavily focused on how Clare mediates different styles of diction, as this subject has been well served in scholarship.[37] Rather, I am interested in the value systems that come into place in these acts of mediation.

I share Goodridge's expressed awareness that any approach to Clare must not neglect his sense of 'awkwardness', which studies of the 'local' aspects of his work have so brilliantly helped to illuminate.[38] Nor do I argue that Clare ever comfortably resolves his feelings of displacement. However, this displacement must be understood and examined as Clare's subjective framing of his experience in terms that resemble disembedding.

**Idealizing for Polite Readers**

Different audiences were emerging in the Romantic period, as Jon Klancher has noted, 'taking shape as diverging collective interpreters whose "readings" of the social and intellectual world opened unbridgeable cultural conflicts'.[39] The poetry market was an increasingly difficult one to navigate – and concurrently, audience expectations were

[36] Clare to John Taylor (8 February 1822), *Letters*, p. 230.
[37] Most extensively in Gorji, *John Clare and the Place of Poetry*.
[38] Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, p. 7. A similar anxiety is expressed by Ben Hickman in 'John Clare and the End of Description', *JCSJ*, 30 (2011), 5–21 (p. 7). See also Mina Gorji, 'Clare's Awkwardness', *Essays in Criticism*, 54 (2004), 216–39.
[39] Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences: 1790–1832* (Madison, WI and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 5.

not necessarily constant. Throughout the argument of my thesis, variations on one fundamental tension can be recognized in Clare's social observation: between 'dirty reality' and its idealized representation.

Finding a consensus as to what constituted 'realism' in this period, as in any period of literature, is difficult. Writing on Bloomfield's *The Farmer's Boy*, Ian Haywood states:

> Any attempt [...] to locate the 'rural' in a space outside this supercharged ideological matrix, either in an uncontaminated generic zone, or in the 'Romantic' imagination, is a lost cause. Indeed, the quest to find 'pure' or detoxified images of rural life was and remains an act of fantasy, wish fulfilment, and withdrawal which by negotiation and denial betrays its conflicted and terrorized origins.[40]

Clare's phrase 'dirty reality' does, at least, express an awareness of a certain type of dirty – or, using Haywood's term, 'pure' – representation. However, Haywood's advice is salutary, and the concern of this study is not so much to locate 'dirty reality' historically, as to consider the tensions when Clare attempts to represent it. Placing Clare within his time, when a writer might be understood as writing within different discourses – be it literature, science, politics – complicates the polite-impolite division. Any move out of the purely literary expectations placed on him as a labouring-class writer may be construed as 'impolite'; but he uses his awareness of different discourses, literary and non-literary, precisely to mediate for a polite audience.

The nineteenth-century polite audience was not a uniform one. We can explain what we mean by 'polite' expectations by considering the various responses and edits to Clare's first volume, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, published in 1820.[41]

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[40] Ian Haywood, 'The Infection of Robert Bloomfield: Terrorizing The Farmer's Boy', in *Robert Bloomfield*, ed. by John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan (Romantic Circles Praxis (online publication), 2012), para. 2 <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/bloomfield/HTML/praxis.2011.haywood.html> [accessed 10 March 2014].

[41] On this topic, see Mark Storey, 'Clare and the Critics', in *John Clare in Context*, ed. by Summerfield, Haughton and Phillips, pp. 28–50; Alan Vardy, 'Viewing and Reviewing Clare', in *John Clare: New Approaches*, ed. by Goodridge and Kövesi, pp. 107–31.

The most outspoken response came from his conservative, aristocratic patron, Lord Radstock, a force of moral rectitude who directed the edits of his publisher, Taylor. Radstock was a leading member of the Evangelical party and the Society for Suppression of Vice and Immorality.[42] He may be seen as bearing the kind of evangelical attitudes that were exerting influence in Britain towards the end of the eighteenth century; by the 1770s, according to J. M. Golby and A. W. Purdue, the 'Evangelical ethic diffused itself through all sections of society'.[43]

Taylor is a more complex figure, and has proved to be a divisive one for Clare scholars. Robinson calls Taylor 'careless, dilatory, and bullying', while Lucas figures his interference, alongside Radstock's, as an unhelpful imposition on Clare – ultimately leading the poet to self-censor, 'striking the kind of pose that would, so he thought, appeal to his "polite" audience'.[44] The upshot of this, according to Lucas, is that Clare is 'denied his own voice'.[45] More recently, many of the same scholars who have attended to Clare's literary participation have forged a robust defence of Taylor.[46]

The John Taylor who sympathized with Clare's frustrations at Radstock's severe censorship – telling him, with some bravado, 'Take your own Course; write what you like' – appears a very different editor to the one who would later make savage and

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[42] Zachary Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 238; Lucas, 'Clare's Politics', p. 157.
[43] *The Civilization of the Crowd: Popular Culture in England, 1750–1900*, ed. by J. M. Golby and A. W. Purdue (London: Batsford Academic and Educational, 1984), p. 51.
[44] *MP*, I, p. xiii; Lucas, 'Clare's Politics', p. 151.
[45] John Lucas, 'Revising Clare', in *Romantic Revisions*, ed. by Robert Brinkley and Keith Hanley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 339–53 (p. 343); Taylor is also criticised in Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield, 'John Taylor's Editing of Clare's The Shepherd's Calendar', *The Review of English Studies*, 14 (1963), 359–69.
[46] Defences of Taylor include Tim Chilcott, *A Publisher and His Circle: The Life and Work of John Taylor, Keats's Publisher* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 86–128; Tim Chilcott, 'The Dating of Clare's *The Shepherd's Calendar*', *JCSJ*, 25 (2006), 65–77; John Clare, *The Shepherd's Calendar, Manuscript and Published Version*, ed. by Tim Chilcott (Manchester: Carcanet, 2006); Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship*, pp. 206–61. An ambivalent view is expressed in Vardy, *John Clare, Politics and Poetry*, pp. 4–9, 51–55. There has also been a defence of Eliza Emmerson's involvement in Clare's work, in Emma Trehane, '"Emma and Johnny": The Friendship between Eliza Emmerson and John Clare', *JCSJ*, 24 (2005), 69–77.

erratic cuts to *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1827), after Radstock had died in 1825.[47] Taylor's own mental and physical illnesses likely contributed to this change.[48] In any case, it is not necessarily helpful to conflate these two different periods of editorial practice. For my purposes, the activities of the 'earlier' Taylor – delicately handling Radstock's demands – are particularly useful for gauging the complexities of 'polite' mediation that Clare had to negotiate.

Taylor's notable feat of audience-making – his introduction to *Poems Descriptive* – indicates his promotion of Clare's non-polite qualities. He speaks of the poet's distinctive, non-standardized vocabulary and grammar, declaring 'Clare's deficiencies are the cause of many beauties'; the poet's 'provincial expressions' are part of 'the unwritten language of England'.[49] Taylor was placed in a difficult position, conscious that the 'awkwardness' of Clare's poetry constituted qualities to be edited away, and qualities on which the poet could be sold.

As Lawrence Klein has noted, a potential antonym to the eighteenth-century conception of 'politeness' is 'rusticity'.[50] However, by the time Clare was published, rusticity carried something of its own validity among polite readers. During the eighteenth century, various poets had moved away from elegant couplets to more experimental forms.[51] Furthermore, as Margaret Doody states: 'The latter part of the

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[47] Taylor to Clare (6 June 1820), Eg. MS 2245, fol. 139$^{v}$. Exemplifying his increasingly erratic editing, Taylor excised from *The Shepherd's Calendar* certain references to enclosure and some depictions of rural love, including the maiden 'in her unpin'd gown', 'wi heaving breast' ('August'), and the reference to 'her white breasts handkerchief' which was altered to 'bosom's handkerchief' ('May'); however, he allowed another passage on 'the milking maiden' who shows a 'swelling bosom loosly veiled' ('July') to remain; see John Clare, *The Shepherd's Calendar; with Village Stories, and Other Poems* (London: James Duncan, 1827), pp. 66–67.
[48] Bate, *John Clare*, p. 310.
[49] *Critical Heritage*, pp. 47, 48.
[50] Lawrence E. Klein, 'Politeness for Plebes: Consumption and Social Identity in Early Eighteenth-Century England', in *The Consumption of Culture 1600–1800: Image, Object, Text*, ed. by Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 362–82 (p. 365).
[51] David Fairer, 'Creating a National Poetry: The Tradition of Spenser and Milton', in *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. by John Sitter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 177–201.

eighteenth century saw the production of works which required glossaries to explain foreign or exotic words from another language or sub-language.'[52] Clare found precedents for his 'artless' style in mainstream literary models.[53]

The censorship of *Poems Descriptive* indicates the severest pressures of 'politeness' that Clare faced. Taylor informed him that Radstock and 'several other Persons' wished 'My Mary' and 'Dolly's Mistake' to be removed from the volume for being indelicate, while adding, 'For my own part I am not so fastidious'.[54] 'My Mary' (*EP*, I, 78–82), a love poem, memorably asks, 'Who when the baby's all besh–t / To please its mamma kisses it?' (ll. 37–38), though the word 'besh–t' was not printed in the first edition and altered to 'unfit' in the second. It was noted by another of Clare's advisers, the Stamford journalist Octavius Gilchrist, that the line 'shocked the delicate sensibilities of Portland Place'.[55] 'Dolly's Mistake' (*EP*, I, 532–35) – a poem that, in Robinson's memorable phrase, passed in and out of the volume 'like a waitress through a kitchen half-door' – tells the seduction of a maid out of wedlock; in one detail, a character addresses 'ye chubby fac'd bitches' (l. 59), changed to 'witches' in the published edition.[56] Eliza Emmerson, who had enlisted Radstock as the poet's patron, shared the lord's concerns, telling Clare that her friends in Bristol wanted the same two poems, as well as 'Friend Lubin' and 'The Country Girl', to be removed; these readers viewed the pieces 'as *spots*, to what could otherwise *be pure*'.[57] 'Friend Lubin' (*EP*, I, 112–13) is a celebration of rural leisure, stating that 'Misses in the day delight / To show their dressy whims' (ll. 7–8). 'The Country Girl' (*EP*, I, 115–16) is a description

[52] Margaret Anne Doody, *The Daring Muse: Augustan Poetry Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 227.
[53] See Goodridge and Keegan, 'Clare and the Traditions of Labouring-Class Verse'; Gorji, *John Clare and the Place of Poetry*.
[54] Taylor to Clare (12 February 1820), Eg. MS 2245, fol. 37$^{v}$, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, p. 60.
[55] Octavius Gilchrist to Clare (21 March 1820), Eg. MS 2245, fol. 68$^{r}$, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, p. 61.
[56] *EP*, I, p. xiii; John Clare, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, 1st edn (London and Stamford: Taylor and Hessey, and E. Drury, 1820), p. 108.
[57] Eliza Emmerson to Clare (25 November 1820), Eg. MS 2245, fol. 241$^{r}$, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, p. 109.

of seduction from a maid's perspective, who mentions that 'the tell clacking grass's foul staining / In my holiday clothes is remaining' (ll. 25–26).

As a result of these various complaints, 'The Country Girl' was omitted from the second edition, 'My Mary' and 'Dolly's Mistake' from the third, and 'Friend Lubin' from the fourth. Clare's response to the third edition, in a letter to Taylor's partner James Hessey, indicates the blame he levelled at his editor:

> I have seen the third Edition & am cursed mad about it the judgment of T[aylor] is a button hole lower in my opinion – it is good – but too subject to be tainted by medlars *false delicasy*[58]

In response, Hessey sounds an apologetic tone, referring to the norms of taste by which Clare's work should abide:

> [Taylor] perceived that objections were continually made to [the poems] & that the sale of the Volume would eventually be materially injured & therefore he determined on leaving them out. Whether it be false or true delicacy which raises the objections to these pieces it is perhaps hardly worth while to enquire. If we are satisfied that in the Society which we frequent certain subjects must not be even alluded to, we must either conform to the rule of that Society or quit it[59]

Some ideas of 'good taste' that were forming in the period are indicated in the response of journals to Clare's volume. Klancher has demonstrated the importance of periodicals as audience-makers: 'Always supremely conscious of the audiences their writers imagine, assert, or entice, periodicals provide perhaps the clearest framework for distinguishing the emerging publics of the nineteenth century.'[60] As the publisher of Keats, Taylor was deeply aware of the hostile response that a reviewer might offer to a writer of Clare's station. John Lockhart's review of Keats in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* had complained about the 'many farm-servants' who were encouraged to

[58] Clare to Hessey ([10?] July 1820), *Letters*, p. 83. Clare would request that these poems be reinstated in the fourth edition, see Clare to Taylor (16 January 1821), *Letters*, pp. 140–42.
[59] Hessey to Clare (11 July 1820), Eg. MS 2245, fols. 172$^{v}$–73$^{r}$, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, pp. 63–64.
[60] Klancher, p. 4.

write poetry by the 'just celebrity' of Robert Burns.[61] His response to Clare's first book was dismissive, if not so forceful: 'I fear it would be very difficult to shew that he deserves half the fuss that has been made.'[62] Taylor's preface to Clare's second volume, *The Village Minstrel, and Other Poems* (1821), would complain about the 'illiberal spirit of criticism' that contemporary poets had to suffer.[63]

Several reviews showed concern about the same indelicacies that Radstock identified. The *Eclectic Review* called for 'The Country Girl', 'My Mary' and 'Dolly's Mistake' to be removed; the *New Monthly Review* dismissed the latter two as 'by far the worst pieces in the volume'.[64] A self-professed 'Well-Wisher to Merit' wrote to the *Morning Post*, requesting a revised edition of Clare's book from which 'some two or three poems in the present edition might be expunged, in order to make room for others of riper and purer growth'.[65]

The fiercely conservative *Quarterly Review*, however, praised Clare's handling of potentially rough subject matter in 'The Fate of Amy' (*EP*, I, 270–84):

> [...] we must not omit to notice the delicacy with which the circumstances of this inartificial tale are suggested, rather than disclosed; indeed it may be remarked generally that, though associating necessarily with the meanest and most uneducated of society, the poet's homeliest stories have nothing of coarseness and vulgarity in their construction.[66]

Another conservative publication, the *British Critic*, accepted Clare's vulgarity by remarking that 'if a single piece, the *grossieretè* [coarseness] of which cannot fail to offend every reader, has been suffered to creep in, it must be set down as a cause which

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[61] *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, August 1818, p. 519, repr. in *John Keats: The Critical Heritage*, ed. G. M. Matthews (London: Routledge, 1971), p. 97.
[62] *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, June 1820, p. 322.
[63] John Clare, *The Village Minstrel, and Other Poems*, 2 vols (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1821), I, p. xxviii.
[64] *Eclectic Review*, April 1820, p. 340, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, p. 91; *New Monthly Magazine and Universal Register*, March 1820, p. 329, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, p. 71.
[65] *Morning Post*, 11 February 1820, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, p. 81.
[66] *Quarterly Review*, May 1820, p. 168, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, pp. 95, 96. On the conservatism of the *Quarterly Review*, see Marilyn Butler, 'Culture's Medium: The Role of the Review', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. by Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 120–47.

is connected with that which in reality forms the principal merit of the poems before us – the circumstances of the writer'.[67]

These various responses show the inconsistency of 'polite' expectations regarding apparently indiscreet descriptions. The pressure on Clare to conceal or mediate indelicacies must be qualified by the reading public's evident interest in the lives of people of his station. It is notable that Taylor's introduction also places some value on realism: he argues that Clare 'utters "no idly-feign'd poetic pains:" it is a picture of what he has constantly witnessed and felt'; indeed, the poet's wretchedness is his 'unhappy advantage over other poets'.[68]

**Sanitizing Politics**

Clare was also aware of the complexity of responses regarding the political aspects of his poetry. In the wake of fears aggravated by the French Revolution, many among the gentry and middle classes were now primed to fear popular customary activity as potentially Jacobinical; some metropolitan readers wanted representations of rural life to be reassuringly benign.[69] However, the readers who took this attitude contrasted with others who were interested in rustic life for its unfamiliarity. Scott's and Edgeworth's representations of this activity in their 'national' tales appealed to a taste for the exotic that was closer to home.

[67] *British Critic*, June 1820, p. 663, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, p. 103.
[68] *Critical Heritage*, p. 44.
[69] Eileen Janes Yeo, 'Class', in *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture, 1776–1832*, ed. by Iain McCalman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 142–52 (p. 143). See also John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 21.

Clare had been launched in the *London Magazine*, a publication which would strive to avoid the partisan politics of magazines like the *Quarterly*.[70] Eliza Emmerson had recommended Clare to Radstock with a poem that borrowed a line from his early poem 'Helpstone' (*EP*, I, 156–63): 'He'll put up with distress – and be content'.[71] The positive reviews of Clare's first volume identified complaint without a political edge. The *Anti-Jacobin Review* praised his 'Resignation to his lot', while John Scott's review in the *London Magazine* observed that 'the discontent expressed is not querulous'.[72]

Nevertheless, Emmerson and Radstock expressed concerns that the first edition showed '*Radical* and *ungrateful* sentiments', particularly in a passage in 'Helpstone' which railed at 'Accursed Wealth! o'er-bounding human laws', and a couplet in 'Dawnings of Genius' (*EP*, I, 451–52) which described a ploughman as 'That necessary tool to wealth and pride'.[73] In response to these concerns, Clare stated in a letter to Taylor: 'd—n that canting way of being forcd to please I say – I cant abide it & one day or other I will show my Independance more stron[g]ly then ever'.[74] Taylor offered his own tempered response that he was 'inclined to remain obstinate' to such changes, and would later write: 'When the Follies of the Day are past with all the Fears they have engendered we can restore the Poems according to the earlier Editions.' However, the offending lines from 'Helpstone' were excised from the fourth edition of *Poems Descriptive*.[75]

The edits made to *Poems Descriptive*, therefore, reveal the complex, sometimes contradictory pressures that Clare encountered about the representation of indelicate

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[70] The *London Magazine* stated that Leigh Hunt was undervalued by critics because 'Politics is lord of the ascendant', July 1820, p. 45.
[71] Eliza Emmerson, 'Lines written by a Lady, and Presented with a volume of "Clare's Poems" to a Noble Friend' (30 January 1820), Eg. MS 2245, fol. 33$^{r}$, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, p. 57–58.
[72] *Anti-Jacobin Review*, June 1820, p. 349, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, p. 105; *London Magazine*, March 1820, p. 325, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, p. 79.
[73] Emmerson to Clare (11 May 1820), Eg. MS 2245, fol. 119$^{v}$, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, p. 61.
[74] Clare to Taylor (16 May 1820), *Letters*, p. 69.
[75] Taylor to Clare (6 June 1820), qtd in *Letters*, p. 69n; Taylor to Clare (27 September 1820), Eg. MS 2245, fol. 225$^{r}$, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, p. 64.

imagery and radical sentiments. Similar pressures were evident during the production of *The Village Minstrel*. Edward Drury expressed concern that some of these poems in the volume were 'not fitted for our purpose because of absolute indelicacy in the images'.[76] Radstock inscribed 'This is radical Slang' in the margin of the title poem, beside two stanzas complaining about enclosure.[77] Taylor expressed ambivalence about Radstock's editorial interference at this time, writing to Clare: 'we shall be attacked I foresee by his Lordship & *such*, therefore let us be as free from Indelicacy as he would call it as possible, that he may find no Handle against us on that Side.'[78] As proofs were drawn up, Clare wrote to Taylor, 'your taste is preferable to any I have witnessd', and subsequently, 'I believe you are a caterer of profound wisdom in these matters you know what sort of a dish will suit the publics appetite better then I'.[79]

Added to these already complex pressures of audience expectations, it was increasingly difficult to succeed in the poetry market over the course of the 1820s. Clare, having been encouraged in his early poems of 'rural life and scenery', was informed by Drury in 1822 that the public was tiring of 'simple naked nature. Some refinement is now necessary on purely rustic manners & scenery'.[80] The collapse of interest in single-author poetry volumes would prove catastrophic for Clare's career – a decline that was gloomily reported by Taylor in 1827, when *The Shepherd's Calendar* was published: 'I am afraid the Time has passed away in which Poetry will answer'.[81]

**Moralizing and Concealing**

[76] Edward Drury to Clare (9 May 1820), Eg. MS 2245, fol. 115$^{r}$, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, p. 123.
[77] Taylor to Clare (6 January 1821), Eg. MS 2245 fol. 272$^{r}$, repr. in *Letters*, p. 135. The stanzas 107–08 begin 'There once were homes' and 'O England, boasted land of liberty'.
[78] Taylor to Clare (17 February 1821), Eg. MS 2245, fol. 296$^{v}$, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, p. 133.
[79] Clare to Taylor (c.8 March 1821), *Letters*, p. 162; Clare to Taylor (10 July 1821), *Letters*, p. 204.
[80] Drury to Clare (3 August 1822), Eg. MS 2246, fol. 96$^{r}$.
[81] Taylor to Clare (3 August 1827), Eg. MS 2247, fol. 322$^{v}$, qtd. in *Letters*, p. 394n.

In addition to these examples of censorship, there were other pressures on Clare's work that are less conspicuous. One was the need for the poet to make moral gestures. Barrell identifies how, while the course of the eighteenth century coincides with 'an actually increasing demand for "reality and truth" in the depiction of rural life',

> [...] this demand is almost always accompanied and undercut by a compensating desire to re-pastoralise what is then seen as the actual squalor of country life into an image of how that squalor may be avoided by the rural poor, in a life of industry and religion. One could put it another way by saying that the poor are now *blamed* for thoughtless animal behaviour – drinking and wenching [...] the poverty of the rural labourer is seen as the squalid consequence of that behaviour, and the poor are then urged to [...] temperance and industry[82]

James Plumptre, a Cambridgeshire parson, encouraged Clare to moralize in this fashion: 'I hope you will turn your thoughts towards some instructive popular Songs for the lower classes.'[83] *Poems Descriptive* contains several poems which present a general, moralizing voice, such as 'Address to an Insignificant Flower obscurely blooming in a lonely wild' (*EP*, I, 216–18) and 'To a Rose bud in humble life' (*EP*, I, 411–13). As my study shows, Clare's professed moral views on more specific aspects of rural life – rough games, for example – are often displaced or disrupted by other perspectives.

Another, deep-seated aspect of pastoral idealization in the early nineteenth century was the tendency to conceal detail of social structure. Barrell and John Bull define the function of the pastoral vision as being 'to mystify and to obscure the harshness of actual social and economic organization'.[84] Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* extensively outlines how writers 'restrict' what they show of rural society. This restriction is well disguised through the impression of transparency, which Williams indicates when drawing a distinction between fiction of the city and fiction of the country: 'In the city kind, experience and community would be essentially opaque;

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[82] Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, pp. 63–64.
[83] James Plumptre to Clare (26 April 1820), Eg. MS 2245, fol. 99$^{v}$. On Plumptre, see Eric Robinson, 'John Clare (1793–1864) and James Plumptre (1771–1832), "A Methodistical Parson"', *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society*, 11 (1996), 59–88.
[84] *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*, ed. by John Barrell and John Bull (London: Allen Lane, 1974), p. 4.

in the country kind, essentially transparent.'[85] Cities, with their growing populations, new types of class relations and divisions of labour, provide less face-to-face contact than one would expect in the smaller rural community. Therefore, a recurring idealization of rural life is the sense of the 'knowable' community supported by face-to-face relations. Investigating this idealization, Williams claims that Jane Austen's work commonly represents a community which is 'outstandingly face to face', but does so by restricting it to various propertied houses, excluding the working people of England. George Eliot restores the working people in her novels, but does so with a degree of authorial discomfort, finding it difficult to individuate them; in Williams's words, she 'does not get much further than restoring them *as a landscape*'.[86]

Clare's poetry commonly represents a 'knowable' community of labouring-class individuals, excluding representations of certain institutions, classes and, by extension, inter-class relationships. Often, he figures social groups as representative, placing them (and therefore keeping them separate) in a landscape, or in a domestic setting; commercial transactions between such groups are hidden; the rural upper classes are frequently invisible. This idea of the hermetically sealed gathering of villagers, similar to Giddens's notion of the 'embedded' community, is an idealization that continues to be attractive to present-day readers of Clare.

However, tensions emerge in this representation of the 'knowable community': the disfiguring intrusion of parliamentary enclosure indicates influence from beyond the labouring-class sphere; colliding encounters between social groups are revealed, such as the villagers' scorn for gypsies; upper-class males – welcome and unwelcome – come to woo village maids in the courtship narratives. Clare's village is infiltrated by influences from beyond its confines, and the climax of this is the 'Swing' riots, when radical fervour spreads in, and the village is figured as part of a national story; the ability to

[85] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), p. 165.
[86] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 168.

conceive of the local community as isolated, at this point, becomes deeply compromised. Clare's poetry does not so much show him trespassing a fixed boundary; rather, it frequently interrogates the idea of a boundary at all. These possibilities for disruption indicate the mythic nature of this image of isolation, but also its strength: the nostalgic portrayal of an embedded community registers Clare's resistance to the more destructive effects of modernization.

**Scope of the Project**

By attending to Clare's social observation, I am examining his representation of village society – rather than, for example, his accounts of visiting London. Clare's poetry is largely, of course, the poetry of rural life; in addition, the village provides a useful focus as a site of encroaching modernity. However, in my fourth chapter, my concern also turns to national representations, where Clare's social observation explores relations beyond the local community.

My project is centred on Clare's poetry during the pre-asylum years, this being the most fruitful period for his representations of rural society. Furthermore, his internalizing of the expectations associated with publication exacerbate the tensions which I am interested in. I attend to several works by Clare which have received insufficient critical attention until now – particularly his courtship narratives and some of his political poetry. In other instances, I hope to bring new approaches to more established poems, such as 'The Badger' and 'The Village Minstrel', in order to unsettle some of the critical commonplaces that have built up around them.

My approach is a literary-critical one grounded in close-reading, but also informed by historical context and the work of other authors of Clare's time; where possible, I have indicated evidence of his reading these authors. For scholarly purposes,

the texts I work from are those that appear in the Oxford editions. This is often a choice borne of sheer necessity, since many of the poems I study only appear in these versions. Much has already been expressed, and very eloquently too, about the correct way to present Clare, and the associated controversy with Eric Robinson's claim to copyright; these debates have not ended.[87] For my own part, I feel greatly indebted to the work of the Oxford editors, but I share Simon Kövesi's view that the action of 'transcription', which the Oxford editors celebrate as their editorial stance, implies its own active, transformative effects.[88] Furthermore, it is a catastrophic shame that so much of Clare's poetry remains more or less closed off to the general reader, limited to the eyes of researchers – in expensive volumes, unedited and consequently (as Clare would agree) often difficult to the point of being unreadable.[89]

At the same time, I am entirely optimistic that this state of affairs will soon be rectified. My optimism derives from the unprecedented popularity that Clare's work now holds among general readers – far greater than in his own lifetime. Only recently, George Monbiot's article in *The Guardian* called for a 'John Clare Day' to be established, an English equivalent to Burns Night. Clare's birthday has frequently heralded other tributes in the national press.[90]

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[87] Simon Kövesi, 'The John Clare Copyright: 1820–2000', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 31 (2000), 112–19; John Goodridge, 'Poor Clare', *The Guardian*, 22 July 2000 <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/jul/22/poetry.books> [accessed 20 September 2013]; Jonathan Bate, 'John Clare's Copyright 1854–1893', *JCSJ*, 19 (2000), 19–32; Bate, *John Clare*, pp. 563–75; Kövesi, 'Beyond the Language Wars: Towards a Green Edition of John Clare', *JCSJ*, 26 (2007), 61–75; Sara Guyer, 'Figuring John Clare: Romanticism, Editing, and the Possibility of Justice', *Studies in Romanticism*, 51 (2012), 3–24.

[88] Kövesi, 'Beyond the Language Wars', pp. 66–67.

[89] Bate writes of the Clarendon editions: 'it would never have occurred to Clare that his poetry could be published in this form. He expected his editors to insert punctuation and to correct his spelling.' *John Clare*, p. 205.

[90] George Monbiot, 'John Clare, the Poet of the Environmental Crisis – 200 Years Ago', *The Guardian*, 9 July 2012 <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/09/john-clare-poetry> [accessed 29 January 2013]; Boyd Tonkin, 'A Week in Books: The People's Poet Must Be Set Free', *The Independent on Sunday*, 10 July 1999 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/a-week-in-books-the-peoples-poet-must-be-set-free-1105409.html> [accessed 14 April 2013]; 'Editorial: In Praise Of... John Clare', *The Guardian*, 10 July 2009

In an article for *The New Republic*, Helen Vendler expresses a common view, 'Clare was a very loveable man', and in the present day, many sympathetic 'Clare's uneasily coalesce in one portrait: the 'eco-saint' who loves nature; the defender and preserver of rural culture; the tortured Romantic artist with no interest in market fame; the radical champion of the poor.[91] These twenty-first century idealizations are different from the idealizations that would have pleased Radstock, and as critical readers of Clare we must be conscious of their existence – such popularity may cloud the less palatable aspects of his work.

By addressing ambiguities in Clare's representation of the village, my thesis is attentive to ambiguities in the representation of Clare. The 'dirty' Clare is unsettling to readers now, as then. No more is this evident than in the disturbing 'Badger' poems, which I discuss in my first chapter; but also in his political poems, discussed in the fourth chapter, which complicate his position as a 'champion for the poor'. To unsettle Clare's saintly image is not to deny his greatness; on the contrary, by addressing the various 'perspectives' which he adopts, my project recognizes the invigorating tensions in his work which confer this greatness.

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/jul/10/john-clare-editorial> [accessed 7 February 2014].

[91] Helen Vendler, 'Green Words', *The New Republic*, 10 May 2004 <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/green-words> [accessed 10 February 2014].

# Chapter One

## Naturalizing Perspectives: The Representation of Vulgar Behaviour

> There is a cruelty in all
> From tyrant man to meaner things
> & nature holds inhuman thrall
> Against herself so sorrow sings
>
> [Untitled], *MP*, V, 62 (ll. 1–4)

This chapter examines Clare's use of 'naturalizing' perspectives on human behaviour. By 'naturalizing', I am referring to a way of seeing that is comparable to the disinterested observation of the natural historian, who can examine behaviour and its relation to habitat as objects of scientific knowledge. I do not use the term to mean the explicit comparison of human behaviour to a natural phenomenon, as in 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' – although this descriptive technique is occasionally present in the poems under discussion. In the period when Clare was writing, it was common for observers to see the lower orders as 'animals' as a way of registering moral disdain and, in the words of Keith Thomas, promoting the idea that the people 'needed to be forcibly restrained if they were not to break out and become dangerous'.[1] In a different way, popular antiquarians in the eighteenth century adopted a view of the poor as animals, invoking the language of natural history to present their observations. One practitioner, John Brand, in the preface to his *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (1777), spoke of observing 'subordinate *Species*' of 'the human Genus', adding: 'nothing can be foreign to our Enquiry, which concerns the smallest of the Vulgar'.[2] In contrast to these examples, Clare does not set up a patronizing distance between himself

[1] Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500–1800* (London: Allen Lane, 1983), p. 45. Clare's acquaintance Charles Lamb exemplifies the tendency of writers in this period to portray the common people dismissively as animals: 'the whistling ploughman went cheek by jowl with his brother that neighed.' Lamb to George Dyer (20 December 1830), in Charles Lamb, *Selected Prose*, ed. by Adam Phillips (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 388. For Clare's pen-portrait of Lamb, see *By Himself*, pp. 142–43.
[2] John Brand, *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (Newcastle: J. Johnson, 1777), p. ix.

and the community which he portrays. His use of 'naturalizing' perspectives offers a very different understanding of rural behaviour, presented in a manner which is actually closer to the interests of a natural historian.

I do not claim that Clare consciously regards himself as a natural historian in these poems; rather, I argue that his social observation is influenced by the new ways of seeing that emerge in this period, and that were particularly evident in the developments of both natural history and the 'scientific' observation of other cultures. Clare is interested in the relationship between an organism and its natural environment, incorporating both the organism's exposure to the elements and its interactions with other living things. His 'naturalizing' perspectives attend to the spatial element of human activity: just as a particular organism adapts and survives within a particular environment, Clare is interested in the function of human behaviour within a particular locality and how environmental changes may have an impact. There is also a temporal interest: just as a natural historian might observe how an animal's activity is influenced by seasonal patterns, Clare traces human behaviour through time, seeing how it corresponds to particular times of year and how it may be repeated.

To regard the labouring classes as a natural historian might is to 'fix' them and their behaviour. E. P. Thompson has described how, throughout the eighteenth century, custom 'was a field of change and of contest, an arena in which opposing interests made conflicting claims'.[3] By the early nineteenth century, as will be discussed, various labouring-class customary activities were being legislated against. In contrast to this sense of flux, nature provided continuity and stability for Clare, as he expressed in his 1832 poem 'The Eternity of Nature' (*MP*, III, 527–31). When he figures customary behaviour as predictable, 'natural' activity within the sealed, stable environment of the village, he is temporarily stabilizing it, in the face of encroaching modernity. Therefore,

[3] E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: The Merlin Press, 1991), p. 6.

Clare's poetic work attempts not only to enhance the understanding of cultural activities, but also to protect them.

The perspective of a natural historian potentially offers a way of viewing behaviour in amoral terms. Natural historians were not entirely freed from moral considerations, but their habits of observation allowed them to focus upon fundamental details that a moralistic observer might otherwise dismiss as vulgar activity. When Clare widens this observational field to human activity, his naturalizing perspective comes under strain from alternative ways of seeing. In particular, the poems discussed in this chapter are animated by a fundamental tension: whether to look at human behaviour in amoral terms, or to voice moral disapproval. By exploring this tension with regard to customary culture, Clare unsettles the difference between what is 'cultural' and what is 'natural'. His poems show that any notion of a universal value system is problematic, because they invite the polite audience to recognize what is 'natural' – and therefore potentially universal – in otherwise unfamiliar customary behaviour.

After outlining the critical context, my chapter considers Clare's interest in natural history, particularly the works of Izaak Walton and Gilbert White, and how such texts formulated his understanding of animal behaviour. I then consider, as a parallel to Clare's approach, the narratives by the explorers of the South Pacific in the mid-eighteenth century, which provided a useful precedent for writing, from a natural historian's point of view, about behaviour that would have been unfamiliar or exotic to a polite reader. The connection between Clare and the explorers has been raised, if only in passing, by Timothy Brownlow: '[Clare's] work as a botanist and an ornithologist was a humble parallel to the Pacific explorations in that it reveals the richness, the interrelated details, and the uniqueness of his locale.'[4] In this chapter, I extend this parallel to social observation.

[4] Brownlow, p. 46.

My chapter then turns to Clare's poems. First, I consider his representation of human figures existing in a deep relationship to their natural surroundings, beginning with his poems in *The Village Minstrel, and Other Poems*, and subsequently in 'The Mole Catcher'. In these examples, he presents rural people attending to the need to secure their habitation and survive, in parallel with the animals who share their local environment. In the second part of my discussion, I specifically examine instances when Clare turns a naturalizing perspective towards customary activities which involve cruelty to animals. I consider his complex attitude towards bird's-nesting, and the manner in which his poetry moves, over time, from moral condemnation of the practise to a more ambiguous view that considers the activity in its cultural context. This progression culminates in his work 'The Ravens Nest', which demonstrates the integrative function of ritualized violence. I then consider Clare's view of blood sports, and offer an extensive re-reading of another work on customary cruelty, 'The Badger'. In this poetic sequence, I argue, he does not express outright condemnation, but attempts to maintain an amoral distance.

**Critical Context: John Clare, the 'Eco-Saint'**

Clare's sensitive attention to the natural world has long been celebrated – Bridget Keegan correctly observed in 2001 that this characteristic is a central reason for his 'enduring popularity'.[5] Accordingly, the twenty-first century image of John Clare in public life is of an 'eco-saint' who extends compassion to all living creatures. When the National Lottery-funded Clare Cottage opened in his home village of Helpston in 2009, a celebratory editorial in *The Guardian* stated: 'Clare's empathy with victims –

[5] Bridget Keegan, 'Review Essay: Literature and Ecology', *JCSJ*, 20 (2001), 73–78 (p. 73).

including, even, baited badgers – is always striking.'[6] Today, the Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire Wildlife Trust advertises its work as the conservation of 'the flowers, butterflies and creatures recognised and loved by John Clare'.[7] At Clare Cottage, the life-size statue of Clare shelters various carved animals – including a badger.

This status has been supported by Clare's acclaim as an 'ecological' poet by the proponents of 'ecological literary criticism', which Karl Kroeber states is a discipline that 'concentrates on linkages between natural and cultural processes'.[8] Arguably the two most important advocates of Clare as an 'ecological' poet have been Jonathan Bate and James McKusick. Bate describes Clare as an 'ecopoet', where 'ecopoetics' is regarded 'not as a set of assumptions or proposals about particular environmental issues, but as a way of reflecting upon what it might mean to dwell with the earth'.[9] He claims that 'Clare extends *égalité* from mankind to the non-human world [... he] puts himself into a bond of *fraternité,* fellow-vulnerability, with "the poor hares partridges and pheasants".' As a consequence, Clare 'proclaims the right to life of every living thing'.[10]

McKusick identifies Clare as the first 'deep ecological' writer in English: the poet bears a 'deeper sense of the relation of all creatures to a habitat in which the human observer is also implicated', and develops an '*ecolect*' in his mature poetry: a mixed dialect that conveys his sense of locality.[11] McKusick acknowledges that 'Clare is

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[6] 'Editorial: In Praise Of... John Clare', *The Guardian*.
[7] 'John Clare Country | Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire' <http://www.wildlifebcn.org/john-clare-country> [accessed 10 March 2013].
[8] Karl Kroeber, *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 1.
[9] Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p. 266. For other work by Bate on this subject, see *Romantic Ecology*; 'Romantic Ecology Revisited', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 24 (1993), 159–62; 'The Rights of Nature', *JCSJ*, 14 (1995), 7–15.
[10] Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, pp. 170, 172.
[11] James McKusick, *Green Writing*, pp. 80, 89. See also McKusick,'"A Language That Is Ever Green": The Ecological Vision of John Clare', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 61 (1992), 226–49. Among other ecocritical writing on Clare, see W. John Coletta, 'Ecological Aesthetics and the Natural History Poetry of John Clare', *JCSJ*, 14 (1995), 29–46 (part of a special edition on 'Clare and Ecology'); Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London and New York: Routledge,

intensely aware of predator-prey relationships, describing them with some degree of sympathy for the threatened prey, but without undue sentimentality, clearly aware of the role of predation in maintaining the population balance in natural ecosystems.' However, he finds that 'Clare's attitude toward the killing of wildlife by humans [...] is quite different'. In these cases, McKusick argues, Clare tends towards a moral perspective; he identifies 'at a deep emotional level' with the hunted badger, 'as the helpless victim of human brutality'.[12]

Recently, Timothy Morton has offered a revision of the ecocritical approach, countering its more idealizing tendencies. He argues that ecological literary criticism has assumed the task of discovering an 'original, authentic Clare' beneath the artificial processes of editing and publication. Morton explodes this fantasy: 'even from the point of view of the supposed self-contained, organic, feudal village, Clare was writing poetry *for another*'.[13] Other scholars have called for ecocriticism to pay more attention to Clare's social politics and his 'customary consciousness', employing Thompson's term.[14]

The idea that Clare's social observation might resemble that of the natural historian has only ever been tentatively raised by critics, and often with emphasis upon

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2004), pp. 44–48; Scott Hess, 'Three "Natures": Teaching Romantic Ecology in the Poetry of William Wordsworth, Dorothy Wordsworth, and John Clare', in *Romanticism, Ecology, and Pedagogy*, ed. by Bridget Keegan and James McKusick, online publication, 2006 <http://www.rc.umd.edu/pedagogies/commons/ecology/hess/hess.html> [accessed 15 June 2013]. On romanticism and ecology in general, see *Romanticism & Ecology*, ed. by James McKusick, Romantic Circles Praxis Series (online), 2001 <www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/ecology/> [accessed 16 June 2013]; Gary Harrison, 'Romanticism, Nature, Ecology', in *Romanticism, Ecology, and Pedagogy* <http://www.rc.umd.edu/pedagogies/commons/ecology/harrison/harrison.html> [accessed 20 June 2013].

[12] McKusick, *Green Writing*, pp. 83–85.

[13] Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 200, 199; see also Morton, 'John Clare's Dark Ecology'.

[14] John Parham, 'The Poverty of Ecocritical Theory: E. P. Thompson and the British Perspective', *New Formations*, 64 (2008), 25–36. Sarah Zimmerman argues that an awareness of Clare's social politics should be reintegrated into this approach in *Romanticism, Lyricism, and History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999).

the more harmonious aspects of his representations. Bate notes how a poem like 'The Ravens Nest' shows 'the village as a viable ecosystem', while J. M. Neeson claims that commoners 'were the "human fauna" of their lands' and associates this sense of belonging with Clare's nostalgic vision for the lost common-field economy.[15] Onno Oerlemans states that in 'The Badger' human cruelty 'is presented as merely characteristic behaviour, as is that of the animals', but still interprets the poem as an expression of moral outrage.[16]

The work of both Bate and McKusick, in outlining Clare's ideal of shared rights between humans and animals, implicitly elides two conceptions: humans should act like animals, by operating within 'a viable ecosystem' alongside other animals; but also humans should not act like animals, by taking a moral view of their responsibilities. My argument teases out the tensions between these two conceptions, amoral animal and moral being, in Clare's poetry. Like Morton, I do not consider Clare as some authentic eco-saint but as an intellectual whose poetry is profoundly exercised by the problem of representation '*for another*'. My argument does not deny Clare's sensitive interest in nature, his professed 'love & joy / For every weed'.[17] Rather, I am attending to those instances where Clare draws upon a less idealized conception of how nature works, in order to frame a less idealized representation of how social village life works.

[15] Bate, 'The Rights of Nature', p. 14; J. M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 179.
[16] Onno Oerlemans, *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p. 80.
[17] 'The Flitting' (1832), *MP*, III, 479–89 (ll. 189–90).

**Clare and Natural History**

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, natural history was enjoying increased popularity as a pastime.[18] Mary Louise Pratt writes that the systemizing of nature in the eighteenth century, through Linnaean classification, represented 'an urban discourse about non-urban worlds, and a lettered, bourgeois discourse about non-lettered, peasant worlds'.[19] However, by Clare's time, the study of natural history in England – although not available as a formal pursuit to a man of his means – was practised as a hobby by people across all social ranks.[20] Anne Secord notes that the oral culture within labouring-class naturalist circles allowed illiterate enthusiasts to participate, and the discoveries and observations offered by these participants contributed to wider correspondence networks of naturalists.[21]

Clare showed an interest in natural history from his childhood. His knowledge was developed not only by close, sustained observation of the various plants and animals in the Helpston area, but also by his reading of natural history texts, as is evident in his account of working as a gardener for the Marquis of Exeter:

> [...] after I had been there a few weeks I savd my money to purchase Abercrombies Gardening which became my chief study the gardens was very large [*del.* but when I was there] & I remember finding some curious flowers which I had never seen before growing wild among the vegetables[22]

[18] Theresa M. Kelley, 'Romantic Exemplarity: Botany and "Material" Culture', in *Romantic Science: The Literary Forms of Natural History*, ed. by Noah Heringman (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), pp. 223–54 (p. 227).
[19] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 34–35.
[20] Marilyn Gaull, 'Clare and "the Dark System"', in *John Clare in Context*, ed. by Summerfield, Haughton and Phillips, pp. 279–94 (p. 280).
[21] Anne Secord, 'Corresponding Interests: Artisans and Gentlemen in Nineteenth-Century Natural History', *British Journal for the History of Science*, 27 (1994), 383–408.
[22] Pet. MS A34, p. 4.

John Abercrombie, the most prolific writer of gardening manuals in the period, is one of several botanical authors whom Clare recalls reading as a child and adolescent.[23]

Clare also read zoological texts, which dealt with predatory behaviour. In particular, one of his favourite books was Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler*, first published in 1653. As Bridget Keegan argues, Clare was undoubtedly influenced by Walton's notion of 'compleatness': his understanding of the complementarity of different components within a natural and social environment that collectively display an inherent divinity, which anticipates the principles of deep ecology.[24] Walton's conception of the harmonious natural community, built on mutual tolerance, still acknowledges the necessities of predation and killing. By the eighteenth century, the interactions between species were commonly characterized under the idea of 'nature's economy', a theory that, in the words of Kevin Hutchings, 'conceptualized all earthly entities as integral but interdependent parts of a complexly unified, interactive whole'.[25] Erasmus Darwin, whom Clare also read, offered this notion in *The Botanic Garden* (1791), which contained the poem 'The Economy of Vegetation'.[26]

Clare shows his interest in animal predation in the following passage from 'September' (*MP*, I, 129–36) in *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1827):

> In the barn hole sits the cat
> Watching within the thirsty rat
> Who oft at morn its dwelling leaves
> To drink the moisture from the eves
> The redbreast with his nimble eye
> Dare scarcely stop to catch the flye
>
> That tangled in the spiders snare

[23] Clare mentions reading James Lee's *An Introduction to Botany* (1760), Nicholas Culpeper's *Herbal* (1653), and John Hill's *Family Herbal* (1754), see Pet. MS A25, p. 3, repr. in *By Himself*, p. 61. On Abercrombie, see Blanche Henrey, *British Botanical and Horticultural Literature before 1800*, 3 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), II, 363–71.
[24] See Bridget Keegan, 'Clare's "Compleatness": Izaak Walton's Influence on Clare's Nature Writing', *JCSJ*, 23 (2004), 5–14.
[25] Kevin Hutchings, *Imagining Nature: Blake's Environmental Poetics* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), p. 90.
[26] Clare would mention his fondness for Darwin in a letter to Henry Cary (4 November 1827), *Letters*, p. 403.

Mourns in vain for freedom there

(ll. 75–82)

Here, animals are linked to one another as predators and prey; the rolling syntax controlled by couplet rhymes implies a harmonious order to this interaction, while the uncertain agent of 'its dwelling leaves' produces a levelling effect between the cat and rat**.** Clare's steady observation is not contained by any condemnation of this activity as 'cruel'.

One natural historian who had considerable influence on Clare was Gilbert White, whose *The Natural History of Selborne* was first published in 1789. It is unclear when Clare first encountered White's book, but in the mid-1820s, while waiting for Taylor's lengthy edits of *The Shepherd's Calendar*, he embarked on his own imitative (but uncompleted) 'A Natural History of Helpstone', which like White's would be a locally based study written in a series of letters.[27] Clare was encouraged in this endeavour by Taylor's co-publisher, James Hessey, who eventually presented him in 1828 with an edition of *The Natural History of Selborne*.[28] As Oerlemans observes, Clare and White were both fundamentally interested in behaviour, not just morphology.[29] White's book furthered Clare's interest in interdependence, casually indicated when the poet quotes the naturalist in a letter to Taylor in 1828, while justifying his own financial need to write for magazines: '"Interest makes strange friendships" White the Naturalist says & I feel its truth & its misfortune'.[30] Most crucially in terms of his influence on Clare, White believed in the importance of studying a species within its habitat, and attending to temporal patterns – he thus observed birds at different times of day, and through different seasons.

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[27] At one stage, Clare planned to call the work 'Biographys of Birds and Flowers', with an appendix on 'Animals and Insects', *By Himself*, p. 217.
[28] Gilbert White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, 2 vols (London: Rivington, 1825); no. 395 in *Northampton Catalogue*.
[29] Oerlemans, pp. 137–38.
[30] Clare to Taylor (3 April 1828), *Letters*, p. 424.

One of Clare's 'Natural History' letters indicates his discomfort when birds are removed from their habitat for scientific study:

> I love to look on nature with a poetic feeling which magnifys the pleasure I love to see the nightingale in its hazel retreat & the cuckoo hiding in the solitudes of oaken foliage & not to examine their carcasses in glass cases yet naturalists & botanists seem to have no taste for this practical feeling they merely make collections of dryd specimens classing them after Leanius into tribes & familys & there they delight to show them as a sort of ambitious fame with them 'a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush' well every one to his hobby[31]

Clare is opposed to the Linnaean universal classificatory language, which extracts an organism from its local context.[32] His disdain for these scientists is couched in his notion of 'taste' in nature, a quality with similarities to Walton's notion of 'compleatness', which he most extensively details in the 1830 poem 'Shadows of Taste' (*MP*, III, 303–10): 'birds & flowers & insects' that interact with one another are the heirs of taste, '& they / All choose for joy in a peculiar way' (ll. 4–6). Clare's poem attacks the 'man of science' who would remove the species:

> But take these several beings from their homes
> Each beautious thing a withered thought becomes
> Association fades & like a dream
> They are but shadows of the things they seem
> (ll. 147–50)

The need to see 'beings' in context is evident not only in Clare's natural observation, but also in his social observation. The ways of seeing put forward by Walton and White exert considerable influence on the poems discussed in this chapter: human beings are shown behaving alongside other species, in relation to their natural environment.

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[31] 'Natural History Letter III' (1824–26), *NHPW*, pp. 36–42 (ll. 44–52).

[32] Clare satirizes Linnaean classification in 'A Ploughmans Skill at Classification after the Lineian Arrangement' (1809–19), *EP*, I, 211. On his adherence to common names of plants, see Douglas Chambers, '"A Love for Every Simple Weed": Clare, Botany and the Poetic Language of a Lost Eden', in *John Clare in Context*, ed. by Summerfield, Haughton and Phillips, pp. 238–58.

**The Naturalist's Representation of Human Behaviour**

In *The Compleat Angler*, there is an occasion when Walton shows humans not as speaking, rationalizing entities, but as visible animals like any other, when his character the Venator spots men hunting for otters:

> [...] look down at the bottom of the hill there in that Meadow, chequered with *water-Lillies* and *Lady-smocks*; there you may see what work they make; look! look! you may see all busie, men and dogs, dogs and men, all busie.[33]

Men and animals serve the same predatory purpose. The space between the Venator and the men, 'at the bottom of the hill', allows Walton some objective distance, and the violence of hunting from afar is characterized merely as 'busie' activity. If only briefly, Walton observes human behaviour as a form of animal behaviour.

By the eighteenth century, other naturalists were making close observation of human communities. Among the most comprehensive examples are the exploration narratives of the expeditions led by Captain Cook to the South Sea Islands. These expeditions were sent by the government with the expectation that they would provide understanding of previously unknown parts of the world. The groups of explorers invariably contained skilled natural historians, such as, in the case of Cook's first voyage, Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander. These scientists recorded precise observations not only of the flora and fauna of the new territories, but also of the human inhabitants, thereby producing their own proto-anthropological studies. John Hawkesworth's *Voyages* (1773) – the published account of the expedition, based in part upon Cook's and Banks's own first-hand journals – met with a wide and enthusiastic public audience back in England, fuelling a taste among some readers for its depictions of exotic types of human experience, but shocking others.[34] Clare certainly read about

[33] Izaak Walton, *The Compleat Angler*, (London: Hamlyn, 1987), p. 57.
[34] Glyndwr Williams, 'The Achievement of the English Voyages, 1650–1800', in *Background to Discovery: Pacific Exploration from Dampier to Cook*, ed. by Derek Howse, pp. 56–80 (pp.

Cook's expeditions, though it is uncertain whether he read Hawkesworth's original publication.[35] Nevertheless, these accounts provide a useful parallel to Clare, as they illuminate questions about 'customary' and 'natural' behaviour that were beginning to circulate in the eighteenth century.

Considerable criticism was levelled at Hawkesworth's *Voyages* in the 1770s for its reporting of the more licentious customs among the natives of Otaheite.[36] As Bernard Smith states, 'to most God-fearing Englishmen [...] it was only too apparent that these so-called innocents of nature were depraved and benighted savages'.[37] On Cook's first voyage, as reported in Hawkesworth's book, the explorers witnessed prostitution, infanticide and erotic dancing. Confronted with behaviour that would be outrageous to a polite audience back home, these observers met with the conflict of whether to regard human behaviour in moral or amoral terms. A moralist onlooker might dismiss or censor offensive detail, but this reaction would curtail any understanding of the 'other' culture. For the explorers, the perspective of a natural historian became a means of confronting and controlling strangeness; they attempted to maintain what Pratt has identified as the 'conspicuous innocence of the naturalist'.[38] This scientific attitude enlarges the field of observation, so that vulgar human activity becomes worthy of attention.

Among the episodes reported by Hawkesworth from the first voyage was one particularly infamous sexual incident in Otaheite, taken from the Cook's journals:

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70–71). For further background to Hawkesworth's *Voyages*, see John L. Abbott, *John Hawkesworth: Eighteenth-Century Man of Letters* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).

[35] 'COOK, James. *The Three Voyages round the World*. 1824' is listed as no. 162 in *Northampton Catalogue*. Unfortunately, the copy was stolen from the collection a few years ago. One assumes that this edition is *The Three Voyages of Captain Cook Round the World* (London: J. Limbird, 1824) – an abbreviated, and somewhat sanitized edition of Cook's journals, which doesn't include the 'rites of Venus' passage.

[36] For an example of the satirical backlash against the publication, see *Transmigration: A Poem* (London: J. Bew, 1778).

[37] Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, 2nd edn (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 44.

[38] Pratt, p. 57.

> A young man, near six feet high, performed the rites of Venus with a little girl about eleven or twelve years of age, before several of our people, and a great number of the natives, without the least sense of its being indecent or improper, but, as appeared, in perfect conformity to the custom of the place.[39]

Hawkesworth's statement that the incident is 'indecent' and 'improper' shows his compulsion to moralize. However, his condemnation is coupled with his recognition that this activity belongs to the 'custom of the place', which raises the question of whether there may be separate set of standards by which to judge such an incident. He is prompted to ask:

> Whether the shame attending certain actions, which are allowed on all sides to be in themselves innocent, is implanted in Nature, or superinduced by custom? If it has its origins in custom, it will, perhaps, be found difficult to trace that custom, however general, to its source; if in instinct, it will be equally difficult to discover from what cause it is subdued or at least over-ruled among these people, in whose manners not the least trace of it is found.[40]

To claim that 'shame' is implanted in 'Nature' is to endorse the fiction that one's own values are 'natural' and therefore present a universal norm; in other words, you validate your own culture by turning it into 'nature'. If this is the case, the enlightened onlooker's civilized perspective will regard the actions of the strange islanders as vulgar and 'unnatural'. Alternatively, if shame has its roots in 'custom' and therefore is subject to local variation, then the onlooker recognizes that the natives themselves may have their own assumptions about the 'natural' validity of their culture. This view exposes the value system which has constructed the onlooker's sense of shame and made them 'civilized' as being not universal at all, but potentially limited and unstable; it invites a sense of relativism. The fact that Hawkesworth is exercised by this question betrays his consciousness that straightforward moral condemnation will not help him to understand how the Otaheitian culture actually works. Moral and social considerations are not

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[39] John Hawkesworth, *An Account of the Voyages Undertaken by the Order of His Present Majesty for Making Discoveries in the Southern Hemisphere*, 3 vols (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1773), II, 128.
[40] Hawkesworth, II, 128.

completely displaced, but they do not contain the onlooker's perspective, and a new way of seeing emerges.

Clare confronts similar problems to the South Sea explorers when he observes his own rural culture. He is representing a part of the world that is mysterious to his polite audience, and is conflicted whether to regard behaviour in moral or amoral terms. Showing similar interests, he often represents his local community as a sealed one, containing its own stability and coherence that originates from the human inhabitants' close relationship to the natural world. James McKusick writes that in Clare's poetry, 'an organism has meaning and value only in its proper *home*, in symbiotic association with all the creatures that surround and nourish it'; in these poems, the organism in question is the labouring-class figure.[41] By framing rural life using a perspective that resembles a natural historian's, Clare unsettles the validity of any 'universal' value system.

**Attempts at a 'Naturalizing' Perspective: *The Village Minstrel, and Other Poems***

My chapter now addresses Clare's early attempts at representing repetitive human behaviour as natural activity in three poems published in his second collection, *The Village Minstrel, and Other Poems* (1821). These poems all respond to certain generic expectations, each demonstrating a shift in emphasis towards accurate observation of their subject matter.

Clare's 'Recollections after an Evening Walk' (1819–20) is a departure from some of the common characteristics of 'evening' poetry during this period. In eighteenth-century poetry, according to Christopher Miller, the evening frequently served as 'an occasion of perceptual adjustment, in which the faculty of vision yields to

[41] McKusick, '"A Language That Is Ever Green"', p. 237.

aural acuity and imaginative fancy or introspection'.[42] One particularly influential example was William Collins's 'Ode to Evening', published in 1746, which becomes a prayer to 'chaste Eve' (l. 2).[43] In Anna Letitia Barbauld's 'A Summer Evening's Meditation', published in 1773, the narrator finds that the evening propels her towards interior concerns: ''Tis now the hour / When Contemplation, from her sunless haunts, [...] Moves forward' (ll. 17–23).[44]

The evening also often served in poetry as the occasion for idealized 'cottage door' scenes, which portrayed rural labourers drawing contentment from the end of an honest day's work.[45] Wordsworth's *An Evening Walk*, published in 1793, is a loco-descriptive work which exemplifies both of these qualities: it offers an idealized portrayal of quarrymen who 'Glad from their airy baskets hang and sing' (l. 150), and then moves towards interiority, imaginatively conjuring the image of a female vagrant.[46] As Miller states, Wordsworth demonstrates a 'sympathetic visualization [...] an exercise of Fancy on which evening poetry thrives, a way of seeing in the dark'.[47]

In contrast to these examples, 'Recollections after an Evening Walk' (*EP*, II, 326–28) does not move towards the interiority of its narrator, but remains steadily focused upon external observations; it also lessens the idealization of rural life that

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[42] Christopher R. Miller, *The Invention of Evening: Perception and Time in Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 9.
[43] *The Works of William Collins*, ed. by Richard Wendorf and Charles Ryskamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 44–45. Clare owned *The Poetical Works of William Collins* (London: C. Cooke, 1796); no. 322 in *Northampton Catalogue*.
[44] *The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, ed. by William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1992), pp. 81–84. Clare owned an copy of *Poems by Anna Laetitia Barbauld*, new edn (London: J. Johnson, 1792), which includes this poem (pp. 137–44); no. 108 in *Northampton Catalogue*.
[45] John Goodridge, *Rural Life in Eighteenth-Century English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 71–88; Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, pp. 65–77.
[46] William Wordsworth, *An Evening Walk*, ed. by James Averill (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 28–80. Little is known about Clare's reading of Wordsworth. He had certainly read some of Wordsworth's poems in 1819, see letter to Octavius Gilchrist (December 1819), *Letters*, p. 23. Clare's library also contains a copy of Wordsworth's *The Miscellaneous Poems*, 4 vols (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1820), but this was presented to him by his father in 1822; no. 407 in *Northampton Catalogue*.
[47] Miller, p. 85.

'cottage door' scenes provide. These characteristics that distinguish Clare's poem can be linked to its concern, like a naturalist observer's, with how behaviour operates within a certain natural environment. In the poem, Clare's narrator maintains his concentration on the visual and aural scene as various human figures return home, diversified by their occupations: woodman, mower, thresher and shepherd. At the same time, in parallel, various animals appear:

> The shepherd had told all his sheep in his pen
> & hummed his song to his cottage agen
> But the sweetest of all seeming music to me
> Was the song of the clumbsy brown beetle & bee
> The one was a hastning away to his hive
> The other was just from his sleeping alive
> (ll. 17–22)

Goodridge states: 'Natural cycles and patterns are vitally important to Clare, whose idea of community is often associated with the predictability of seasonal and natural sequential patterns'.[48] In this poem, nightfall induces both the human and the beetle to return to their habitats, and the bee to emerge, in an instinctual changing of the guard. While carrying out their environmentally determined behaviour, the beetle and the bee produce a blended song, thus drawing a parallel not only with the humming shepherd, but also with the poet whose song is inspired by the 'natural sequential pattern' of the labouring day.

The poem, however, undermines the sense of an idealized homecoming, when it draws attention to another kind of rural dweller: '& there came the snail from his shell peeping out / As fear full & cautious as thieves on the rout' (ll. 29–30). As Roger Ekirch notes, in rural communities, crime was considered the greatest menace at night: 'After sunset, rogues and miscreants, like wild beasts, emerged from their lairs seeking fresh quarry.'[49] The allusion to thieves inflects the ending of the poem when the narrator and

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[48] Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, p. 135.
[49] A. Roger Ekirch, *At Day's Close: A History of Nighttime* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), p. 31.

his companion return home: '& then we came up to our cottage once more / & shut out the night dew & lockt up the door' (ll. 57–58). The attention to human dwelling incorporates the 'natural' need to secure one's habitat against the threat of thieves.[50]

Another of Clare's poems, 'After reading in a Letter proposals for building a cottage', written between 1819 and 1820, works within the genre of the eighteenth-century 'wish' poem that expresses the desire for an idealized rural retreat.[51] Again, Clare demonstrates a change in emphasis within these generic expectations, as he details this human dwelling and its place within a natural environment in a manner that resembles his later poetry on nests. For example, in 'The Nightingale's Nest' (*MP*, III, 456–61), written in 1832, Clare attends to the construction of the bird's dwelling out of various materials and how it is guarded by a 'thorn bush' (l. 91), in order to illustrate the protective function of the nest. 'After reading in a Letter...' (*EP*, II, 60–61) presents a humble 'shed' (l. 1) which is sheltered by surrounding trees: 'Wi' stubbles coverd oer / Let broad oaks oer its chimley spread' (ll. 2–3). The narrator emphasizes the cottage's embeddedness in its natural environment through his hope that the thatch and chimney-top might provide dwellings for sparrows and swallows. The sense of an idealized dwelling, characteristic of the 'wish' poem, is then momentarily disrupted by another reference to criminality:

> The door may open wi a string
> So that it closes tight
> & locks too woud be wanted things
> To keep out thieves at night

[50] Clare returns to this image in 'January: A Winter's Day' (*MP*, I, 3–11) in *The Shepherd's Calendar*, describing a thresher's homecoming: 'owlets glad his toils are oer / Swops by him as he shuts the door' (ll. 175–76).

[51] Clare had already written within this genre in his early poems 'The Wish' (*EP*, I, 43–50) – which asks for a cottage with its roofing made of solid 'british oak' and 'slate' (ll. 15–16) – 'A Winter Wish' (*EP*, I, 131) and 'The Poets Wish' (*EP*, I, 489). On this subject, and the influence of John Pomfret on Clare's attempts, see Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, pp. 37–44.

(ll. 5–8)

'Locks' is a jarring detail, as with 'lockt up' in 'Recollections after an Evening Walk'. In both poems, Clare's naturalizing view of a human habitat leads him to acknowledge the inevitable threat of thieves in rural life.

While these two poems ultimately focus upon the narrator's own home, Clare's 'The Woodman', written in 1819, also concerns the elemental experience of outdoor labour, which would have been alien to his polite audience. In this work, the narrator's naturalizing view is continually pressured by the need to idealize or moralize. These tensions can be illustrated when the poem is compared to two other texts with more stable perspectives: Robert Burns's 'The Cotter's Saturday Night', which Clare claimed to be directly imitating; and Clare's prose piece, 'The Woodman, or the Beauties of a Winter Forest', written in the same period.[52]

In 'The Cotter's Saturday Night', published in 1786, Burns provides a pious image of rural life. His poem is dedicated to Robert Aiken, a lawyer in Ayr, and its sentimental representation panders to an urban reader's fantasy of living in the countryside:[53]

> The *lowly train* in life's sequester'd scene;
> The native feelings strong, the guileless ways,
> What A**** in a *Cottage* would have been;
> Ah! tho' his worth unknown, far happier there I ween!
> (ll. 6–9)[54]

The pastoral ideal of a rural life being happier than a rich one resurfaces later in Burns's poem, as the narrator, in distinctly elevated diction, addresses 'Scotia':

> Long may thy hardy sons of *rustic toil*

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[52] Clare to Isaiah Holland (October? 1819): 'I am now writing "The Woodman" in the manner of Burns Saturday night', *Letters*, p. 15. Holland, to whom the poem is dedicated, had lent Clare a copy of Burns, see Bate, *John Clare*, p. 121.

[53] Robert Crawford, *The Bard: Robert Burns, a Biography* (London: Random House, 2010), p. 34.

[54] *Burns: Poems and Songs*, ed. by James Kinsley, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), I, 145–52. References to Burns are taken from this edition.

> Be blest with health and peace and sweet content!
> And O may Heaven their simple lives prevent
> From *Luxury*'s contagion, weak and vile!
> (ll. 174–77)

When he acknowledges vice in the rural community – mentioning that a rake might seduce the Cotter's daughter, Jenny – he adopts a moralizing tone: 'Curse on his perjur'd arts! dissembling smoothe! / Are *Honor*, *Virtue*, *Conscience*, all exil'd?' (ll. 86–87).

Clare's 'The Woodman' (*EP*, II, 287–96) is also dedicated to a polite reader, the Congregational minister Isaiah Knowles Holland, and in the manner of Burns he shows the poor as rustically charming at the beginning and the end of the poem.[55] The woodman works not merely to ensure his family's survival, but also their comfort: 'Make both ends meet & from long debts keep free / & keep as neat & clean his creasing family' (ll. 26–27). The woodman's wish is echoed at the end of the poem by his wife, who keeps 'their cots & childern neat & tight' (l. 162).

However, in the middle of the poem, Clare reverses Burns's image of the woodman returning home by presenting him going out to work. Here, the perspective of the poem changes, as it details how 'winters riggid power affects all nature through' (l. 54). Burns mentions the harsh conditions outdoors only briefly, when his cotter returns home and 'November chill blaws loud wi' angry sugh' (l. 10); for Clare, these conditions provide the principal subject matter. In his poem 'The Pettichaps Nest' (*MP*, III, 517–19), written between 1825 and 1826, a woodman is a disturbance to a bird's habitat.[56] In 'The Woodman', contrastingly, labouring figures are characterized not as outsiders, but as showing behaviour that is comparable to the instinctual activity of various animals. The woodman 'shrugs & wishes – but its all in vain' (l. 5) while the 'milk maids songs is drownd in gloomy care' (l. 42); their reluctance is reflected by

[55] On Holland, see Bate, *John Clare*, pp. 120–21.
[56] On this poem, see Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p. 160.

other creatures: ‘The squirking rabbit scarcly leaves her hole [...] The fox is loath to gin a long patrole’ (ll. 46–48). Here Clare’s perspective shows the influence of natural history, as he reveals the similarities between humans and animals: they are all forced outside by necessity and behave under the influence of the environmental conditions. This novel representation of the woodman powerfully evokes the experience of working outside, in the cold.

The barren landscape in ‘The Woodman’ contrasts with the idyllic representations not only in Burns’s poem but also in Clare’s essay, ‘The Woodman, or the Beauties of a Winter Forest’.[57] This prose piece invokes the pastoral image of the resting, idle shepherd, when the woodman sees that his ‘favorite tree (where he was wont in summer to stretch his limbs in idle dalliance on the flowery turf beneath its cooling shade) is now left desolate rob’d [*del.* of] both of its idle shepherd and the green foliage that cloth’d its summer boughs’ (ll. 11–15).[58] In Clare’s poem, the shepherd’s favourite spot has been ‘rob’d’ in a different sense:

> The shepherd seeks no more his spreading oak
> Nor on the sloping pond head lyes at lare
> The arbour he once wattld up is broke
> & left unworthy of his future care
> The ragged plundering stickers have bin there
> & bottld it away – he passes bye
> His summer dwelling desolate & bare
> & neer so much as turns a ’serning eye
> But gladly seeks his fire & leaves the ’clement skye
> (ll. 64–72)

The ‘ragged plundering stickers’, one assumes, have been stealing wood for fuel. In the context of the poem’s naturalizing perspective, these actions are presented as another example of the need for protection and survival in oppressive circumstances. After the caesura following ‘bottld it away’, the shepherd does not pause to condemn such a deed,

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[57] ‘The Woodman or the Beauties of a Winter Forest’ (1820), *NHPW*, pp. 3–9. References are taken from this edition.

[58] On this prose piece’s self-conscious use of poetic references, see Paul Chirico, ‘“The Woodman” and Natural Anthology’, *JCSJ*, 19 (2000), 41–51.

but ‘passes bye’ with no time to turn ‘a ’serning eye’. Similarly, the woodman cannot contemplate his surroundings: ‘To look at things around hes fit to freeze’ (l. 77). By contrast, the prose piece shows a woodman enjoying ‘fairy visions’ (ll. 45–46) and ‘musing on ancient days’ (ll. 51–52).

The mention of wood-stealing has an underlying political element, nostalgically evoking the lost rights of the common-field economy which had been important to the inhabitants of rural Northamptonshire and were disappearing by Clare’s time. After enclosure, villagers had to enter fenced land belonging to local farmers or landlords to collect wood, whose permission they would require. As Neeson states, these villagers were now ‘gathering as a privilege not a right’.[59] In the case of ‘The Woodman’, those who were once legitimate commoners have necessarily become ‘plunderers’. Clare implies that such an act betrays a universal need, which validates it. But in another sense, his naturalizing perspective has a depoliticizing effect: the conditions after enclosure are accepted as part of the natural struggle to survive.

Later in ‘The Woodman’, however, the naturalizing perspective on outdoor life is disrupted by direct political complaint: the narrator states of the labouring poor, that ‘wealth forever gainst em shuts her door’ (l. 93), and subsequently attacks the ‘parish moneys’ as benevolence which ‘mocks the poor mans pain’ (ll. 106–08). In another shift away from the naturalizing view, the narrator moralizes when the woodman gives ‘crumble drops’ (l. 124) to a robin: ‘Thanks to thy generous feelings gentle swain / & what thy pity gives shall not be gave in vain’ (ll. 125–26). The robin was commonly perceived as the innocent friend of mankind, and this praise for the woodman echoes a passage in Clare’s prose piece: ‘Well done! honest woodman – thy charity towards this innocent little creature shall be rewarded – thy fellow-workmen shall applaud the

[59] Neeson, *Commoners*, p. 184.

worthy deed – and every heart rejoice' (ll. 100–02).[60] In this example, the notion of workmen rejoicing sounds comically overblown; as Paul Chirico states, this condescending dedication may be a 'parody of the complacent narrator'.[61]

Towards the end of the poem, when the woodman retreats indoors, Clare indicates a full shift of perspective away from that of the natural observer:

> I think I see him seated in his chair
> Taking the bellows up the fire to blow
> I think I hear him joke & chatter there
> Telling his childern news they wish to know
> (ll. 145–48)

The narrator switches from what he observes, to what he 'thinks', and like Burns his imagination conjures an idyllic scene. Rather than turning to the alehouse, the woodman has come home, in a pastoral manner similar to that identified by Barrell in Thomas Gainsborough's paintings, which represent 'the deserving poor as attached to separate little domestic economic groupings which are the sole object of the labourer's attention'.[62] The woodman is now figured in pious terms, 'humming oer an anthem hymn or psalm' (l. 184), and reciting a prayer of thanks – 'Prepare thou me this wicked world to leave' (l. 214) – that casts a moral view on the circumstances detailed in the poem.

These three poems from *The Village Minstrel* demonstrate Clare's early use of naturalizing perspectives on human behaviour. In each case, he emphasizes the need to protect oneself within an unforgiving environment and acknowledges the presence of thieves in the rural community. 'The Woodman' provides the more extensive example of this type of perspective, but its naturalizing vision is nevertheless placed in tension with other perspectives – the narrator also makes political complaint, moralizes over his protagonist, and in the domestic scenes, falls into pastoral idealization. This

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[60] On the status of the robin, see Thomas, p. 111.
[61] Chirico, '"The Woodman" and Natural Anthology', p. 44.
[62] Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, p. 73.

proliferation of perspectives illustrates the difficulty of finding a single set of values by which to regard rural poverty. In the years that followed *The Village Minstrel*, Clare would indicate this difficulty again in his poem 'The Mole Catcher'.

**Representing the Need to Survive in 'The Mole Catcher'**

Like 'The Woodman', the extended observation in 'The Mole Catcher' (*MP*, II, 21–29) evokes the perspective of a natural historian. However, while 'The Woodman' kept the plundering stickers invisible, 'The Mole Catcher' makes the very poorest visible. Clare worked on this poem over a long period – five manuscript drafts exist, dating from 1822 to 1830 – and his revisions show a concern to eliminate what might be deemed inappropriate: for example, the lines describing the workhouse were heavily reworked, then eventually cut.[63]

As a portrait of a rural solitary, 'The Mole Catcher' can be placed in the same generic line as Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence' and 'The Old Cumberland Beggar'. In 'Resolution and Independence', published in *Poems, in Two Volumes* in 1807, Wordsworth's leech-gatherer is presented like a mystical being: 'a thing endued with sense: / Like a Sea-beast crawl'd forth' (ll. 68–69).[64] His narrator cannot quite define the leech-gatherer, 'not all alive nor dead, / Nor all asleep' (ll. 71–72), and ultimately regards him as a sublime figure**:**

> The Old Man still stood talking by my side;
> But now his voice to me was like a stream
> Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide;

[63] Versions of the poem appear in Pet. MS A18, A19, A20, A31 and A50. Lines 1–18 of the first draft, which introduce the workhouse scene, do not appear in Pet. MS A50. The poem may have been intended for *The Shepherd's Calendar* – a version is copied into Pet. MS A20, pp. 62–63, which contained several pieces that would eventually appear in this collection – but it was not published in Clare's lifetime

[64] William Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800–1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 123–29. References are taken from this edition.

> And the whole Body of the man did seem
> Like one whom I had met with in a dream;
> Or like a Man from some far region sent,
> To give me human strength, and strong admonishment.
> (ll. 113–19)

Through this visionary perspective, the leech-gatherer is abstracted into a figure of endurance and moral beneficence, serving to instruct Wordsworth's narrator.

Clare presents his mole-catcher in more matter-of-fact terms. While Wordsworth's leech-gatherer speaks 'Choice word, and measured phrase; above the reach / Of ordinary men' (ll. 102–03), Clare's mole-catcher, an old man, provides practical wisdom to various members of the village:

> A sort of walking almanack he seems
> The rustic swains who deem him weather wise
> Shepherd & woodman his discourse esteems
> & ploughmen often stop their reeking teams
> (ll. 20–23)

The mole-catcher serves the function of print culture as an 'almanack', providing a receptacle for the collective memory of the rural community. This binding function can be distinguished from the one ascribed to the protagonist in 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', published in 1800:

> [...] the Villagers in him
> Behold a record which together binds
> Past deeds and offices of charity
> Else unremember'd, and so keeps alive
> The kindly mood in hearts which lapse of years,
> And that half-wisdom half-experience gives
> Make slow to feel, and by sure steps resign
> To selfishness and cold oblivious cares.
> (ll. 80–87)[65]

Wordsworth transforms his solitary into an emblem; the communal charity which the beggar prompts crafts a private sense of community, but actual interaction with him is restrained. Clare does not extrapolate his mole-catcher into any such figure of moral importance. Instead, the conversation that the mole-catcher holds with shepherds and

[65] William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 228–34.

woodmen (and not refined observers like Wordsworth) illustrates the day-to-day interactions which cultivate a sense of collective memory. The leech-gatherer may describe how he makes his living, but Wordsworth cannot tell how he survives when work is unavailable. In contrast, 'The Mole Catcher' is grounded in Clare's observation of the subject in his habitat throughout the year.

Clare's representation of the mole-catcher is couched in natural similes. The old man operates according to the cycle of the seasons, emerging from the workhouse as if out of hibernation, as soon as 'the elderns pethey branches buds' (l. 1). He is a figure who 'like the pewet comes with spring again' (l. 122), but is also a hunter of pewet's eggs:

> & soon as springs first mornings are awake
> He threads the pasture pewets eggs to look
> & when these fail the more ponds flaggy nook
> To beat for leeches—then the mushrooms start
> In black green fairey rings—thus natures book
> Is turned till he each lesson knows by heart
> In lifes rude patchwork play to act the alotted part
> (ll. 57–63)

The gathering of eggs and leeches is presented as predatory activity as 'natural' as turning the pages of 'natures book'. In Wordsworth's 'Michael, a Pastoral Poem', a shepherd is ennobled by his 'endless industry' (l. 97); in contrast, Clare's mole-catcher is not glorified, but merely fits into the poet's idea of 'tasteful' interaction.[66] He plays his part within a 'rude patchwork' of species, the line here balanced harmoniously by the chiastic structure of /p/ and /a/ sounds.

Clare characterizes the mole-catcher's actions as evidence of his dependency on his environment: he 'leans on natures offerings for supply / Like a weak child upon a mothers breast' (ll. 64–65). Enclosure is written into this poem: the old man targets the moles who do 'the fences harm' (l. 18) and leaves those others on 'moors & commons & the pasture green [...] undisturbed to root & run' (ll. 107–08). However, while Clare's

[66] Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads,* pp. 252–68.

1832 poem 'Remembrances' (*MP*, IV, 130–34) condemns the killing of moles under the procedures of enclosure – a process which 'like a Buonaparte let not a thing remain' (l. 67) – in 'The Mole Catcher' he portrays the same action without moralizing outrage:

> & as a triumph to his matchless skill
> On some grey willow where a road runs bye
> That passers may behold his powers to kill
> On the boughs twigs he'll many a felon tye
> On every common dozens may be met
> Dangling on bent twigs bleaching to the sun
> Whose melancholly fates meets no regret
> Though dreamless of the snare they could not shun
> They died unconsious of all injury done
> (ll. 98–106)

The image of the dead moles is unnerving – 'bleaching to the sun' – yet their status as 'unconsious of all injury' subdues the impression of an unnecessarily cruel death.

On occasion, however, Clare's naturalizing portrayal of the old man comes under tension. As Sara Lodge observes, the mole-catcher is 'a node between the natural and the civic economy, neither of which can fully support him'.[67] This liminal status is evident when Clare's natural imagery appears inadequate, especially in the poem's opening description of the workhouse: 'crys of childern born to wither there / Like buds which tempests in the april seres' (ll. 12–13). The natural simile here is meant to be unsettling, as it threatens blithe acceptance of suffering; Clare suggests that the poem's naturalizing view has its limitations.

In addition, this view is disrupted by surprising details that authenticate Clare's account – the sort of details which exemplify what Mina Gorji has termed his 'awkwardness'.[68] Despite the old man's poverty, he carries a 'snuffbox' (l. 123) – a luxury that, in the eighteenth century, was more commonly associated with the incipient bourgeoisie in coffee houses than the labouring classes (by the early nineteenth century, William Cobbett had condemned it as a 'foolish article' for the labouring classes to

[67] Sara Lodge, 'A Life Outside: Clare's Mole Catcher', *JCSJ*, 20 (2001), 5–18 (p. 9).
[68] See Gorji, 'Clare's Awkwardness'.

spend their money on).[69] The mole-catcher also steals 'a turnip from the sheep' (l. 133), a vegetable that in this period was regarded as 'stubbornly unpoetic', and that only humans in desperate need would consider eating.[70] Reduced to competing with other animals for food, the old man shows fear when he is confronted:

> Prides unconsern that hath no heart to feel
> Full often in his pottering pace appears
> From whom his turnip thefts he will consceal
> Who as a tyrant wakes his humble fears
> Whose proud & threatening taunts will fill his eyes with tears
> (ll. 136–40)

Lodge speculates that figure of 'Pride' may be a personified abstraction or a concrete figure such as a gamekeeper.[71] In any case, the importance of this passage lies in its sudden access to the psychological state of the old man which is otherwise limited by the poem's focus on external behaviour.

As with the poems already discussed in this chapter, Clare's attempt to view human behaviour as 'natural' comes under pressure from other ways of seeing. These points of tension indicate the difficulty of forming a coherent judgement, according to a single set of values, about a figure of rural poverty like the mole-catcher. For the remainder of this chapter, I will address the poet's treatment of one particular, non-idealized aspect of rural life: human cruelty towards animals. My discussion of 'The Mole Catcher' has indicated how some acts of violence, such as stealing eggs and killing moles, may be figured as part of the need to survive. In the discussions that follow, Clare's use of naturalizing perspectives brings additional complications, because he is representing ostensibly cruel pastimes that are ritualized within a tradition of customary culture, such as bird's-nesting and badger-baiting. The question that

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[69] Rudi Matthee, 'Exotic Substances: The Introduction and Global Spread of Tobacco, Coffee, Cocoa, Tea, and Distilled Liquor, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries', in *Drugs and Narcotics in History*, ed. by Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 24–51 (pp. 46–47). *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 6 January 1820, p. 569.
[70] Helsinger, p. 106.
[71] Lodge, p. 11.

Hawkesworth posed, as to whether attitudes are 'natural' or rooted in 'custom', is a dilemma that particularly comes to haunt these poems.

**Clare and Bird's-Nesting: Moral and Amoral Views**

As Anne Barton observes, 'Clare wrestled throughout his writing life with the problem of man's cruelty to the brute creation and – crucially – with the question of where to draw the line.'[72] Barton finds him to be inconsistent on this issue, and I agree that to claim he ever settled his opinions would be mistaken. However, I argue that we can gain a firmer understanding of Clare's attitudes by attending to his use of naturalizing perspectives, which point to certain instances of cruelty towards animals within the labouring-class community that he may find more acceptable than others.

By the late eighteenth century, there was a growing outcry against the cruel treatment of animals among the English middle classes, and particularly among the poets whom Clare read.[73] Cowper viewed cruelty to animals as symptomatic of man's exile from Eden, and complained that 'bird and beast / Should suffer torture' at man's hands.[74] Wordsworth's moral in 'Hart-leap Well', published in 1800, vowed: 'Never to blend our pleasure or our pride / With sorrow of the meanest thing that feels' (ll. 179–80).[75] Crabbe specifically wrote against cockfighting in *The Parish Register* (1807), describing the cocker as 'inhuman' and a 'savage'.[76] The protest movement culminated in the foundation in 1824 of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.[77]

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[72] Anne Barton, 'Clare's Animals: The Wild and the Tame', *JCSJ*, 18 (1999), 5–21 (p. 17).
[73] Thomas, p. 144.
[74] '*The Task* and Other Poems, 1785: Book VI, The Winter Walk at Noon', ll. 389–90, in *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. by John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), II, 237–63.
[75] Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, pp. 133–39.
[76] 'Part I, Baptisms', ll. 257, 265, in *George Crabbe: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Norma Dalrymple-Champneys and Arthur Pollard, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), I, 212–35. All further references to Crabbe's poetry are taken from this edition.
[77] Thomas, p. 149.

Clare was expected to offer similar sentiments on the subject. In July 1820, Lord Radstock presented him with an edition of James Beattie's *The Minstrel*, including an effusive handwritten inscription that voiced his hope of the poem's effect: 'Oh, how will your mind – your soul expand!', he writes.[78] Within this copy, Radstock highlights, with his signature 'R.', the following lines that refer to the poem's title character Edwin:

> The exploit of strength, dexterity, or speed,
> To him nor vanity nor joy could bring.
> His heart, from cruel sport estranged, would bleed
> To work the woe of any living thing,
> By trap, or net; by arrow, or by sling;
> (book I, stanza xviii)[79]

Edwin's compassionate disapproval, as a labouring-class figure, was offered as a moral example to Clare.

Barton identifies 'a suggestive parallel between Clare's mixed attitude towards hunting and his equally mixed attitude towards those village boys who, every spring, rapturously sought out birds' nests and took the eggs'.[80] By exploring this parallel more closely, one can begin to trace the occasions where Clare offers a more naturalizing view on violence towards animals. Bird's-nesting was commonly viewed as a pastime of unruly children, and towards the end of the eighteenth century, children's books frequently condemned the activity.[81] *The History of the Robins* (1786) by Sarah Trimmer, the founder of an Anglican Sunday School, encouraged 'humane' behaviour towards animals, as did children's books by Mary Wollstonecraft, and Jane and Ann Taylor (the sisters with whom Clare shared a publisher).[82] John Locke's *Some Thoughts*

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[78] James Beattie, *The Minstrel* (London: Rivington, 1811); no. 112 in *Northampton Catalogue*.
[79] James Beattie, *The Minstrel, Or, The Progress of Genius, with Some Other Poems* (Edinburgh: William Creech, Manners and Miller, and A. Constable, 1803). Further references to Beattie are taken from this edition, because the stanzas are numbered.
[80] Barton, 'Clare's Animals', p. 17.
[81] G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 236. See also Heather Glen, *Vision and Disenchantment: Blake's* Songs *and Wordsworth's* Lyrical Ballads (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 16.
[82] Sarah Trimmer, *Fabulous Histories; Or, The History of the Robins*, 13th edn (London: N. Hailes, 1821), p. 6; Mary Wollstonecraft, *Original Stories from Real Life; with Conversations,*

*Concerning Education* (1693), a highly influential text on education throughout the eighteenth century, wrote of children that 'the custom of tormenting and killing of Beasts, will, by degrees, harden their Minds even towards Men'.[83] When John Trusler, a clergyman, came to repeat Locke's view in his children's book, *Proverbs Exemplified and Illustrated by Pictures from Real Life* (1790), he notably tempered this view – warning that the torturing of animals in adulthood leads to cruelty towards mankind, but allowing that such acts of cruelty, 'in our childhood, may be considered as of little moment'.[84]

Clare is confessional in his early poem 'Helpstone' (*EP*, I, 156–63) about his boyhood involvement in bird's-nesting – which might involve stealing from nests, and destroying the eggs or birds. The natural historian Elizabeth Kent, whose *Flora Domestica* (1823) was admired by Clare, wrote to him that she could not believe a poet would be capable of such a thing: 'for a man who has the sensibility he must have to *be* a poet, cannot well be a brute; and what but brutality is it, after the thoughtlessness of boyhood has passed away, to inflict unnecessary pain upon any living creature'.[85] When Clare later comes to write his poem 'Birds Nesting' (*MP*, II, 163–84), he uses the term merely to mean the observation of birds rather than any destructive activity.

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*Calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness* (London: J. Johnson, 1796); Ann Taylor and Jane Taylor, *The Linnet's Life. Twelve Poems with a Copper Engraving to Each* (London: Whittaker and Co, 1822), p. 12. On Trimmer, see *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers, 1660–1800*, ed. by Janet Todd (London: Methuen, 1984), pp. 306–07.

[83] John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, ed. by John W. Yolton and Jean S. Yolton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 180 (ll. 18–19). On Locke's influence, see Margaret J. M. Ezell, 'John Locke's Images of Childhood: Early Eighteenth Century Response to Some Thoughts Concerning Education', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 17 (1983), 139–55. For a broad account of eighteenth-century children's books and educational theories, see Zachary Leader, *Reading Blake's 'Songs'* (Boston, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 1–36.

[84] John Trusler, *Proverbs Exemplified and Illustrated by Pictures from Real Life* (London: J. Trusler, 1790), p. 70.

[85] Clare to Taylor (31 July 1823), *Letters*, pp. 278–79; Elizabeth Kent to Clare (17 February 1826), Eg. MS 2247, fol. 145$^{v}$.

Clare's letters prepared for 'A Natural History of Helpstone' show his attempt to work out the moral problem of bird's-nesting in prose. He states that village children are cautioned by their parents not to destroy the nests of martins, for 'fear of incurring therebye almost an unforgiven offence to their maker', and he approves of 'this tender & praiseworthy superstition'.[86] However, all the while he understands that preying on birds is simply and inevitably what boys do. He lists the main threats to the bumbarrel's young as the 'school boy & hawk', as if these boys are following a predatory instinct.[87] Regarding the bumbarrel, he states: 'Were is the school boy that [*del*. does] has not [*del*. know] heard that mysterious noise which comes with the spring in the grass & \green/ corn I have followd it for hours & all to no purpose'.[88] The activity of bird's-nesting is important for cultivating the boy's knowledge of the natural world.

In a different prose account, however, Clare condemns bird's-nesting when it is carried out for a reward:

> I always [*del*. think] thuogh it a very cruel practice for the overseers of the parish to give rewards to boys to kill sparrows as they often do it very cruelly & cheat the overseers ignorance a many times in taking other harmless birds to pass them for sparrows to get the bounty.[89]

Clare accepts the notion that sparrows are 'harmful' – the overseers treat them as agricultural pests for eating grain. It is not so much the fact that the deaths are 'cruel', but that this cruelty is commercially rewarded, that aggravates Clare. There is an implicit sense that the practice might be acceptable if the idea of payment were removed.

An observer bearing a conventional Christian view of fallen nature might well view a child's bird's-nesting as a 'natural' and therefore evil act that needs to be

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[86] 'Bird List' (1825–26), *NHPW*, pp. 123–64 (ll. 588–89, 591–92).
[87] 'Natural History Letter V' (1824–26), *NHPW*, pp. 45–49 (l. 85). 'Bumbarrel' is an old name for the long-tailed tit.
[88] 'Natural History Letter VI' (1824–26), *NHPW*, pp. 49–51 (ll. 3–6). Grainger uses oblique strokes here ('\green/') to indicate Clare's insertion of the extra word.
[89] 'Bird List', ll. 333–37.

corrected through education. Clare's conception of this activity as 'natural' is very different. He does oppose the disruption of a bird's habitat, but usually when the activity is bounded up in wider issues of exploitation: for a commercial purpose, or, as in his attack on 'men of science' quoted earlier, for the purpose of removing a species to the laboratory. In these prose examples, Clare defines the difference between bird's-nesting as an amoral, 'natural' activity and as an immoral one in terms of the interface between an embedded relationship with the local, self-enclosed environment, and an exploitative method prompted by a relationship with the wider economy or culture. In the case of his poetry, however, this naturalizing perspective on cruelty towards animals is not one that he immediately demonstrates in his early work; rather, it is an approach that he adopts more fully, over time.

Clare's poem 'Summer Evening' (*EP*, I, 5–12), written between 1815 and 1817 and published in *Poems Descriptive,* adopts a moralizing voice as soon as it comes to the subject of bird's-nesting. Initially, like 'Recollections after an Evening Walk', the poem details parallel activity by various species at the close of day: while 'the snail has made his ring' (l. 27), the moth 'Circles round in winding whirls' (l. 31). This parallelism extends to images of animal aggression, including 'fighting geese' (l. 86), sparrows 'fighting on the thatch' (l. 96), and foxes that prey on hens, all of which place pressure on the sense of harmony. However, when the narrator comes to consider boys who kill sparrows, he breaks into open condemnation:

> Cursd barbarions pass me by
> Come not turks my cottage nigh
> Sure my sparrows are my own
> Let ye then my birds alone
> Sparrows come from foes severe
> Fearless come yere welcome here
>
> (ll. 109–14)

Terms such as 'barbarions' and 'turks' afford the narrator a kind of contemporary cultural authority, that of the English civil voice whose references lie beyond the

confines of the village community. The railing against the boys is, in light of the poem's mild opening tone, uncharacteristically violent:

> O woud they meet some mysery
> Some foe as bad as theyre to thee
> Shoud rogues disturb their waking dream
> How hard how cruel woud it seem
> Forcd from theer beds their rest resign
> & take their lives as they do thine
>
> (ll. 123–28)

Having provided detailed observation of natural activity, the poem now uses an imaginative, conditional mode that indicates the distinction of humans from animals – precisely because, in real life, the boys are not preyed upon as the sparrow is.

By the end, like many eighteenth-century 'evening' poems, 'Summer Evening' has shifted into a heavily moralizing perspective. The sparrows' behaviour is beneficial to humans, since they pick off insects and preserve crops, and so the narrator concludes:

> Thus providence when understood
> Her end & aim is doing good
> Sends nothing here without its use
>
> (ll. 149–51)

The narrator's conception that all species interaction ultimately serves a divine good resembles Walton's notion of 'compleatness'.[90] At the same time, the concluding request of the poem, that mankind might 'learn at least Humanity' (l. 158), points to a conflicted view: humans are seen as members of nature's community, but they are also subjected to superior expectations of behaviour to other animals.

One might attribute the change in perspectives in 'Summer Evening' to Clare's poetic immaturity. Another early poem, 'Elegy to Pity' (*EP*, I, 293–95), also points to his inconsistent attitude: the narrator satirizes sentimental attitudes towards animals, vowing to save a 'maggot' from the sight of 'granny' (ll. 33–34), but also, with a lack of irony, threatens schoolboys who go looking for sparrows 'In Murder' (l. 24). However,

[90] For McKusick's reading of these lines, see *Green Writing*, p. 83.

these confusions of tone provide meaning in themselves, playing out Clare's difficulty in negotiating man's place in the natural world.

Over the course of 1820s, Clare's poetry demonstrates a more openly ambivalent attitude regarding boys' cruelty to animals. He is still prepared to offer the moral view, on occasion: in 'The Wild Bull' (*MP*, III, 520–23), written between 1825 and 1826, the bull scares away the boys who have gone bird's-nesting, and at the end their parents tell them 'never more / To hurt young birds' (ll. 70–71). However, in another unpublished poem of the same period, 'A Sunday with Shepherds & Herdboys' (*MP*, II, 15–20), Clare presents a similar set of actions without passing moral judgement. This poem shows the leisure activities of herd boys on a Sunday as routine behaviour, just as other villagers attend church.[91] The narrator dispassionately records that, while the farmers are absent, the boys 'steal / The green peas for a sunday meal' (ll. 53–54) and 'pick from hedges pilferd wood' (l. 63). Later in the poem, other acts of theft are incorporated within a harmonious network of labour relations, since they provide work for others: the pinder seeks out the sheep which have escaped through the 'gaps the gipseys pilfer thin' (l. 162).

'A Sunday with Shepherds & Herdboys' frames cruelty towards animals as part of a set of interactions between humans and non-humans within a specific environment. The boys are represented

> Fishing for stuttles in the brooks
> Wi thread for lines & pins for hooks
> & stripping neath the willow shade
> In [the] warm muddy ponds to bathe
> & pelting wi unerring eye
> The heedless swallows sturting bye
>
> (ll. 97–102)

[91] Clare recalls Sundays spent with shepherds and herd boys, without mentioning any animal cruelty, in an autobiographical fragment, *By Himself*, pp. 39–40.

'Pelting', following mellifluously from 'fishing' and 'stripping', is an acceptable part of rural play, balanced by the swallows' 'sturting'. In the subsequent lines, violence is returned towards the boys, furthering the sense of interconnectivity between species:

> Oft breaking boughs from trees to kill
> The nest of whasps beside a hill
> Till one gets stung then they resort
> & follow to less dangerous sport
>
> (ll. 103–06)

Clare leads the reader from 'kill' to 'sport', a transition from one monosyllabic rhyme-word to another that lightens any sense of moral scrutiny. The poem introduces a reciprocity of fear between boys and animals:

> A snake that wakens at their play
> & starts as full of fear as they
> & knewt shapd swifts that nimbly pass
> & rustle in the brown heath grass
> From these in terrors fears they haste
>
> (ll. 127–31)

Such fears are based on misrecognition: the snake is more fearful than the boys recognize; the newts are, in fact, swifts. Clare's detail here places his narrator in a similar position to the hidden natural historian who does not disturb animals as other humans do.

The narrator introduces a summary view on the boys' behaviour:

> Thus will the boys in makeshift joy
> Their toil taskd sabbath hours employ
> & feed on fancys sweet as they
> That in the town at freedom play
>
> (ll. 145–48)

Clare reminds his reader that such leisure, however violent, provides necessary relief from 'toil'. 'Sweet as they', though referring to 'fancys', invites the idea that these activities may be regarded not as vulgar, but as equivalent to the activities of children in 'the town' – presumably the sort of harmless games depicted with approval in children's

books.[92] The ambiguity as to whether 'sweet' belongs to the boys' or the narrator's view challenges the idea of a universal authority on such actions.

In 'A Sunday with Shepherds & Herdboys', the boys are not following a survival instinct, like the woodman or the mole-catcher, but their actions appear validated by the sense of their close attachment to their environment. This poem complicates the emphasis that Bate and McKusick place on Clare's benign sense of human companionship with the non-human world. Here, Clare's conception of a human/non-human community allows him to frame human predatory actions as part of interconnected, symbiotic relations.

**Violence as Remembered Ritual in 'The Ravens Nest'**

In his poetry of the 1830s, to which this chapter now turns, Clare more explicitly demonstrates the integrative function within the rural community of violence towards animals. His use of naturalizing perspectives brings forward a kind of cultural anthropology (to use an anachronistic term); this strategy is particularly evident in 'The Ravens Nest', written in 1832. Clare's poem focuses upon a tree as a site of reverence and memory, and in this sense it draws upon works by Cowper and Wordsworth. In Cowper's 'Yardley Oak', published in 1804, an aged tree serves a binding function across the generations, being the 'Survivor sole, and hardly such, of all / That once lived here thy brethren' (ll. 1–2).[93] As Tim Fulford writes, Cowper's tree is 'a living monument to a shared sense of common ancestry, a totem rooting poet and readers into

[92] In Jane and Ann Taylor's 'The Village Green', children show 'true pleasure' as they dance and play with the hoop and ball, *Original Poems, for Infant Minds*, rev. edn, 2 vols (London: Harvey and Darton, 1839), II, 120–21. Though Clare would not have read him, William Blake's 'The Ecchoing Green' (1789) illustrates cricket and the stick and hoop as innocent childhood pastimes, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, ed. by Andrew Lincoln (London: William Blake Trust and Tate Gallery, 1991), plate 6.
[93] *Cowper*, III, 77–83.

the English past'.[94] In order for the decayed tree to be turned into this object of worship, it requires the interpretative action of the poet:

> But since, although well-qualified by age
> To teach, no spirit dwells in thee, seated here
> On thy distorted root, with hearers none
> Or prompter save the scene, I will perform
> Myself, the oracle, and will discourse
> In my own ear such matter as I may.
> (ll. 137–42)

Wordsworth's 'Ewtrees', inspired by 'Yardley Oak' and published in 1815, presents a cluster of trees as a 'natural temple', albeit with a less overtly Christian sense than Cowper's poem. The poem also carries the message of patriotic pride: one yew tree has furnished weapons for the battles of Agincourt, Crécy and Poitiers (l. 30).[95]

In 'The Ravens Nest' (*MP*, III, 559–61), Clare's tree is a monument not to national or religious solidarity, but to the unity of a smaller, confined rural community:

> & like a landmark in the chronicles
> Of village memorys treasured up yet lives
> The hugh old oak that wears the ravens nest
> (ll. 46–48)

The 'hugh old oak', each monosyllable weighted with stress, does not require the poet's tribute to restore its significance, as was the case in Cowper's poem. Instead, its status is confirmed by the elders of the village:

> So long hath been their dwelling there – old men
> When passing bye will laugh & tell the ways
> They had when boys to climb that very tree
> (ll. 10–12)

'Old men' – the phrase loaded with emphasis as a separated, spondaic foot – are the primary bearers of memory.

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[94] Tim Fulford, 'Cowper, Wordsworth, Clare: The Politics of Trees', *JCSJ*, 14 (1995), 47–59 (p. 52).

[95] Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes*, p. 606. The poem appears in Clare's copy of Wordsworth, *The Miscellaneous Poems*, II, 125–26. On Wordsworth and Cowper, see Jonathan Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 279, 442.

If this tree were to disappear, the fabric of the community would be imperilled too. Clare articulates elsewhere how trees may be the focal points of the community in 'Langley Bush' (*EP*, II, 250) and 'The Fallen Elm' (*MP*, III, 440–43). The difference of 'The Ravens Nest' from these poems, as well as from Cowper's and Wordsworth's works, is that reverence for the tree, and for the raven's nest which it contains, is sustained by the continual violence of boys' bird's-nesting.[96] The activity is shown to be collaborative and structured, during which some participants draw up 'waggon ropes' so that 'one assends secure' (ll. 26–28). In this poem Clare again shows his interest in how the rural community operates according to 'natural sequential patterns'. The consciousness of time in 'The Ravens Nest' is circular and repetitive, bringing customary and natural processes into close alignment: the birds' repeated construction of their nest invites the boys' repeated efforts to reach it. In this way, the poem stabilizes custom, a 'field of change and contest', as nature. Clare's poem is caught between two timescales, linear and cyclical, that present two ways of perceiving the activity: as vulgar behaviour which should be corrected over time, in a 'civilizing process' that resembles Norbert Elias's theory of how humans move from cruel savages to civilized humanitarian beings; or as behaviour which is validated, and made 'natural', by its repetition.[97]

Clare's poem illustrates this clash of perspectives when demonstrating the idea of 'collective memory' that is tied to a specific social group and physical locality. This is a concept which has since been theorized in twentieth-century sociological studies. Maurice Halbwachs's influential work on the subject argues that we recall our memories through our membership of social groups, and that these collective memories are located in the material spaces which a particular group occupies. The physical

[96] Keith Thomas links the practices of bird's-nesting to the decline of ravens, among other birds, in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, p. 275.
[97] Elias, p. x.

objects in these material spaces – such as a raven's nest – give us an image of immemorial stability.[98] Paul Connerton has furthered the study of collective memory, by examining how these images of the past are conveyed and sustained between generations. Drawing on Marc Bloch's observation that the practice of the oldest living generation teaching the youngest contributes to the traditionalism inherent in 'peasant' societies, Connerton argues that 'images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by (more or less ritual) performances'. These acts of repetition explain the 'social persistence' of images of the past.[99]

In 'The Ravens Nest', Clare's attention to the connection between the old men and the young boys suggests this same idea of social persistence. The old men's view displays the illusion of permanence:

> & they will say that the two birds are now
> The very birds that owned the dwelling then
> Some think it strange yet certaintys at loss
> & cannot contradict it so they pass
>
> (ll. 16–19)

As Bate observes of this poem, the 'oral tradition of reminiscence creates a local history which identifies the village as a viable ecosystem, constantly evolving but with necessary continuity'.[100] In addition, the repetitive raiding of the nest becomes a form of memory in itself, so that the old men claim the same birds inhabit the nest. In a clash of perspectives, the passing individuals, like the narrator, know that the this memory is historically mistaken – the linear conception of time corrects the cyclical conception – though they 'cannot contradict it'. Clare is reproducing the view of the old men, but also exposing the space around it. His own memorializing and framing of the bird's-nesting

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[98] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992; first published in French, 1925 and 1941).
[99] Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. by Peter Putnam (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1954), pp. 40–41; Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 40. See also Barbara A. Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering* (Maidenhead and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2003).
[100] Bate, 'The Rights of Nature', p. 14.

through print culture, by writing this poem, is a corrective to the collective text of the old men's memory. Their value system is shown to be fictive and limited.

'The Ravens Nest' is Clare's most sophisticated account of the customary significance of bird's-nesting. The poem frames the activity in its context, without moralizing, in order to illustrate its integrative function; but at the same time, the narrator cannot fully share the view of the villagers, who validate the practice by regarding it as timeless. Clare continues to view bird's-nesting as an amoral, 'natural' activity, but appears increasingly conscious of his own uncertain positioning, as a reflexive observer of tradition rather than an embedded participant.

**Blood Sports and 'The Badger'**

Alongside bird's-nesting, Clare represents organized 'blood sports' in his poetry, which he would have witnessed at first hand. Northamptonshire was a popular county for fox-hunting, and the Fitzwilliam family, Clare's patrons, kept a pack of hounds.[101] Stamford's annual bull-running event drew hundreds of spectators and participants; George Burton's *Chronology of Stamford* (1846) recorded that the sport was 'kept as a holiday by all grades'.[102] Between 1788 and 1838, various attempts were made to repress the custom, largely for the cost of policing it.[103] Clare would have been awkwardly aware that his first meeting with Taylor in 1819, at an evening of music

[101] *The Victoria History of the County of Northamptonshire*, ed. by W. Ryland D. Adkins, R. M. Serjeantson, William Page, L. F. Salzman, Philip Riden, Mark Page and Matthew Bristow, 7 vols (London: Archibald Constable, 1902–2013), II (1906), 354, 359, 373–5.
[102] George Burton, *Chronology of Stamford* (London: Edwards & Hughes, 1846), p. 19.
[103] On the bull-running, see Robert W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700–1850* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 47, 126–35; Thomas, p. 144.

hosted by Octavius Gilchrist in Stamford, took place on the same day of the bull-running.[104]

Clare's attitude towards blood sports is mixed, as Barton and Sarah Houghton both argue.[105] On fishing – a pastime practised among all social ranks – he is most unambiguously celebratory.[106] His 1820 poem 'Rustic Fishing' (*EP*, II, 642–45) positively shows boys chasing fish, while the 1832 work 'Angling' (*MP*, IV, 337–40) states: 'Angling has pleasures that are much enjoyed / By tasteful minds of nature never cloyed' (ll. 1–2). The eulogy 'Isaac Walton' (*MP*, IV, 209–10), written in 1830, attacks those who find fishing 'cruel' (l. 2), the object of its criticism being the sentimental hypocrite who still 'hunts the hare' (l. 5).

With regard to higher-class hunting sports, Clare's ambivalence is more evident. His condemnatory poems figure hunters as outsiders both to the animal community and to the labouring-class community. In 'Autumn' (*EP*, II, 73–80), published in *The Village Minstrel*, he condemns pheasant shooters as unwelcome 'murderers' intruding onto a natural scene (l. 155). In 'The Parish' (*EP*, II, 697–779), written over the course of the 1820s, young Headlong Racket 'murders' his prey as he hunts and shoots, '& thus he lives a hated sort of life' (l. 303); in another, untitled poem of the 1830s (*MP*, V, 293), a fowler has 'boots of monstrous leg' and a 'gun of monstrous length' (ll. 1–3).

However, Clare also produces poems in celebration of these pastimes. Written between 1819 and 1820, 'Sports of the Field' (*EP*, I, 378–79) presents an idealized vision of hunting with horses and hounds, and 'Milton Hunt' (*EP*, II, 198–99) praises the activity when it is organized by the Fitzwilliams. A more confused tone is evident in

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[104] *By Himself*, p. 113. Octavius Gilchrist's account of the meeting is given in 'Some Account of John Clare, an Agricultural Labourer and Poet', *London Magazine*, January 1820, pp. 7–11, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, p. 37. The bull-running was reported in the *Stamford Mercury*, 19 November 1819; see Robert Heyes, '"Looking to Futurity", p. 67.

[105] Sarah Houghton, '"Some Little Thing of Other Days / Saved from the Wreck of Time": John Clare and Festivity', *JCSJ*, 23 (2004), 21–43 (p. 28).

[106] Keegan, 'Clare's "Compleatness"', p. 7.

the 1818 poem 'To Day the Fox must dye: A Hunting Song' (*EP*, I, 400–01), which records the fear of the fox but is also awash with the excitement of the spectacle. Clare's hunting poems, according to Barton, 'have temporarily submerged dislike in a desire to placate readers of a higher social class' – a persuasive theory that is supported by Clare's remarks on 'Milton Hunt', when he proposes to cut lines in an early version which state that 'the fox himself enjoys / The tumult of the chase': 'I think it woud make a good hunting Song then & free me of being fond of the barberous sport'.[107]

Houghton similarly argues that Clare's varied attitude toward blood sports is dependent on their class associations:

> [...] if he at times displays a judicious ambivalence towards the 'blood sports' of the wealthy landowners whose patronage he needs, when he turns to their equivalents amongst poorer classes, members of the frenzied mob are depicted as base cowards when they glory in the kill.[108]

Houghton draws this conclusion from her reading of 'The Badger', Clare's poetic depiction of a badger-baiting, which she, like several other critics, reads as a work of condemnation.[109] In contrast, David Perkins has detected a more ambiguous tone in 'The Badger', while Oerlemans notes that the 'cruelty is plain, but is not satirized or explicitly commented upon'.[110] My reading shares the view that Clare's narrative voice is peculiarly ambivalent towards the baiting, and argues that this work uses a naturalizing perspective – in a fashion similar to the examples previously discussed in this chapter – to illustrate the detail of the procedure; in the process, it shows the difficulty of forming a correct response to such behaviour.

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[107] Barton, 'Clare's Animals', p. 15; *EP*, II, 199n; Clare to Taylor (17 February 1821), *Letters*, p. 154. It is intriguing that Clare's 'Hunting Song' (*LP*, I, 434–35), written when in the asylum (and free of patronage), continues the sense of ambivalence: 'dogs make a terrible cry' (l. 8) in what is nevertheless a 'beautiful' setting (l. 20).
[108] Houghton, 'John Clare and Festivity', p. 28.
[109] Eric Robinson, 'John Clare: Games, Pastimes, Sports and Customs', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 44 (2013), 56–60 (p. 56); McKusick, *Green Writing*, p. 85.
[110] David Perkins, *Romanticism and Animal Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 89–103; Oerlemans, p. 80.

'The Badger', written between 1832 and 1837, is comprised of four couplet-based poems of sonnet length – Seamus Heaney refers to this form as the 'supplet' – that are usually printed as a sequence in modern-day anthologies.[111] They are taken from manuscript, without a title or indication of separation from the other sonnets Clare wrote in Northborough.[112] Perkins states: 'We cannot know how Clare might have revised and arranged these sonnets for publication, or whether he would have published any or all of them.' The work was a private intervention into a very public debate. At approximately the same time that Clare wrote the sequence, in 1835, parliament outlawed badger-baiting, alongside bull-baiting and cock-fighting.[113] These were sports specifically practised by the labouring classes, as the antiquarian Joseph Strutt pointed out:

> Bull and bear-baiting is not encouraged by persons of rank and opulence in the present day; and when practised, which rarely happens, it is attended only by the lowest and most despicable part of the people; which plainly indicates a general refinement of manners and prevalency of humanity among the moderns[114]

Some defended labouring-class blood sports by associating them with the aristocracy. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* published 'A Modest Commendation of Cock-Fighting' in 1827, claiming that Henry VIII enjoyed the sport, and that it encouraged valour: 'Let them recollect that cock-fighting has been part of the system under which the country has become the terror, and envy, and admiration of the world'.[115] It was the aggression roused by labouring-class blood sports that brought concern to many of the upper classes, who feared, in the light of the French Revolution, any gathering of an

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[111] Seamus Heaney, 'John Clare's Prog', in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), pp. 275–92 (p. 282).
[112] Pet. MS B9, pp. 64–66.
[113] Perkins, pp. 97, 99.
[114] Joseph Strutt, *Glig-Gamena Angel Ðeod, or the Sports and Pastimes of the People of England*, 2nd edn (London: T. Bensley, 1810), pp. 227–28.
[115] *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, November 1827, p. 592.

unruly mob.[116] But defenders of rough sports argued that they contributed to a certain English manliness, and so forged a unifying sense of national identity.[117]

'The Badger' belongs to a number of poems, unpublished in Clare's lifetime, which he wrote in the mid-1830s on labouring-class cruelty towards animals, and which are often anthologized as his 'Animal' poems.[118] Robinson and Powell note the 'unusual starkness' of Clare's work in this period, following his move to Northborough in 1832, a journey of only a few miles yet a displacement to a community noticeably not his own.[119] Kate Rigby finds that the 'Animal' poems show 'the premodern rural world as a place of violence, cruelty, and blind prejudice, rather than as a pastoral idyll', and concludes that Clare's move to Northborough 'helped to give him a greater perceptual distance on rural life'. Her notion of Clare's 'perceptual distance' appears to mean his capacity to form enlightened, moral judgements – thus, when he writes about farmers killing hedgehogs, he is challenging 'traditional assumptions and practices that he views as cruel and barbaric'.[120]

Certainly, the 'Animal' poems are unusually brutal in their depictions of violence. Aside from Clare's move to Northborough, this alteration in his poetic style may also be attributed to the idea that, as a mature poet, he was more willing to challenge the expectations of polite readers with the realities of rural life. His poem 'The Hedgehog' (*MP*, V, 363–64) condemns the killing of hedgehogs, as he debunks the folk myths which provoke this activity:

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[116] Perkins, p. 92.
[117] See John Whale, 'Daniel Mendoza's Contests of Identity: Masculinity, Ethnicity and Nation in Georgian Prize-Fighting', *Romanticism*, 14 (2008), 259–71.
[118] Alan Porter was the first critic to group them together, in his 1924 review of *Madrigals and Chronicles*, in *Critical Heritage*, pp. 364–68. Where possible, I refer to these poems by the titles commonly given to them in modern anthologies.
[119] *John Clare: Major Works*, ed. by Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 492n.
[120] Kate Rigby, *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* (Charlottesville, VA and London: University of Virginia Press, 2004), pp. 237, 239.

> They say they milk the cows & when they lye
> Nibble their fleshy teats & make them dry
> But they whove seen the small head like a hog
> Rolled up to meet the savage of a dog
> With mouth scarce big enough to hold a straw
> Will neer believe what no one ever saw
> (ll. 19–24)

The idea that hedgehogs steal cow's milk plays on a fear which fuelled a great number of superstitious beliefs in rural life: from the late Middle Ages onwards, the accusation of stealing or drying up milk from cows was used in witchcraft trials all over Europe.[121] Clare's narrator complains that the hunting happens with 'savage force [...] no one cares & still the strife goes on' (ll. 27–28).

In Clare's other 'Animal' poems, particularly 'The Badger', there is not such an obvious tone of condemnation. Clare shows a different kind of 'perceptual distance' from the moral positioning that Rigby recognizes, demonstrating the kind of naturalizing attention that has been discussed in this chapter. As in 'A Sunday with Shepherds & Herdboys', he frequently assumes the position of the hidden observer: in 'The Marten' (*MP*, V, 357–58), the narrator watches the marten in its habitat, 'Where print of human foot is scarcely made' (l. 8). This privileged knowledge contrasts him with the woodman who fails to spot the marten, and the gypsy and the boys who 'hear a hissing noise' and think it must belong to 'a foreign bird' (ll. 20–22) rather than the owl who resides there. Clare's narrator remains present when other humans are absent: in another poem of this period, 'The schoolboys in the morning soon as drest' (*MP*, V, 358–59), he watches a bull who 'stared & bellowed with supprise' as frightened boys flee (l. 23).

'The Badger' (*MP*, V, 360–62) is the most disturbing example of Clare's naturalizing perspective. Badger-baiting, unlike bull-baiting, could be conducted in

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[121] Stephen Wilson, *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe* (London and New York: Hambledon, 2000), p. 107. On the persistence of popular beliefs in witchcraft, see also Michael D. Bailey, *Magic and Superstition in Europe: A Concise History from Antiquity to the Present* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), pp. 215–22.

secrecy, which may explain its covert survival in the late nineteenth century, and even today.[122] At the beginning of the sequence, the hidden narrator watches the badger undisturbed:

> The badger grunting on his woodland track
> With shaggy hide & sharp nose scrowed with black
> Roots in the bushes & the woods & makes
> A great hugh burrow in the ferns & brakes
> With nose on ground he runs a awkard pace
> (ll. 1–5)

The narrator's observation of the animal is followed by his observation of a woodman, which demonstrates his intimate understanding of the preparations for the baiting:

> The wood man when the hunting comes about
> Go round at night to stop the foxes out
> & hurrying through the bushes ferns & brakes
> Nor sees the many hol[e]s the badger makes
> (ll. 9–12)

The woodman's movement follows the same trail as the badger, 'through the bushes ferns & brakes'. Through this verbal echo, Clare creates a semblance of organization grounded in knowledge of the local environment, before the frenzy of the baiting. The woodman is stopping foxes from escaping into holes, as part of the preparations for fox-hunting, but doesn't notice the badger holes. When he trips over these holes, Clare is making an ironical juxtaposition between the acceptable sport of fox-hunting and the vulgar, banned sport of badger-baiting. Like 'A Sunday with Shepherds & Herdboys', these lines bring forward a sense of interconnectivity between species within a single environment: man, fox and badger all cultivate the same land in different ways, and they interact with each other as they do so.[123]

As the baiting begins, Clare uses the pairing 'dogs & men' twice in the sequence (ll. 8, 15) to show a levelling between the two as predators. He creates a similar effect in

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[122] Malcolmson, p. 135; 'Cruelty to Badgers "Almost Doubles" ahead of Cull', *BBC News*, 14 April 2013 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-22141366> [accessed 8 February 2014].
[123] Clare invokes the interaction between these particular animals when writing about Reformers and Tories: 'foxes will do all they can to drive badgers out of their holes', in a letter to George Darley (January–February 1830), *Letters*, p. 502.

'The Marten', when the creature hides 'from boys & dogs & noise & men' (l. 28). In 'The Badger', man is frantically caught up with the other animals in the turmoil of the scene:

> The old fox hears the noise & drops the goose
> The poacher shoots & hurrys from the cry
> & the old hare half wounded buzzes bye
> (ll. 20–22)

Houghton claims that the 'Badger' sequence demonstrates Clare's 'abhorrence of "barberous sports"'; but words of heavy condemnation do not appear in this sequence.[124] The word 'savage' is used once, but to describe the 'heavy mastiff' (l. 37), not man. The only explicit statement of disapproval comes in the use of 'blackguard': 'The frighted women takes the boys away / The blackguard laughs & hurrys in the fray' (ll. 43–44). This brief intervention presents the limit of Clare's naturalizing view, because he cannot entirely escape moral questions. At the same time, however, the detailed observation in 'The Badger' is not contained by such questions.

The contrast between woman and blackguard emphasizes the masculinity of the spectacle; she is the only female featured in the sequence (even the badger is referred to as male). Violence in the other 'Animal' poems is overwhelmingly male, and female disapproval is indicated by the maid who scolds boys for stealing eggs in 'The schoolboys in the morning soon as drest'. Clare's contrast emphasizes the 'moral' position frequently assumed by older females within the rural community, as is also evident in his accounts of women's storytelling.

In 'The Badger', the naturalizing perspective of the narrator sits in tension not only with the impulse to moralize, but also with the apparent excitement of the spectacle. When the antiquarian Strutt describes badger-baiting, his single paragraph is characterized by self-distance:

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[124] Houghton, 'John Clare and Festivity', p. 28.

> Badger-baiting may also be placed in this chapter. In order to give the better effect to this diversion, a hole is dug in the ground for the retreat of the animal; and the dogs run at him singly in succession; for it is not usual, I believe, to permit any more than one of them to attack him at once; and the dog which approaches him with the least timidity, fastens upon him the most firmly, and brings him the soonest from his hole, is accounted the best.[125]

Strutt's qualifier, 'I believe', negates any direct involvement in the event. His portrayal is relatively painless, focusing on the skill of the dogs rather than the suffering of the badger. The evidence of the baiters' controlled restraint, in allowing only one dog at a time to attack the badger, contrasts with the frenzied energy of Clare's depiction:

> They get a forked stick to bear him down
> & clapt the dogs & bore him to the town
> & bait him all the day with many dogs
> & laugh & shout & fright the scampering hogs
> He runs along & bites at all he meets
> They shout & hollo down the noisey streets
> (ll. 23–28)

Here, the action is quick and frantic, enabled by the crowding and hammering of direct, monosyllabic verbs, some of which are repeated in the sequence ('clapt', 'bite'). The frenetic movement of the lines is propelled by the disjointed syntax: it is briefly uncertain whether the line, 'He tries to reach the woods a awkard race', refers to the 'blackguard' or the badger – the ambiguity advanced by Clare's characteristic lack of punctuation – which again creates a levelling effect between humans and animals.

The formal framework of rhyming couplets sets order upon a scene of disorder, to demonstrate that this is both mob fury and an established cultural activity, serving a communal purpose. Roy Porter writes that customs in the eighteenth century 'gave chances for release – for tipsiness, or paying off old scores – and ritual play put a smile on the back-breaking drudgery which was the curse of working lives'.[126] The libidinal drive generated by badger-baiting here might function as a welcome release from the hard conditions of contemporary labour.

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[125] Strutt, p. 248.
[126] Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Allen Lane, 1982), p. 169.

Robinson, McKusick and Tom Paulin all suggest that Clare identifies himself with the badger, as hunted and vulnerable.[127] But this interpretation is complicated by the awkwardness of the animal: it is presented as an unruly figure of the 'other', with whom the speaker cannot comfortably identify. The beast – variously described as 'grunting', 'shaggy', 'awkard' – does not conform to a sentimental image of a victim, but is as feral as its hunters; as the men 'bait', the badger 'bites'. Clare registers the difficulty of empathizing with the badger while also recognizing its fortitude in defending itself. In another 'Animal' poem, 'The Fox' (*MP*,V, 359–60), he similarly observes the skill of the animal, which lies still as a 'dead disguise' before escaping its tormentors (l. 12). The badger must show considerable resistance in order that it be attacked, and that the ritual continue. As with 'The Raven's Nest', cyclically perpetuating activities depend on a sense of struggle.

In his prose writings Clare details the horrifying sound of a badger's screams:

> the noise of the badger is absolutely frightful [*del*. it is exactly like people say when they describe it] its yells are like those of a woman under the agonys of murder & in fact it is believd to be the noise of a spirit that has been murderd and wanderers to [*del.* ?] dog the speed of night travellers with its dismal cry[128]

The end of 'The Badger' is characterized by similarly 'frightful' discordance:

> He falls as dead & kicked by boys & men
> Then starts & grins & drives the crowd agen
> Till kicked & torn & beaten out he lies
> & leaves his hold & cackles groans & dies
> (ll. 51–54)

At the unquiet, disquieting moment of death, the badger 'cackles' – an awkward, sinister response. The word is provocative, summoning a witch-like image in the context of animal suffering. It resists our urge to empathize satisfactorily with imagined pain, to assume a 'correct' response. Sonically, it immediately clashes with the 'groan' that follows – two very different noises which, placed next to one another, throw up a

[127] *LP*, I, p. ix; McKusick, *Green Writing*, p. 85; Paulin, p. 50.
[128] 'Note C' (1824–25), *NHPW*, p. 264 (ll. 3–8).

challenging division of responses that the scene might provoke. Clare has bound up in the cacophonous, staccato verb ‘cackle’, the unreadable ‘otherness’ of the animal.

The tensions in ‘The Badger’ – whether to moralize, empathize, be caught up in the excitement or remain coolly scientific – indicate the inadequacy of any unified way of perceiving such behaviour. Clare would have easily imagined a very different version of this work: one that dwelt on pathos and moral outrage; indeed, the kind of work that many critics have strained to see. Instead, his alternative poetic procedure presents the event not in the context of polite feeling, but within a customary context. Like ‘The Ravens Nest’, ‘The Badger’ is a poetic act that memorializes and preserves tradition. Badger-baiting was potentially disappearing in this period, and antiquarians like Strutt would not argue for its continuance. Clare’s scientific approach shows the activity’s ‘natural’ sense of continuity, however ambivalent his own response. Attempting to avoid moral censorship, ‘The Badger’ focuses on the detail of the procedure, its collaborative nature and the feelings that it generates, in order to demonstrate the integrative function of the baiting.

**Conclusion**

My chapter has re-contextualized Clare’s poetry, placing it within an emergent discourse, derived from the work of natural historians, that considered human societies as systems with their own way of operating and explored the relationship between custom and nature. In the process, I have revealed a strand of Clare’s writing that has not been recognized before, stretching from some of his earliest pieces to his ‘Animal’ poems. This examination has led me to reassess the best-known work in this discussion, ‘The Badger’, and argue that we should avoid an overly moral reading of this sequence.

This argument invites a reassessment of what is commonly known as Clare's 'ecological' vision. Many of the poems discussed in this chapter demonstrate how humans might express an intimate sense of belonging to a natural place. But the figuration of custom in tandem with natural processes also qualifies the conception of nature itself. 'The Ravens Nest' exemplifies how a harmonious natural community might accommodate humans even when they are violent and cruel: the raven will rebuild its nest in accordance with the boys' repeated raiding. Ecocritical writers like McKusick and Bate are not wrong to identify 'the deeper sense of a relation of all creatures to a habitat' in Clare's verse; but there may be unintended consequences within this system of relations.[129] When entering into a bond of *egalité* with the non-human world, Clare leaves open the question of whether humans should learn 'humanity' and assume moral roles, or recognize their animality. It is not enough to say, as Bate does, that he 'proclaims the right to life of every living thing', unless the 'right to life' also involves the right to kill. As much as he might wish to join them together, Clare is uncomfortably aware of the potential fissure between the rights of humans and the rights of nature.

In Clare's more mature work, he increasingly emphasizes the importance of custom: while the criminality evident in early poems like 'The Woodman' arises from a need to survive that is evidently 'universal', the later poems attend to how activities are sanctioned and encouraged by the idea of localized ritual. By presenting customary culture in this manner, Clare is endowing a field of change with the appearance of something 'natural', and stabilizing it. These poems carry the sense of preservation, while at the same time indicating Clare's ambivalence.

All of the poems discussed in this chapter show Clare's difficulty in finding universal authority for judging human behaviour. In his early poetry he commonly

[129] McKusick, *Green Writing*, p. 80.

follows the (expected) impulse to moralize, but over time he adopts an amoral view on human behaviour with increasing fullness. The tension between the moral and amoral perspectives never disappears; indeed, it is most energizing in 'The Badger'. Bate writes, 'what the life and work of John Clare can show us is that even in terms of pragmatic self-interest it is to our benefit to care for nature's rights – our inner ecology cannot be sustained without the health of ecosystems.'[130] But it may be said that the scene of 'The Badger' represents a functioning, 'healthy' ecosystem, in its darkest form. It shows that ecology can be disturbing to Clare, rather than securing a stable sense of identity.

Whether Clare approves or disapproves, he is breaking away from the moralizing tradition which binds other poets, and instead finding space for an alternative method of social observation. The adoption of a 'naturalizing' perspective enables the closer scrutiny of details, and the appreciation of the social function of certain activities. In all of these works, he tests the idealized image of harmonious rurality. His observations are made to appear both exotic to his polite audience, and yet familiar, as they imply what is 'natural' to all humans. Bringing forward cultural anthropology as a poetic method, Clare depicts the labouring-class community as it really works, in its darkest moments.

[130] Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p. 174.

# Chapter Two

## Refined Perspectives: Representing Rural Life in 'The Village Minstrel'

> The lower orders of England from their almost total disregard of Poesy have been judged rather too harshly as destitute of the finer feelings of humanity & taste & it is a [*del*. common yearly] paradox yearly witnessed of the apparent apathy & unconsern with which they witness [*del*. an execution] the tragedy of death displaying faces as seemingly happy as on an holiday excursion yet these very people will stand around an old ballad singer & with all the romantic enthusiasm of pity shed tears over the doggerel tales of imaginary distress
>
> (Clare, Pet. MS A49, p. 6)

This chapter provides a critical reassessment of 'The Village Minstrel' (*EP*, II, 123–79), the semi-autobiographical title poem of Clare's second published collection which details the early life of Lubin, a village labourer with an unusual poetic sensibility.[1] My argument recharacterizes the ambivalences that critics have found in this problematic work: I show that Lubin's mixed identity, represented as both embedded and disembedded, enables the poem's paradoxical impulse, moving towards and away from an idealization of village life. I examine how this poem plays out the difficulty of representing the rural community, and directly engages with the problem of what is 'tasteful' and what is 'vulgar'.

The introduction to *The Village Minstrel* included a prose account by Clare about rural customs – an editorial decision by his publisher, John Taylor, that indicates the perceived similarities between the volume and the work of popular antiquarians at this time.[2] Both Clare and the antiquarians were responding to the interests of polite readers in rural culture, and attempting to preserve elements of that culture that had

[1] Clare wrote the poem between October 1819 and January 1820. On the preparation of this volume, see P. M. S. Dawson, 'John Clare's Village Job: The Making of *The Village Minstrel* (1821)', *Romanticism*, 12 (2006), 236–71.
[2] Clare, *The Village Minstrel*, I, p. xxi–xxv.

disappeared or were under threat from modernization.[3] John Brand, who did more than any other antiquarian to establish popular customs as worthy of study, presented his *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (1777) with the assertion that 'nothing can be foreign to our Enquiry, which concerns the smallest of the Vulgar'.[4] In order to make their subject matter worthy of representation, antiquarians would sanitize their observations or introduce a moralizing perspective. However, many also invoked the language of 'taste', in order to assert the aesthetic qualities of their subject matter. The preface to Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* declared that the author's 'object was to please both the judicious Antiquary, and the Reader of Taste; and he hath endeavoured to gratify both without offending either'. The idea of shared taste allows Percy to mediate his discoveries, as his collection sets out to illuminate the 'taste' of 'our ancestors'.[5] Joseph Ritson's *A Select Collection of English Songs* (of which Clare owned a part-copy) also aimed 'to satisfy the critical taste of the judicious' while implicitly acknowledging that tastes might differ among 'various readers'.[6] As I will argue, Clare himself uses 'taste' for mediating purposes.

This chapter shows the distinctive type of social observation in 'The Village Minstrel' by placing it in the context of two poetic precedents. First, Clare's poem follows in the tradition of writing about the rural community that was set out in the poetry of Duck, Goldsmith, Crabbe and Bloomfield, whom I refer to collectively as the 'heroic-couplet' writers. Raymond Williams writes of Bloomfield's poetry:

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[3] On popular antiquarianism, see Rosemary Sweet, *Antiquaries: The Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), pp. 309–43; Marilyn Butler, 'Antiquarianism (Popular)', in *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture, 1776–1832*, ed. by Iain McCalman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 328–38; Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, rev. edn (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1994), pp. 3–22.

[4] Brand, p. ix.

[5] Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 4th edn, 3 vols (London: Rivington, 1794), I, pp. xvii, xx.

[6] Joseph Ritson, *A Select Collection of English Songs*, 2nd edn, 3 vols (London: Rivington, 1813), I, p. ii. Clare owned volumes I and III; no. 344 in *Northampton Catalogue*.

> [...] even at his best he is constrained within a verse convention that is syntactically that of an observer rather than a participant: the third-person abstraction and personification of other men who labour; the ratification by literary allusion; the required periphrastic gesture[7]

Williams's comment draws attention to how the respectable agenda of the observers might influence their social representation. Accordingly, each of these writers is motivated to exclude details which do not fit his poetic message: they tend towards pessimistic visions of contemporary rural life, though Bloomfield is notably more mixed in this regard; and they make the individuality of their characters a secondary concern.

In contrast, Clare's Lubin is an individual with a highly developed subjectivity. He can be placed in the context of a second literary tradition: the work of James Beattie and Wordsworth, who were interested in the development of a particular kind of (male) individual consciousness emerging from village life. Clare shares this interest, but also gives a fuller sense of the wider social community in which his protagonist is located.

My subsequent discussion of 'The Village Minstrel' falls into three parts. First, I consider how Clare creates a fluid kind of rural identity: Lubin appears disembedded from his life in the village community, aware of his own refinement that distinguishes him from his fellow workers; at the same time, he appears as a sociable, embedded participant in the life of the community. Clare resolves these contradictory aspects through the idea of Lubin's developing 'taste', which accommodates both his solitary interest in 'poesy' and his sociable enjoyment of rural customs, particularly storytelling.

Secondly, I examine how Clare uses this mixed identity to formulate a distinctive type of social observation. Lubin's taste provides the poet with a means of bridging the gap between rural culture and a refined consciousness, enabling him to show details of rural life that the heroic-couplet writers often neglected. This flexibility allows him to incorporate both the positive and negative aspects of rural life. At the

[7] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 135.

same time, finding what is 'tasteful' about the rougher aspects of rural life proves to be problematic, and the poem plays out the difficulty of this representation. Lubin provides the fluctuating moral agenda of the poem: his approval or disapproval of rural activities influences the attention of the narrator, and accordingly, there is a sense of continually shifting perspectives. The overall effect of this is that 'The Village Minstrel' moves both towards and away from idealization. This movement objectifies Clare's own uncertain position: while a socially superior antiquarian might feel ambivalence – wishing to preserve aspects of culture while at the same time expressing disapproval – as an actual labouring-class participant, Clare feels this ambivalence even more keenly, at the level of his own sense of identity. For him, to express too great a disapproval is to distance himself from the community which he records, and so diminish his credibility as a realist recorder.

In the final part of my discussion, I consider the effects of enclosure towards the end of the narrative in 'The Village Minstrel'. I argue that Clare establishes, paradoxically, a parallel between Lubin's alienated sense of disembeddedness, and the feeling of displacement felt by the wider rural community after enclosure. Disembeddedness, therefore, is no longer isolating, and in both of these cases, the sense of loss is productive: Lubin is led to a more individuated consciousness, and to a desire to record the distinctive aspects of two vulnerable social groups, shepherds and gypsies; the wider sense of loss unifies the diverse rural community, suggesting the beginnings of an emergent 'class-consciousness' which can acknowledge the differences between social groups. Lubin – who by this latter stage in the poem, seems especially identifiable as Clare – is figured as a potential spokesperson for these people; enclosure gives him a unified perspective.

**Critical Context: A Problematic Poem**

Scholarship on 'The Village Minstrel' has been influenced to a great extent by Clare's own dismissive comments on the poem. Following the poem's publication, he claimed: 'the reason why I dislike it is that it does not describe the feelings of a ryhming peasant strongly or localy enough'.[8] However, he also stated that it contained 'some of the best rural descriptions I have yet written'.[9]

Many critics have seized upon the lack of the 'local' in the poem – a category which describes Clare's use of language, but also applies to the realist content of the work. John Barrell figures the poem's importance mainly as a point of departure: 'Clare made the decision – if it was as conscious a thing as that – to write 'locally', after he had finished *The Village Minstrel*'.[10] Jonathan Bate makes a similar argument: '[...] the language and form of the poem are inherited and for the most part conventional. "The Village Minstrel" marks out the terrain of Clare's later poetry, but he has not yet found a voice that is true to both himself and that terrain'.[11] William Brewer agrees with Barrell that 'The Village Minstrel' would give way to a more local style, but also finds the poem to be a point of transition in itself – claiming that it inconsistently defers to both eighteenth-century pastoral traditions and present-day realities. In the process, he draws a comparison with Beattie's *The Minstrel,* claiming that unlike this earlier work, Clare's poem contains real-world interruptions.[12] Furthering the comparison with Beattie, Mina Gorji argues in favour of the 'local' quality of 'The Village Minstrel', which she appears to equate with realist content. She claims that Clare does more than

[8] Pet. MS B6, p. 81, repr. in *By Himself*, pp. 113–14.
[9] Clare to Taylor (7 January 1821), *Letters*, p. 136.
[10] Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, p. 166.
[11] Bate, *John Clare*, p. 226.
[12] William D. Brewer, 'Clare's Struggle for Poetic Identity in The Village Minstrel', *JCSJ*, 13 (1994), 73–80.

rehearse literary conventions; he draws on experience and observation, and 'his description has a homely feel and a distinctly local accent'.[13]

Regarding Lubin, the critical tendency has been to emphasize Lubin's isolation. Bate argues: 'The price of Lubin's absorption in nature is alienation from his fellow-villagers.'[14] Barrell reads him as an exceptional figure, adding that it would not have encouraged Clare to see the monolithic class of villager in Helpston as in fact made up of so many other self-conscious individuals.[15] John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan find that Lubin 'is much less interested in the popular culture that surrounds him than in the more transcendent poetry of nature that belonged to Thomson and Wordsworth'.[16] Johanne Clare, who claims that Clare himself was 'never really comfortable with the brawling spirit of his time', argues that Lubin 'prefers the solitude of nature to the company of men because he wants to forge for himself a unique and separate identity which he cannot find within his community'. She finds him to be a largely passive figure, deferential to genteel expectations of rustic innocence.[17]

Critics have also had to square Lubin's isolation with the poem's interest in rural culture. In a separate article, Keegan argues that Clare 'reopens the possibilities of a more productive relationship to a popular tradition that he had labelled elsewhere as trash'.[18] Her final claim that Lubin's muse 'is the muse of popular culture' sits a little uncomfortably with the emphasis she places upon his aloofness from other villagers, and with her argument that the oral modes of Nature's song and folk culture, while both

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[13] Gorji, *John Clare and the Place of Poetry*, p. 62.
[14] Bate, *John Clare*, p. 226.
[15] Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, p. 173.
[16] Goodridge and Keegan, 'Clare and the Traditions of Labouring-Class Verse', p. 282.
[17] Johanne Clare, *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), pp. 21–22, 109, 96.
[18] Bridget Keegan, 'Broadsides, Ballads and Books: The Landscape of Cultural Literacy in "The Village Minstrel"', *JCSJ*, 15 (1996), 11–19 (p. 13). Keegan also discusses the poem in 'Boys, Marvellous Boys: John Clare's "Natural Genius"', in *John Clare: New Approaches*, ed. by Goodridge and Kövesi, pp. 65–76.

influencing him, are not complementary.[19] John Lucas claims that 'The Village Minstrel' is a confused poem: 'What is celebrated is also kept at a distance; condescended to as Clare loathed being condescended to.'[20] Importantly, however, both Lucas and Keegan argue that the poem becomes more unified after enclosure. Lucas identifies a strong voice of anger that contrasts with the tone of 'deference' that Johanne Clare finds characteristic of the entire poem, while Keegan states that 'Lubin transcends his previously significant discursive differences from the villagers and attempts to speak for the losses of both nature and village culture'.[21] Alan Vardy also emphasizes the political content of the poem, which he claims rebels against the wishes of Clare's conservative patrons.[22]

In recent years, critics have offered more positive appraisals of 'The Village Minstrel'. Essaka Joshua, arguing that Lubin's solitariness is only intermittent, reads the poem as a flexible work that tolerates a variety of perspectives, and Theresa Adams highlights the poem's antiquarian interests.[23] In a particularly important reading of the poem, Sarah Houghton identifies Clare's ambivalence towards the rougher festive games, and claims that the poem shows both the decline of customs and Clare's increasing 'self-consciousness' as a poet: 'Literacy intrudes on festivity in the form of writing things down and thus changing their nature, and over-emphasizing the distinction between scenes and their observer.'[24]

My own reading of 'The Village Minstrel' reframes the ambivalences that critics have repeatedly found problematic. I place the poem in a dual poetic lineage, involving a wider range of comparison, in order to assert its distinctiveness as social observation.

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[19] Keegan, 'Broadsides, Ballads and Books', pp. 18, 15.
[20] John Lucas, *John Clare* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), p. 30.
[21] Keegan, 'Broadsides, Ballads and Books', p. 17.
[22] Vardy, *John Clare, Politics and Poetry*, p. 52.
[23] Joshua, pp. 129–34; Theresa Adams, 'Representing Rural Leisure: John Clare and the Politics of Popular Culture', *Studies in Romanticism*, 47 (2008), 371–92.
[24] Houghton, 'John Clare and Festivity', pp. 36–37.

Confronting the ambiguities of this work, I show that Lubin is a more sociable figure than has been commonly recognized by critics, and that his participation in village life contributes to his status as both an embedded and disembedded figure. This mixed identity contributes to the poem's shifting representation of rural life, as it dramatizes Clare's own fluctuating sense of self.

**'Heroic-couplet' Poetry: Form and Representation**

'The Village Minstrel' follows the representations of rural communities provided by Duck, Goldsmith, Crabbe and Bloomfield over the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These four writers all used the heroic couplet, a form which suited the taste for poetry as public-facing, where the poet might appear as a standardized, gentlemanly analyst who wrote according to the consensual standards of polite conversation. James Sutherland notes that these standards included 'a willingness to subordinate what is merely personal or private or a matter of "self-expression" in favour of what is generally interesting and universally intelligible in polite society'.[25] For these writers, the poetic speaker had to be endowed with a voice of refinement, in order not to appear 'vulgar'.

Their concern with refinement was managed alongside an increasing desire to represent the real. Barrell states that pastoral poetry in the early eighteenth century was 'characterised by an extreme reluctance to mention the practical aspects of rural life'.[26] Both he and Raymond Williams have traced the developments in eighteenth-century English poetry away from the delightful pastoral vision exemplified by Pope, and 'the

[25] James Sutherland, *A Preface to Eighteenth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), p. 65. For a more recent account, see J. Paul Hunter, 'Couplets and Conversation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. by Sitter, pp. 11–36.
[26] Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, p. 9.

emergence of a more actualised poetry [...] of rural life'.[27] In so doing, they both identify the importance of nostalgia – or the lack of it – in constructing these representations. Williams claims that Duck and Crabbe offered realist portrayals; in contrast to these, as Barrell and John Bull summarize, he places Clare alongside Goldsmith and other poets of nostalgia, who put forward 'a mythological history of the degradation of labour which [...] is always for them a happening in the recent past'.[28] Barrell, however, argues that Goldsmith's nostalgia in itself has radical implications: it shows the possibility of the poor being at leisure rather than born to toil, and is alert to the impact of historical change – unlike Crabbe's *The Village*, which takes place against a backdrop of continuous misery.[29]

Williams places Clare in this lineage of writers, arguing that he marks the end of pastoral poetry: 'Clare goes beyond the external observation of the poems of protest and of melancholy retrospect. What happens in him is that the loss is internal.' He conceives of Clare as 'the man alone with nature and with poverty, recreating a world in his green language'. Paradoxically, Clare's poetry shows its strength in its connecting feelings of human warmth and community, and its weakness in the making of this connection, through the lonely withdrawal into nature.[30]

My argument links Duck, Goldsmith and Crabbe together, as each produces social observation which is governed by a respectable moral agenda, resulting in a pessimistic view of contemporary rural life. I place Bloomfield's *The Farmer's Boy* as a development from this tendency, whose more mixed perspective influences Clare's own representation. These heroic-couplet poets tend to deny any sense of community in the present day, but this sense reappears in Clare's poetry – despite Williams's claims of his

[27] Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, p. 15.
[28] *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*, ed. by Barrell and Bull, p. 380.
[29] Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, pp. 14, 77–82.
[30] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, pp. 140–41.

isolation. Nostalgia also figures in 'The Village Minstrel', but is complicated by Clare's conception of how the community may survive after the trauma of enclosure.

Sutherland argues that in Goldsmith's vision of the village, no character appears 'quite adult', while Crabbe is 'for the most part the *spectator ab extra*, moved by the hard lot of the poorer classes, and distressed by their shiftlessness and improvidence, but not particularly interested in their minds'.[31] His comments indicate another significant difference, I argue, between these writers and Clare: for the heroic-couplet poets, individual identity is a lesser concern. Barrell claims that the society Clare presents is one 'in which "character", if it exists at all, is primarily a function of what people do'.[32] While this is certainly true in much of Clare's work (not least in a poem like 'The Woodman'), in 'The Village Minstrel', he creates an exceptional, highly complex form of rural identity.

**The Fixed Positions of Stephen Duck's World**

Stephen Duck's 'The Thresher's Labour' (1730), of which Clare owned an extract, exemplifies the proletarian anti-pastoral poem.[33] Duck, the thresher, was defined by his job, like other labouring-class poets of this period: James Woodhouse the cobbler, Robert Tatersal the bricklayer and Mary Collier the washer-woman. He adopts a gentlemanly register, and intermixes his polished style, complete with what Williams calls 'the anxious classical reference' reminiscent of Pope, with the pessimistic depiction of hard labour:[34]

[31] Sutherland, pp. 100–02.
[32] Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, p. 172.
[33] Crossan, p. 31; Goodridge, *Rural Life in Eighteenth-Century English Poetry*, p. 6.
[34] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 88.

> Down one, one up, so well they keep the Time,
> The CYCLOPS' Hammers could not truer chime;
> Nor with more heavy Strokes could *Ætna* groan,
> When VULCAN forg'd the Arms for THETIS' Son.
> In briny Streams our Sweat descends apace,
> Drops from our Locks, or trickles down our Face.
> No Intermission in our Work we know;
> The noisy Threshal must for ever go.
> (p. 12)[35]

The lack of 'Intermission' allows for little else but men to perform their function of labour. Organized according to a serious moral agenda, Duck's description refuses any examples of individuality: there is no place for anyone to speak with a regional voice, which might appear vulgar, even comic, in this context.

'The Thresher's Labour' shows a harvest meal, an important occasion in the mythology of the 'moral economy' of the eighteenth century, where 'landlord, tenant and labourer sit together in a spontaneous celebration whose freedom is uninhibited by any obtrusive sense of social division'.[36] Duck's portrayal, however, resists idealization, as any pleasures are overwhelmed by further labour:

> We think no Toils to come, nor mind the past.
> But the next Morning soon reveals the Cheat,
> When the same Toils we must again repeat;
> (p. 27)

As Goodridge notes, Duck's social position should not convince us to read the poem as 'truth'.[37] Unlike Clare, he conceals leisure practices, claiming that there is no opportunity for the labourer to 'tell a merry Tale' while working (p. 13). The emphasis on labour alone is enforced when the narrator expresses disdain for 'prattling Females' who ought to be working (p. 19).[38]

It is Duck's aspirational literary style that enforces his conservative message. At the end, the thresher can only think of 'Toils to come': 'New-growing Labours still

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[35] Stephen Duck, *Poems on Several Occasions* (London: printed for the author, 1736). Further references are taken from this edition.
[36] Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, pp. 59–60.
[37] Goodridge, *Rural Life in Eighteenth-Century English Poetry*, p. 17.
[38] Duck's complaint was answered by Mary Collier in 'The Woman's Labour' (1739).

succeed the past; / And growing always new, must always last' (p. 27). In spite of articulating this revelatory disillusion, the balanced couplet only points to the fixed positions of Duck's world. By providing this vision, he does not examine the paradoxical nature of his own poetic identity; contrastingly, in Clare's poetry, nearly a century later, such questions of identity will come to the fore.

**The Absence of Community in Goldsmith and Crabbe**

Goldsmith and Crabbe, both of higher social standing to Duck, also took up pessimistic, anti-pastoral positions. Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* (1770) and Crabbe's *The Village* (1783) both emphasize the loss of communal ties. In Goldsmith's poem, the loss of community is literal, as labourers leave the village. Goldsmith recalls a glorious past, 'ere England's griefs began' (l. 57), but now sees 'trade's unfeeling train / Usurp the land and dispossess the swain' (ll. 63–64), resulting in the decline in social relations between rich and poor.[39] Goldsmith links this state of 'desolation' (l. 38) to parliamentary enclosure and the resulting loss of common rights:

> Where then, ah, where shall poverty reside,
> To scape the pressure of contiguous pride;
> If to some common's fenceless limits strayed,
> He drives his flock to pick the scanty blade,
> Those fenceless fields the sons of wealth divide,
> And even the bare-worn common is denied.
> (ll. 303–08)

As Patricia Meyer Spacks states, Goldsmith's complaint is couched in a 'sentimental method': sensibility becomes part of value judgement, and men of trade are 'unfeeling'

[39] *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. by Arthur Friedman, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), IV, 287–304. Further references are taken from this edition.

– devoid of sympathy for others.[40] This sensitive opposition feeds into Clare's later conception of enclosure as 'tasteless'.

In contrast to Goldsmith, Crabbe's *The Village* appears to deny that a glorious past ever existed. Clare found Crabbe particularly provocative, as when he wrote to John Taylor (while preparing *The Village Minstrel* for publication):

> [...] whats he know of the distresses of the poor musing over a snug coal fire in his parsonage box – If I had an enemey I coud wish to torture I woud not wish him hung nor yet at the devil my worst wish shoud be a weeks confinment in some vicarage to hear an old parson & his wife lecture on the wants & wickedness of the poor[41]

Despite Clare's complaint about the ignorant parson, Crabbe did have some experience early in his life working as a farmhand.[42] His own self-portrait in *The Village* presents him as one who has escaped, 'Fled from these shores where guilt and famine reign' (I, l. 123), and now returns as a polite solitary, to be confronted with 'a bold, artful, surly, savage race' (I, l. 112).[43]

While Goldsmith presents desertion, Crabbe's poem is particularly useful for comparison with 'The Village Minstrel', as each represents how the contemporary rural community works. *The Village* is openly shaped by a pessimistic agenda: 'No longer truth, though shown in verse, disdain, / But own the village life a life of pain' (II, ll. 1–2). Accordingly, Goodridge argues that the poem 'is not a documentary description of a "real" village, but an abstracted progression of counter-pastoral images designed to prove certain truths which, for Crabbe, pastoral poetry has hitherto neglected or denied'.[44] Gavin Edwards also assesses that Crabbe's realism is constrained by his own

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[40] Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Reading Eighteenth-Century Poetry* (Chichester and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 186–87.
[41] Clare to Taylor (7 January 1821), *Letters*, pp. 137–38.
[42] Neil Powell, *George Crabbe: An English Life, 1754–1832* (London: Pimlico, 2004), p. 18.
[43] *Crabbe*, I, 155–74.
[44] Goodridge, *Rural Life in Eighteenth-Century English Poetry*, p. 18.

designs: his concept of 'the real picture' never comes into focus, 'because he cannot decide exactly how his own direct knowledge of village life fits into it'.[45]

Crabbe allows for no communal warmth, as when his narrator looks within the walls to view a domestic scene:

> Go look within, and ask if peace be there:
> If peace be his – that drooping weary sire,
> Or their's, that offspring round their feeble fire,
> Or her's, that matron pale, whose trembling hand:
> Turns on the wretched hearth th' expiring brand.
> (I, ll. 175–79)[46]

The 'sire', 'matron' and 'offspring' collectively make up a family, yet Crabbe considers them in separated, end-stopped images; they are individuals isolated from one another, line by line. Their sorrow shapes Crabbe's description of their surroundings: the 'feeble fire', the 'wretched hearth'.

The same lack of community ties is evident in the depiction of an old man dying in his bed: 'No friends with soft discourse his pain beguile, / Or promise hope till sickness wears a smile' (I, ll. 272–73). A few lines later, when a vicar enters the scene, Crabbe informs the reader that there has in fact been a 'gazing throng' (I, l. 280) gathered around, which retrospectively inflects this earlier couplet. Many are present, yet none of them are friends; if this gathering is joined together by anything, it is by their voyeurism regarding the private scene.

In *The Village*, poverty is linked to corruption, and the representation of rural leisure is characterized by degeneracy: villagers get drunk and fight one another (II, ll. 33–38); 'nymphs' sleep with both 'Peers' and 'Clowns', spreading venereal disease along the way (II, ll. 49–54); and 'vice' steals away 'nightly rest' (I, l. 92), intruding upon the efficiency of labour. Crabbe also claims that 'few amid the rural tribe have

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[45] Gavin Edwards, *George Crabbe's Poetry on Border Land* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990), p. 42.
[46] The editors of *Crabbe* mistakenly switch 'sire' and 'fire'; I have amended this in my quotation.

time / To number syllables and play with rhyme' (I, ll. 25–26). Crabbe's pessimism leads to the concealment of details which do not fit into his image of rural life. The poverty of the village is blamed upon the fatalistic, generalized whims of 'Nature's niggard hand' (I, l. 131) rather than any social changes. *The Village* also categorizes and typifies villagers; any elaboration of complex subjectivity is outside its purpose. As Johanne Clare remarks, we find Crabbe 'suppressing his personal knowledge of the victimised labourers he describes'.[47]

However, there are also ambivalences in Crabbe's poem, when his agenda as a pessimistic moralist, who looks upon a fallen world, comes into conflict with his consciousness, as a social critic, that historical changes do take place and may have negative effects. When his narrator dismisses the cultural activities of the labouring classes, there is a curious tone of nostalgia:

> Where are the swains, who, daily labour done,
> With rural games play'd down the setting sun;
> Who struck with matchless force the bounding ball,
> Or made the pond'rous quoit obliquely fall;
> While some huge Ajax, terrible and strong,
> Engaged some artful stripling of the throng,
> And fell beneath him, foil'd, while far around,
> Hoarse triumph rose and rocks return'd the sound?
> (I, ll. 93–100)

Crabbe adopts a common, idealizing technique of the pastoral which he previously attacked, heightening the description of village games with classical allusions in order to bemoan their absence. His articulation of change unsettles Barrell's view of him as a poet who cannot acknowledge past joys.[48]

Crabbe's awareness of historical change is also suggested in the passage in *The Village* on 'rank weeds' (I, ll. 63–78). As Lucas has pointed out, the compulsion to describe the weeds presents 'a case for weed control', in favour of agricultural

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[47] Johanne Clare, p. 34. This technique of categorizing the poor reappears, more extensively, in Crabbe's poem *The Parish Register* (1807), in *Crabbe*, I, 212–80.
[48] Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, pp. 77–85.

improvement; but it also shows Crabbe's delight in their resistance to order, as well as his 'concealed, almost guilty, knowledge' about the traditional medicinal qualities of the weeds. Ostensibly, Crabbe ignores enclosure, neglecting to mention it in any of his poems.[49] The effect of these lines, however, suggests his ambivalence, even nostalgia, regarding the consequences of agricultural improvement.[50] *The Village* shows how agenda-driven social observation may be disrupted by awkward historical detail.

**Robert Bloomfield: Allowing for Optimism**

Clare believed that Bloomfield was 'the most original poet of the age & the greatest Pastoral Poet England ever gave birth too'.[51] The narrator of Bloomfield's *The Farmer's Boy* (1800) asks that the poem 'mould to truth's fair form what mem'ry tells' ('Spring', l. 18), but 'truth' is qualified by his moral agenda: 'The Farmer's life desplays in every part / A moral lesson to the sensual heart' ('Summer', ll. 1–2).[52] During its composition in the mid-1790s, there had been a series of poor harvests, and radical fervour was brewing among labourers – but the poem's village, by contrast, enjoys plentiful harvests. Thus William Christmas categorizes the work as the 'neopastoral mode', claiming that there was a cultural need by 1800 for 'the particular brand of rural escapism' that the poem provides.[53] It is such optimism that leads

[49] The instance of 'inclosing' in *The Borough*, 'Letter XVI', refers to trees forming the perimeter of an estate rather than parliamentary enclosure, *Crabbe*, I, 506–12 (ll. 80–85).
[50] John Lucas, 'Crabbe's Disorderly Nature', in *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, ed. by Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells (London and New York: Zed Books, 1998), pp. 110–23 (pp. 114, 116).
[51] Clare to Thomas Inksip (10 August 1824), *Letters*, p. 300. On the affinity between Clare and Bloomfield, see John Lucas, 'Bloomfield and Clare', in *The Independent Spirit*, ed. by Goodridge, pp. 55–68; Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, pp. 83–101.
[52] *Robert Bloomfield: Selected Poems*, ed. by John Goodridge and John Lucas, rev. edn (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2007), pp. 23–61. Further references to Bloomfield's poetry are taken from this edition.
[53] William J. Christmas, '"The Farmer's Boy" and Contemporary Politics', in *Robert Bloomfield: Lyric, Class, and the Romantic Canon*, ed. by Simon White, John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2006), pp. 27–48 (pp. 30–31). On

Williams to complain about Bloomfield's 'external attitude' obstructing his 'real experience'.[54]

I argue, however, that compared to the previous examples of heroic-couplet poetry, Bloomfield's portrayal is noteworthy for its mixed attitude towards contemporary rural life, as when it states that 'joys and cares in every path are sown' ('Spring', l. 23). Far from being blandly optimistic, *The Farmer's Boy* also shows the harsh realities of rural life, as has been recently argued by Ian Haywood: when Giles undergoes the 'chearful servitude' of his labours ('Spring', l. 30), Haywood detects in this phrase an 'oxymoronic darkening of tone'.[55]

Bloomfield provides a nostalgic description of a harvest-home feast:[56]

> Behold the sound Oak table's massy frame
> Bestride the Kitchen floor, the careful Dame
> And generous Host invite their friends around
> For all that clear'd the crop, or tilld the ground
> Are guests by right of custom, old and young
> And many a neighboring Yeoman joins the throng
> ('Summer', ll. 299–304)

Custom cements everyone in their place. However, such scenes are revealed as belonging in the past, since modernity has given way to the gentrification of farmers:

> Such were the days; of days long past I sing
> When pride gave place to mirth without a sting
> Ere tyrant customs strength sufficient bore
> To violate the feelings of the poor
> To leave them distanc'd in the mad'ning race
> Where'er refinement shews its hated face
> ('Summer', ll. 333–38)

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Bloomfield's pastoralism, see Roger Sales, *English Literature in History: 1780–1830, Pastoral and Politics* (London: Hutchinson, 1983), pp. 19–21.

[54] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 135.

[55] Haywood, 'The Infection of Robert Bloomfield', para. 6. John Goodridge writes about the loneliness and physical discomfort represented in the poem in *John Clare and Community*, pp. 92–96. For other readings of the poem, see Bridget Keegan, 'Giles's Duty: Poetry, Husbandry, Sustainability', *The Robert Bloomfield Society Newsletter*, 9 (2005), 2–8; Simon J. White, *Robert Bloomfield, Romanticism and the Poetry of Community* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), pp. 7–30.

[56] Bloomfield also depicts a harvest-home feast in 'The Horkey. A Provincial Ballad' (1806), in *Robert Bloomfield: Selected Poems*, pp. 99–105.

The modes of refinement are defined as alternative, 'tyrant customs' which disrupt the rhythms of the community. However, the break between past and present in Bloomfield's vision is less absolute than in Goldsmith's evocation of a lost, golden world. For Bloomfield, some sense of community has been preserved by the final section of the poem: 'A bond of amity and social love' ('Winter', l. 8).

*The Farmer's Boy*, as well as allowing for optimism, contains another important difference from the heroic-couplet poems previously discussed, through its focus on a single character, Giles. The narrator states of Giles, 'Labour his portion, but he felt no more' ('Spring', l. 28), and accordingly he is an inscrutable figure, without a fully developed subjectivity. As Haywood notes, '[Giles's] interiority is inconsistently represented, and it is often insubstantial and transient'.[57]

Bloomfield hints at a tension between his narrator's and protagonist's perspectives in the scene when Giles slaughters a group of lambs. Giles's reaction is not articulated, but Bloomfield's polite narrator turns away in disgust:

> Down, indignation! hence, ideas foul!
> Away the shocking immage from my soul!
> Let kindlier visitants attend my way
> ('Spring', ll. 353–55)

The narrator stands in for the reader who might well be prepared to eat meat, but cannot confront the process that leads to its production. This turning away reveals the space between the realities of rural labour and its poetic representation. A similar tension between the perspectives of narrator and protagonist is exploited by Clare, more persistently, in 'The Village Minstrel'.

Bloomfield does, briefly, provide another example of rural subjectivity through the disembodied voice that appears towards the end of 'Summer'. The narrator announces the voice as a ghostly intrusion: 'Methinks I hear the mourner thus impart /

[57] Haywood, 'The Infection of Robert Bloomfield', para. 7.

The stifled murmurs of his wounded heart' ('Summer', ll. 345–46). This voice belongs to an anonymous cottager, speaking in the same polite register as the narrator:

> Content, the poet sings, with us resides,
> In lonely Cots like mine the Damsel hides
> And will he then in raptur'd visions tell
> That sweet Content with Want can ever dwell?
> ('Summer', ll. 361–64)

The cottager's complaint comes close to Crabbe's attack on idealizing pastoral writers. Yet, as ever, Bloomfield's tone is mixed – this passage sits in tension with a latter part of the poem, where his narrator spies a cottage which contains 'Inestimable sweets of social peace!' ('Autumn', l. 176). As Duck concluded his poem with the acknowledgement that 'New-growing Labours' will continue, Bloomfield's own final couplet provides a positive perspective on the endless cycle of seasons: 'Another Spring! his heart exulting cries / Another year with promis'd blessings rise!' ('Winter', ll. 385–86).

Of these heroic-couplet poems, *The Farmer's Boy* can be regarded as the work which has greatest influence on Clare's 'The Village Minstrel', through its mixed vision – caught between optimism and pessimism – which allows for community ties in contemporary rural life. Both Bloomfield and Crabbe handle the realms of past and present uncertainly: Crabbe's poem cannot deny historical change, while Bloomfield's cannot deny continuity. These tensions illuminate the difficulty for any realist poet to achieve a nostalgic perspective that neatly partitions past and present. As will be discussed, Clare encounters a similar difficulty in his own handling of time – and particularly the 'break' enforced by enclosure – in 'The Village Minstrel'.

**The Use of Other Verse Forms: Beattie's 'Artless' Minstrel**

Duck, Goldsmith, Crabbe and Bloomfield all treat social identities as fixed, and in the process, they minimize the space for individual, rural subjectivity to emerge from their scenes. In a development from this literary lineage, Clare's own interest in subjectivity draws from those writers who took the inner life of the rural male as their subject, and who adopted alternative poetic forms from the couplet – in particular, Beattie and Wordsworth.

As the eighteenth century progressed, poets experimented more frequently with the Spenserian stanza and blank verse, and with these efforts, subjectivity became a preoccupation.[58] The Spenserian stanza, as used in William Shenstone's *The School-Mistress* (1737) and James Thomson's *The Castle of Indolence* (1748), evoked Spenser's romantic imagination to lead poets away from social moralizing.[59] At the same time, an enormous influence on subsequent English poets, including the heroic-couplet writers, was Thomson's blank-verse poem *The Seasons* (1726–30) which celebrated rural labour. Thomson's poem used the openness of the blank-verse form to make swift changes in tone and subject matter, from elevated rhetoric to reflection on the minute details of one's surroundings. The movement between ideas enabled by blank verse eventually led to its frequent use for a certain type of philosophical poem, exemplified by Mark Akenside's *The Pleasures of Imagination* (1744).

Writing in the mid-century, poets such as Thomas Gray, William Collins and James Beattie were less concerned with the public or political ends of poetry, and more interested in developing a self-reflective form of subjectivity. Jennifer Keith figures the

[58] Fairer, p. 179.
[59] On Spenser's influence, see Richard C. Frushell, 'Spenser and the Eighteenth-Century Schools', *Spenser Studies*, 7 (1986), 175–98.

increased use of alternative forms to the couplet during the eighteenth century as a turn toward interiority. She identifies two different notions of representation:

> [...] an earlier notion of representation as the imitation of Nature, seen, for example, in the poetry of Pope, and a later notion of representation as the expression of an individual's imagination and feelings, where the poet creates as much as imitates Nature, as seen in much of Wordsworth's poetry.[60]

The emergence of Romanticism saw artists, such as Wordsworth, frequently placing their own individual experience at the centre of their work.[61]

Both the title and the Spenserian stanza form of 'The Village Minstrel' show its close relationship to Beattie's *The Minstrel* (1771–74).[62] Beattie introduces his verse as 'artless' (I, iii), in itself an artful experiment by an educated writer. His poem, which has been figured as a precursor to the Romantic interest in subjectivity, concerns an unusually sensitive rural character named Edwin.[63] Beattie himself had modest origins as the son of a farmer, but had risen to become a professor of philosophy. Edwin was both an idealized double and an anti-double of him: Edwin wanders alone, while Beattie was immersed in society; Edwin humbly stays in his place, while Beattie rose through the class system.

Clare owned two copies of *The Minstrel*, one of which was presented by Lord Radstock with various inscriptions by the donor recommending the poem as an ethical

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[60] Jennifer Keith, '"Pre-Romanticism" and the Ends of Eighteenth-Century Poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. by Sitter, pp. 271–90 (p. 276).
[61] Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and Its Background 1796–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 6–7.
[62] John Lucas emphasizes that this title was not Clare's choice, in *England and Englishness*, p. 147. However, Taylor stated his own reservations: 'I have preferred your old Title The Peasant Boy after duly Considering all Circumstances. – For some time I thought favorably of 'The Minstrel Village' – & also of 'The Village Muse' – but unless you recommend either of them I cannot trust to adopting either.' It was Clare who finally confirmed 'The Village Minstrel' as the title, since it 'still sticks in my memory as best of all'. See Taylor to Clare (10 February 1821), *Letters*, p. 148; Clare to Taylor (13 February 1821), *Letters*, p. 151.
[63] Everard King makes this claim in *James Beattie's The Minstrel and the Origins of Romantic Autobiography* (Lewiston, NY, Lampeter and Queenston, Ont.: Edward Mellen Press, 1992). For an alternative reading of the poem, see David Hill Radcliffe, 'Completing James Beattie's *The Minstrel*', *Studies in Philology*, 100 (2003), 534–63.

model for the labouring-class writer.[64] Part of the suitability of Beattie's poem as a model was that it did not dwell upon the 'dirty reality' of rural life. 'The Minstrel' is set 'in Gothic days, as legends tell' (I, xi), and its contemporary references are sporadic and oblique. The enemies of Edwin are listed in universal categories such as 'Fortune', 'Pride', 'Envy' and 'Poverty' (I, i), the sorts of terms which may be associated with the satire of Johnson and, indeed, the realism of Crabbe. Allusions to corrupt modernity are also generalized, such as 'Ambition's grovelling crew' (I, vii).

The poem describes the cultivation of Edwin's imagination, influenced by 'Whate'er of lore tradition could supply / From Gothic tale, or song, or fable old' (I, lviii). Despite his inspiration, his father counsels him: 'Let man's own sphere [...] confine his view, / Be man's peculiar work his sole delight' (I, xxviii). This conservative emphasis does not entail a focus on labour; Edwin is untroubled by the demands of employment that a writer like Duck illustrates. Aside from his parents, and the mysterious hermit in book two of the poem, Edwin's encounters with other villagers are only occasional and insubstantial: 'The neighbours stared and sighed, yet blessed the lad: / Some deemed him wondrous wise, and some believed him mad' (I, xvi).

In one instance of the poem, Beattie suggests that Edwin's imaginative capacity may be more socially destabilizing. A dream-sequence appears when Edwin sleeps and lets his 'fancy roam at large' (I, xxxiii); this is the closest that Beattie comes to portraying a bustling social scene. Edwin witnesses a courtly dance, where the warriors 'doff the targe and spear' to a 'troop of dames'; the dancing figures 'dart' and 'wheel' to and from Edwin's sight (I, xxxv). His fancy has released a suppressed fascination with a

[64] The other copy was an 1819 edition given by Chauncey Hare Townshend on 6 May 1820, no. 113 in *Northampton Catalogue*. In addition, Clare owned extracts from Beattie's poem in *The Parnassian Garland; Or, Beauties of Modern Poetry*, ed. by John Evans, (London: Albion Press, 1807), pp. 3–4; and John Aikin (ed.), *The Select Works of the British Poets* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1820), pp. 798–807; nos 328 and 92 in *Northampton Catalogue*.

more refined existence. As he awakes, he is newly attuned to the presence of other figures in the landscape:

> Crowned with her pail the tripping milkmaid sings;
> This whistling ploughman stalks afield; and, hark!
> Down the rough slope the ponderous wagon rings;
> (I, xxxix)

These typified figures, however, do not hover any closer into Edwin's sight. The ploughman remains 'afield', and Beattie's hero 'surveys' from on high; he only 'faintly kens the bounding fawn, / And villager abroad at early toil' (I, xx). Edwin stays in his village, but his isolation means that Beattie's poem does not show any substantial sense of the rural community that might exist there.

**Wordsworth and Rural Subjectivity**

In his poetry, Wordsworth portrays various kinds of consciousness emerging from rural life. One example of this is the blank-verse poem 'Michael', published in 1800. This work provides a more sanitized vision of rural poverty than the vicious realism of Crabbe, achieved in part through the representation of Michael's respectable character. In 1801 Wordsworth wrote to Charles James Fox, the parliamentary leader of the opposition, that 'Michael' and another poem, 'The Brothers', 'were written with a view to shew that men who do not wear fine cloaths can feel deeply'.[65] The narrator of 'Michael' apologizes for the tale's 'homely' and 'rude' character (l. 35), but Michael is a very pure, innocent figure: one never sees him drinking in a tavern or joining in some rough sport.[66]

[65] Wordsworth to Fox (14 January 1801), *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years, 1787–1805*, ed. by Ernest De Selincourt, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), II, 315; 'The Brothers, a Pastoral Poem', in *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by Butler and Green, pp. 141–58.
[66] See also Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787–1814* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 262.

Michael is not a poetic solitary like Beattie's Edwin, but a worker more firmly embedded in an ongoing traditional way of life. He contextualizes himself when he speaks to his son:

> – Even to the utmost I have been to thee
> A kind and a good Father: and herein
> I but repay a gift which I myself
> Receiv'd at others' hands
>
> (ll. 371–74)

Tracy Ware states: 'It is not that Michael's life is virtuous because it is "natural" but rather that it is natural because it is ennobled by custom'.[67] A Burkean impulse is at work here, as Wordsworth suggests that a community bound by custom provides a basis for morality. However, his top-down narrative perspective veils any sense of how the rural community actually operates. Several critics have pointed to the poem's lack of reference to contemporary social and political conditions.[68] Instead, the narrative focus tends to fall upon Michael and his family alone: when he and his son sit in the shade, there are 'others round them, earnest all and blithe' (l. 181), but no further description is provided of these figures.

A different example of Wordsworth's interest in rural subjectivity – and one which bears close resemblance to Clare's Lubin – is the philosophical Pedlar of 'The Ruined Cottage'. This poem has a complicated textual history, and in a separate but connected text, 'The Pedlar' (published in Clare's time as 'The Wanderer'), Wordsworth provides a detailed account of the intellectual development of the Pedlar from his rural origins in a 'virtuous household, though exceeding poor' (l. 110).[69] There

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[67] Tracy Ware, 'Historicism Along and Against the Grain: The Case of Wordsworth's "Michael"', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 49 (1994), 360–74 (p. 370).
[68] Annabel M Patterson, *Pastoral and Ideology: Virgil to Valéry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 275; Marjorie Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 59.
[69] I quote from the MS. E: Reading Text of 'The Pedlar', as provided in William Wordsworth, *The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar*, ed. by James Butler (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 382–448. See Butler's introduction to this edition for an account of the textual history, pp. 3–35. 'The Wanderer' was published in William Wordsworth, *The Excursion, Being a Portion of The Recluse, a Poem* (London: Longman, 1814), pp. 1–49.

is a strong sense of autobiographical identification here; several passages resemble parts of *The Prelude*.[70] Wordsworth identifies not only the influence of nature on his subject, but also both folk and literary culture, as Clare does with Lubin. The Pedlar's exposure to traditional tales nourishes 'Imagination in her growth' (l. 160); among the books he reads as a child is a volume of supernatural tales bearing figures that are 'Strange and uncouth [...] – forms which once seen / Co[uld never be forgotten]' (ll. 172–75). Having been sent to a school, he also reads Milton and mathematical books.

The result of this education is that the young man seeks an itinerant course of labour, assuming work as a pedlar. His rupture from his native place resembles a process of disembedding, and his wandering offers him a wider perspective on man:

> [...] From his native Hills
> He wander'd far: much did he see of men,
> Their manners, their enjoyments, and pursuits,
> Their passions and their feelings
> (ll. 299–302)

One experience leads the Pedlar to narrate, in 'The Ruined Cottage', the tragic tale of a war-widow, Margaret. The Pedlar presents the social reasons for her plight: following two bad harvests, her weaver husband is unemployed and dependent on parish charity; he then joins the army and is sent away to war. However, rather than supplying a radical interpretation to these events, the poem instead comes to focus on Margaret's subjectivity. As Duncan Wu states, 'the narrative, though it documents Margaret's decline against a recognizably contemporary milieu, is actually driven by Wordsworth's preoccupation with her interior world'.[71] The Pedlar's moral lesson at the end sits uneasily following

[70] See William Wordsworth, *The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar*, pp. 17–18.
[71] Duncan Wu, 'Wordsworth's Poetry to 1798', in *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 22–37 (p. 33).

his narration.[72] In 'The Ruined Cottage', Wordsworth again does not provide the kind of interest in the functioning of the rural community that the heroic-couplet writers show.

**Taste and 'The Village Minstrel'**

'The Village Minstrel' draws upon both of the literary lineages that I have outlined. Like Beattie's Edwin and Wordsworth's Pedlar, Lubin is a rural figure made exceptional in his rural community by his intellectual development; he is also closely bound into a traditional way of life, like Michael. But Clare uses Lubin's distinctive identity to provide a distinctive overview of rural life, that can be compared with the works of the heroic-couplet writers. Lubin appears both disembedded and embedded: his 'refinement' distinguishes him from his peers; at the same time, he is unable and unwilling to withdraw fully from the social community of the village. Clare resolves these contradictory aspects through his conception of Lubin's developing 'taste', which can accommodate interests both inside and outside the village: 'as his years increasd his taste refind / & fancy wi new charms enlightnd up his mind' (ll. 652–53).

'Taste', developed by Joseph Addison and many others during the eighteenth century, was conventionally considered in this period as the quality required to appreciate works of art.[73] While debate continued as to what constituted an object of taste, Edmund Burke's definition exemplified its association with 'high' culture: 'that

[72] On the avoidance of political concerns in *The Ruined Cottage*, see James Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 134–35. On the lack of human interest in 'The Pedlar', see Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's* Lyrical Ballads *(1798)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 93–95.

[73] On 'taste' in the eighteenth century, see John Brewer, '"The Most Polite Age and the Most Vicious." Attitudes towards Culture as a Commodity: 1660–1800', in *The Consumption of Culture 1600–1800*, ed. by Bermingham and Brewer, pp. 341–61; John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London: HarperCollins, 1997).

faculty, or those faculties of the mind which are affected with, or which form a judgment of the works of imagination and the elegant arts.'[74]

Clare occasionally figures taste as a quality that distinguishes him from his rural peers: 'I thought somtimes that I surely had a taste peculialy by myself'.[75] His 1820 poem 'On Taste' (*EP*, II, 375–76) implies that the 'gross clown' cannot be as discriminating as him – 'natures unfolded book / As on he blunders never strikes his eye' (ll. 11–12). A similar capacity for attention to nature is exhibited by Wordsworth's Pedlar, who never fails

> Incessantly to turn his ear and eye
> On all things which the moving seasons brought
> To feed such appetite
>
> (ll. 147–49)

Adam White argues that Clare's idea of taste broadly accords with its conventional, elitist meaning: the poet employs 'the idea of the "man of taste" as a way of fashioning his poetic identity, and this self-fashioning for Clare involves a necessary and wilful distancing of himself from his own social class'.[76] This argument, however, does not allow for the inclusivity that characterizes Clare's conception of taste elsewhere. In 'Dawning of Genius' (*EP*, I, 451–52), written between 1817 and 1819, he describes 'a rough rude ploughman' (l. 16) who is nevertheless attentive enough 'to trace / The opening beauties of a daiseys face' (l. 20). As Barrell states, Clare insists here on 'the humanity of his ploughman, and applies to him that characteristically Romantic test of humanity, the capacity for receiving aesthetic pleasure'.[77] Importantly, this ploughman is not exceptional in the poem: a 'lowly shepherd' also shows 'taste' (ll. 5–8), and the narrator claims that 'genius' can be found from 'arts Refinements to th'unculter'd swain' (l. 4).

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[74] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by James T. Boulton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 13.
[75] *By Himself*, p. 17.
[76] Adam White, 'John Clare: "The Man of Taste"', *JCSJ*, 28 (2009), 38–54 (p. 38).
[77] Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, p. 155.

Most readers of Clare will be aware of his capacity for inconsistency, and should not be surprised to find it here between this example and the more elitist descriptions of taste that White focuses upon. But this inconsistency is important, because it shows that Clare's notion of taste relies on a certain fluidity between rural and polite spheres. White interchanges the terms 'socially refined' and 'poetic' a little too readily; 'The Village Minstrel' shows a more complex understanding of the relationship between these terms, as Lubin's poetic refinement emerges from, and is consistent with, his experiences as a labouring-class individual. His capacity for tasteful attentiveness distinguishes him but is also cultivated by his sociable exposure to fairy tales:

> & he has markt the curious stained rings
> Tho seemly nothing in anothers eye
> & bending oer em thought em wonderous things
> Where nurses night fays circling dances hie
> (ll. 465–68)[78]

In Clare's later poem 'Shadows of Taste', the man of taste is able to make 'Associations sweet' (l. 133) with what he observes in nature, making references to poets but also to local 'folk' names. The consequence, as Sarah Weiger has discussed, is that Clare's taste has the quality of harmonizing different elements rather than dividing them: different species show 'shades' of taste, and it is the man of taste who 'is able to see the shades in their present environmental context as parts of a larger, shared natural and literary history'.[79] Like Weiger, I argue that 'The Village Minstrel' shows taste as a mediating quality, in two ways. First, various influences – natural, folk and literary – coalesce in the development of Lubin's taste, which by extension sustains his attachment to his fellow villagers; this culminates, as the final part of my chapter argues, in the shared opposition of the rural poor to 'tasteless' enclosure. Secondly, like

[78] The 'fairey ring' was, according to Clare's Oxford editors, a 'circle of darker grass caused by fungi and attributed to dancing of fairies', *MP*, II, 384.
[79] Sarah Weiger, '"Shadows of Taste": John Clare's Tasteful Natural History', *JCSJ*, 27 (2008), 59–71 (p. 68). For an earlier discussion of 'natural' taste in Clare, see Brownlow, pp. 116–33.

the antiquarians, Clare's recognition of taste allows him to represent otherwise 'vulgar' aspects of rural culture that may be of interest to his polite audience.

**Lubin's Mixed Identity**

Clare emphasizes Lubin's situation as a labourer: he has to 'earn his living by a sweating brow' (l. 32), recalling Duck's discomforting description: 'In briny Streams our Sweat descends apace' (p. 12). While Beattie's Edwin has endless leisure time, Clare has imbued his solitary with the pressures of 'toil & slavery' (l. 16). A critic of 'The Village Minstrel' in *The Morning Post* noticed the differences from Beattie's poem:

> In fact, it may be said with truth, that this Poem possesses nothing in common with BEATTIE'S Minstrel, it being little else than the simple matter-of-fact history of the Poet himself – and that too, told in the most artless and humble manner.[80]

Beattie's Edwin contemplates grand landscapes, climbing the 'craggy cliff' to 'stand sublime' (I, xxi), and Wordsworth's Pedlar stands upon 'the tops / Of the high mountains' to look upon the 'ocean and the earth' beneath him (ll. 190–93). Lubin inhabits a world of smaller proportions, in which he is more likely to stand 'Upon a molehill' (l. 173), a deflationary position which recalls Queen Margaret's humiliation of the Duke of York in Shakespeare's *Henry VI: Part III*: 'Come, make him stand upon this molehill here [...] What! was it you that would be England's king?' (I. 4. 68–71).[81] For Lubin, the fire of inspiration offers some form of escape: 'Ambitions prospects fird his little soul / & fancy soard & sung bove povertys controul' (ll. 35–36). 'Bove' contains its own ambiguity, pointing to a poetic position superior to, or in spite of,

[80] *The Morning Post*, 11 October 1821.
[81] *Henry VI: Part III*, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 103–40. Further references to Shakespeare are taken from this edition. Bate notes the frequency of characters sitting on molehills in Clare's poetry, *John Clare*, p. 225n.

Lubin's social station. In either reading, it presents a socially destabilizing alternative to the case of Edwin, who is 'checked by [...] Poverty's unconquerable bar' (I, i).[82]

Lubin's creative development is catalysed by three disparate influences: nature, literary culture and popular culture. Regarding the first, Lubin hears a thrush sing, 'thought it sweet & mockt it oer again' (l. 159), in a similar manner to Bloomfield's Giles: 'His own shrill mattin join'd the various notes / Of nature's music from a thousand throats' ('Spring', ll. 137–38). Lubin also spots a primrose and attempts 'a rude sonnet in its praise' (l. 162): 'sonnet' here appears to mean 'song' rather the literary form, though the term evokes a transmutation of nature's influence into a poetic awakening. He continues to show this mimetic reaction to nature's music:

> Enthusiasm made his soul to glow
> His heart wi wild sensations usd to beat
> As nature seemly sung his mutterings usd repeat
> (ll. 170–72)

This is a steady form of enthusiasm, built on the rhythms of nature, exemplified by the metrical regularity of the lines.

Literary culture is another, less clearly articulated influence on Lubin's development, and one which renders him exceptional (unlike Giles). Clare's vague representation of literary influence in 'The Village Minstrel' might be symptomatic of his deference to the wishes of his publishers (Octavius Gilchrist's introduction to Clare in the *London Magazine* had played down the extent of his reading).[83] Nevertheless, Clare does affirm Lubin's enthusiasm for polite literature: he appreciates the 'refined joys' of 'poesy' (ll. 386–87), and one text is overtly mentioned: 'oft wi books spare hours he woud beguile / & blunderd oft wi joy round crusoes lonly isle' (ll. 383–84).

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[82] Clare is diverting from the absolutism of 'Helpstone', which blamed 'Accursed wealth' as 'the bar that keeps from being fed / & thine our loss of labour & of bread' (ll. 131–32).

[83] 'Beyond his Bible he had read nothing but a few odd volumes, the very titles of some of which he had forgotten, and others, which he remembered, were so utterly worthless, that I should shame to mention the names. A single volume of Pope, however, with the *Wild Flowers* of Bloomfield, and the writings of Burns, were sufficient to stimulate his innate genius for poetry.' *Critical Heritage*, p. 38.

Clare recorded that *Robinson Crusoe* would 'fill my fancys' as a child, and Taylor wrote in his introduction to *Poems Descriptive* that Clare's perusal of this book 'greatly increased his stock of knowledge and his desire for reading'.[84] Defoe's book was considered suitable reading for the poor, and abbreviated versions of the book were cheaply available and popular among the labouring classes during the eighteenth century, being sold by wandering chapmen.[85] Bloomfield's Giles is himself described as 'the Crusoe of the lonely fields' ('Autumn', l. 210), though this reference does not indicate his reading.

Lubin's literary exposure, however briefly articulated, is a significant departure from the hermetically sealed visions of rural life provided by Duck, Goldsmith and Crabbe. Beattie's Edwin is taught to bound his knowledge, since knowledge brings unhappiness; in contrast, Lubin's education increases his pleasure, 'Delighting more as more he learnd to know' (l. 167). Lubin increasingly becomes an outsider, the 'sport of all the village' (l. 414). While Edwin was deemed 'mad' by some, Clare's gossips are harsher in their judgement. It is said of Lubin, 'A more uncoothly lout was hardly seen' (l. 412) – the villagers' reaction here curiously resembles a polite condemnation of vulgarity, and they also observe:

> How half a ninney he was like to be
> To go so soodling up & down the street
> & shun the playing boys when ere they chancd to meet
> (ll. 418–20)

Lubin's experience of scorn resembles Clare's own autobiographical recollections:

> I began to wean off from my companions and sholl about the woods and fields on Sundays alone conjectures filld the village about my future destinations on the stage of life, some fanc[y]ing it symtoms of lunacy and that my mothers prophecys woud be verified to her sorrow and that my reading of books (they

[84] Pet. MS A25, p. 32, repr. in *By Himself*, p. 57; *Critical Heritage*, p. 45.
[85] Clare's 'The Shepherds Lodge' (*MP*, III, 538–42), written in 1833, describes a simple, virtuous shepherd owning it, alongside his copies of Bunyan and the Bible; John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, pp. 173–74.

> woud jeeringly say) was for no other improvment then quallyfiing an idiot for a workhouse, for at this time my taste and pasion for reading began to be furious[86]

While solitary, Lubin is seen 'muttering oer his joys from clowns intrusions free' (l. 1281), levering himself away from the average activities of his peers. His habit resembles Wordsworth's habit of muttering to himself when composing poetry on walks, as described by a gardener: 'he would start bumming, and it was bum, bum, bum, stop; then bum, bum, bum, reet down till t'other end'.[87]

Lubin's poetic development leads to him appearing disembedded from his rural origins. To restate Anthony Giddens's theory, his exposure to literary culture demonstrates how his locale is 'thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant' from it.[88] This sense of dislocation is expressed in the poem's most explicit attack on the dullness of village life:

> Folks may wonder how the thing may be
> That lubins taste shoud seek refined joys
> & court the 'chanting smiles of poesy
> Bred in a village full of strife & noise
> Old sensless gossips & blackguarding boys
> Ploughmen & threshers whose discourses led
> To nothing more then labours rude employs
> 'Bout work being slack & rise & fall of bread
> & who were like to dye ere while & who were like to wed
> (ll. 385–93)

The peculiar negativity of this passage is uncharacteristic of much of Clare's poetry. The 'discourses' of villagers here have a mind-numbing circularity, covering work and bread, in contrast to the more impassive depiction of farmers' talking about grain and harvests in *The Shepherd's Calendar*.[89] The portrayal of old women as 'sensless gossips' is a very different image from their culturally valued role, in this poem and

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[86] *By Himself*, p. 5.
[87] H. D. Rawnsley, *Reminiscences of Wordsworth among the Peasantry of Westmoreland* (London: Dillon's, 1968), p. 18.
[88] Giddens, p. 19.
[89] See 'January: A Winters Day', *MP*, I, 3–11 (ll. 8–28).

Clare's other work, as storytellers.[90] The passage has undoubtedly led critics to emphasize Lubin's aloofness, but this ignores an important ambiguity here: it shows what 'Folks' may think, and not necessarily what the poem shows. Ultimately, 'The Village Minstrel' corrects the view expressed here, since Lubin does not experience such absolute isolation from his community.

While Bloomfield's Giles is perennially lonely, Lubin is perennially moving towards and away from the village. Keegan states that prior to enclosure, 'the poem's narrator continually dissociates Lubin from the village'; it may be added that Lubin is re-associated just as frequently. [91] The sequestered nature in which he wanders is also a cultured nature, close to human settlements, and in these moments of isolation the village appears particularly harmonious to him. Casting his gaze across the landscape, Lubin sees among 'many a beauty that does intervene / The steeple peeping oer the woods dark brow' (ll. 69–70). Later, upon the molehill he takes a 'prospect of the circling scene' (l. 174):

> Marking how much the cottage roofs thatch brown
> Did add its beauty to the budding green
> Of sheltering trees it humbly pe[e]pt between
> The waggon rumbling oer the stoney ground
> (ll. 175–78)

In the balance of town and nature, the cottage fits within the scene of green; the wagon's 'rumbling sound' chimes harmoniously with its echo of 'humbly'. Lubin's 'prospect' view is soon modified by his need to return.

Lubin's most enthusiastic involvement in the cultural life of the village is through his interest in village storytelling. In the early 1820s, Clare had begun collecting the folklore and folksongs of his region, leaving the most comprehensive

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[90] See John Goodridge, '"Now wenches, listen, and let lovers lie": Women's Storytelling in Bloomfield and Clare', *JCSJ*, 22 (2003), 77–92; Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, pp. 169–89.
[91] Keegan, 'Broadsides, Ballads and Books', p. 15.

record of any participant in this tradition.[92] Writing in 1791, James Lackington, a shoemaker's son who became a bookseller, observed that 'within the last twenty years', the increased availability of books had caused a change in practice among 'the poor country people in general, who before that period spent their winter evenings in relating stories of witches, ghosts, hobgoblins, &c. now shorten the winter nights by hearing their sons and daughters read tales, romances, &c.'.[93] Lackington's views should be treated sceptically, as John Brewer cautions, since they 'express the unexamined belief in progressive enlightenment and retreat from superstition that governs the story of his own life and the book trade'.[94] 'The Village Minstrel', appearing as it does thirty years after Lackington's book, suggest that such stories did not disappear; indeed, its reference to one character, Hodge, buying a ballad sheet for his maid indicates the productive overlap between oral and printed forms (ll. 700–06).

Clare's poem also shows his ambivalence to the superstitious aspects of rural culture. The narrator of 'The Village Minstrel' shows a disenchanted outsider's view when he reports 'haunted tales which village legends fill / As true as gospel revealations told' (ll. 82–83). Unlike Lackington – who was determined to indicate his own process of enlightenment – Clare could never comfortably disdain the oral tales that supported these superstitious beliefs.[95] Indeed, while writing 'The Village Minstrel', he expressed dismay at the request by the parson James Plumptre that he remove references to supernatural phenomena: 'I soon found his rules woud not do for me & bluntly told him

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[92] George Deacon, *John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, paperback edn (London: Francis Boutle, 2002), p. 21.
[93] James Lackington, *Memoirs of the First Forty-Five Years of the Life of James Lackington: The Present Bookseller in Chiswell Street, Moorfields, London, Written by Himself in a Series of Letters to a Friend*, new edn (London: J. Lackington, 1792), pp. 386–87.
[94] John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, p. 157.
[95] *By Himself*, p. 45. On Clare's ambivalence towards folk superstition Richard G. Swartz, '"Their Terrors Came upon Me Tenfold": Literacy and Ghosts in John Clare's Autobiography', in *Lessons of Romanticism: A Critical Companion*, ed. by Thomas Pfau and Robert F. Gleckner (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 328–48.

my superstitious Grandmother had instilld those notions into my nature so very early that it woud be hard matter now to make me disbelieve em'.[96]

E. P. Thompson writes: 'If nineteenth-century folklore, by separating survivals from their context, lost awareness of custom as ambience and *mentalité*, so also it lost sight of the rational functions of many customs within the routines of daily and weekly labour.'[97] Unlike many polite folklorists, Clare makes the social function of storytelling visible to his public, without subordinating its vulgarity to an idealized representation. 'The Village Minstrel' displays the actual circumstances of storytelling, when a group sit to rest from their labours while 'merrily the snuff box charm went pinching round the ring' (l. 527). This is a scene of communal bonding which, unlike a harvest feast, has not been organized by any master; it exemplifies Theresa Adams's observation that the poem 'projects leisure as an escape from social hierarchy'.[98] It also provides a corrective to the pessimism of Duck, who claimed that labourers had no time for storytelling and added the question 'Alas! what pleasing thing, / Here, to the Mind, can the dull Fancy bring?' (p. 13).

Storytelling provides the receptacle for collective memory, and therefore, some sort of formal village history. Tales show their embeddedness, linking place as well as community: the setting of the story 'Jenny burnt a-se' – altered to the less offensive 'Jack-a-lantern' in the published version of the poem – is immediately located to a brook that Lubin knows well (ll. 79–81). Later, Lubin recognizes a 'haunted pond [...] where amys woes were drownd' (ll. 483–87), pointing to an event which was grounded in the recent history of Helpston, and which Clare had retold in his early poem 'The Fate of Amy' (*EP*, I, 270–84).[99]

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[96] Clare to Taylor (4 May 1820), *Letters*, p. 62.
[97] E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, p. 3.
[98] Adams, p. 375.
[99] On the origins of 'The Fate of Amy', see Paul Chirico, *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader*, pp. 110–19.

Even the more fantastical tales are related to the scale and daily experience of village life: the strength of Hickathrift is demonstrated in the fact he 'knew no troubles waggoners have known / Of getting stalld & such dissasters drear' (ll. 533–34).[100] The supernatural becomes domesticated, when fairies are identified as creeping 'thro a lock hole' (l. 104) and into the realm of the home. A similar account of thieving fairies appears in *The Shepherd's Calendar*, but in 'The Village Minstrel' a lesson is also supplied: 'How they rewarded industry he knew / & how the restless slut was pinched black & blue' (ll. 107–08).[101] The unexpected violence of the final line points to the tough, punishing character of many village customs.[102] Morality is upheld but with more than a hint of non-polite, sadistic glee.

Storytelling has an aesthetic influence on Lubin's creative development, and through this process Clare points to how folk culture might be revitalized through new, poetic pathways. Clare autobiographically acknowledged this influence in his later poem 'The Progress of Rhyme' (*MP*, III, 492–503), recalling how 'oer the songs my parents sung / My ear in silent musings hung' (ll. 273–74). Superstitious stories also played an important formative role: in one prose account, Clare recalls how as a young man he 'usd to imagine tales and mutter them over' while walking home at night from his job in Maxey, to distract himself from his fear of the ghosts and hobgoblins associated with the spots he had to pass.[103]

In 'The Village Minstrel', stories infiltrate Lubin's dreams when he is a child, and are renewed by his imagination: 'long each tale by fancy newly drest / Brought faireys in his dreams & broke his infant rest' (ll. 125–26). When he walks at night, 'Dread monsters fancy moulded on his sight' (l. 131): his sight is passively altered so

[100] On the popularity of this tale, see Blamires, 'Chapbooks, Fairytales and Children's Books in the Writings of John Clare: Part I', pp. 29–30.
[101] See 'January: A Cottage Evening', *MP*, I, 12–25 (ll. 121–56).
[102] See Thompson's section on 'Rough Music', *Customs in Common*, pp. 467–531.
[103] *By Himself*, p. 72.

that it can act as an agent of the imagination. Only a few lines later, Lubin is said to show the 'swift [...] wild retreat of childhoods fancyd fear' (l. 135). Fancy that can appear and disappear just as quickly is quite different from the kind of fancy of steady, controllable creative powers which is represented in Beattie's *The Minstrel*. Lubin begins to 'chatter oer each dreadful tale' (l. 137), and so his fancy is developed over the imaginative framework of these stories.

When Bloomfield's Giles encounters a ghost at night, his response is to view it as a figure of moral judgement: 'Tis not my crimes thou comest here to reprove / No murders stain my soul, no perjur'd love' ('Winter', ll. 283–84). However, he then experiences disenchantment, discovering that the apparition is nothing more than the moonlight shining on an ash tree.[104] Clare's fullest description of Lubin's supernatural encounter at night contains no such disenchantment; additionally, the effect is more aesthetic than moral:

> & as the clining day his stalking shade
> A jiant monster stretcht in fancys view
> What bustle to his cottage has he made
> Ere sliving night around his journey threw
> Her circling curtains of a grizly hue
> & on the rings the fairy routs displayd
> From gossips wisdom much he gleand & knew
> Who told him haunts for ghosts as well as fays
> & what quere things were seen in grannys younger days
> (ll. 474–82)

This shrouding of darkness cloaks Lubin in the forms of fancy which briefly lift him out of his material conditions. The 'stalking shade' could refer to Lubin's shadow or an independent monster – the ambiguous participle points to the passive/active tension of Lubin's involvement, which continues over the subsequent lines. Lubin is passive as the night 'threw' its curtains around him and 'displayd' fair routs (or, indeed, if the 'fairy

[104] Similarly, Bloomfield's 'The Fakenham Ghost' (1802), in *Bloomfield: Selected Poems*, pp. 72–74, reveals a (perceived) ghost to be an ass's foal.

routs' display themselves – again, the syntax is unclear); yet he has also actively 'gleand' from his knowledge of monsters and fairies.

Lubin's experience has been cultivated by his embeddedness in communal village life; the tales he knows are grounded in space (he is familiar with the 'haunts') and time ('grannys younger days'). For Lubin, to learn 'gossips wisdom', the store of community memory, is to bear it for future generations. But to 'chatter oer' such tales, and cultivate his 'fancy' indicates a creative capacity that renders him exceptional, and seemingly disembedded, in the village. As will now be discussed, it is Lubin's fluid identity that enables the poem's fluid form of social observation.

**The Representation of Lubin's Village**

Clare's poem mentions the false representations of poverty provided by other writers:

> O poverty thy frowns was early dealt
> On him who mourned thee not by fancy led
> To whine & wail oer woes he never felt
> Staining his ryhmes wi tears he never shed
> (ll. 349–52)

The lines bear some resemblance to his attack on Crabbe's 'parsonage box' realism. They implicitly contrast the false 'fancy' of sheltered writers, with the 'fancy' that Lubin exercises and that is grounded in his experience of poverty.

Any realist depiction of rural life, however, is complicated by the expectation that Clare's poetry ought not to offend his audience. As with Goldsmith's 'radical' depictions, any representations of leisure would have been provocative for showing the aberration from productive labour.[105] More pressingly, the boisterous character of rural festivity was potentially offensive. Both Taylor and James Hessey disliked Clare's

[105] Malcolmson, p. 94. These concerns may explain why in *The Shepherd's Calendar*, Taylor cut lines in 'September' reading 'Glad that the harvests end is nigh / & weary labour nearly bye' (ll. 126–27), though one must make allowances for the erratic nature of his editing in this period. On Taylor's editing, see Robinson and Summerfield.

poem on the annual statute fair, 'Helpstone Statute or the Recruiting Party' (*MP*, III, 163–74), written between 1820 and 1823; Hessey complained, 'it is too coarse – you may be faithful in your pictures but you must not be too close in the resemblance of the coarsenesses of the clowns'.[106] 'The Village Minstrel' tests these boundaries. A review of the poem in the *Monthly Magazine* complained that it was inappropriate in both subject matter and use of language, observing that there was 'something more than homeliness, approximating to vulgarity, in many of his themes'.[107]

Clare's narrator argues that village customs must be portrayed in the verse:

> The statute namd each servants day of fun
> The village feast next warms the muses song
> Tis lubins sphere a threshers lowly son
> Tho little usd to mix such routs among
> Such fitting subjects to the theme belong
> As rural landscapes destitute of trees
> Woud doubtlessly be fancied painted wrong
> & lowly rural subjects such as these
> Must have its simple ways & feats diserning eyes to pleas[e]
> (ll. 762–70)

In contrast to Crabbe's pessimistic approach, Clare's portrayal of 'lubins sphere' may involve scenes of 'fun'. The fact that these rural ways may please 'diserning eyes' implies that a value of taste is being weighed here. These subjects are figured as essential and beautifying as trees in a rural landscape.[108] In addition, they are enlivening: the feast 'warms the muses song', just as the experience of storytelling inspires Lubin's own creative development.

Like the antiquarians, Clare uses a shared idea of taste to justify his representations; but this conception of taste cannot always reconcile Lubin to the rougher aspects of 'lowly rural subjects'. What is particularly distinctive about the social observation in 'The Village Minstrel', in relation to the works of the heroic-

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[106] Clare's journal entry (21 September 1824) in *By Himself*, p. 176; Hessey to Clare (13 October 1823), Eg. MS 2246, fol. 246[r].
[107] *Critical Heritage*, p. 152.
[108] In the published version, 'rural landscapes' was altered to 'pictur'd landscapes', which further emphasizes the 'tasteful' quality of such material, *The Village Minstrel*, I, 38.

couplet writers, is that it is Lubin who commonly determines what can or cannot be shown – rather than the narrator's own moral agenda. The narrator is an external, literary voice, who views folk superstition with scepticism but also curiosity; he does not express disapproval as readily as Lubin does.

The interplay between the perspectives of Lubin and the narrator creates the impression of 'The Village Minstrel' moving towards and away from idealization. An example of this interplay comes when Lubin passes a workhouse:

> Yon parish huts where want is shuvd to dye
> He never viewd em but his tear woud start
> He past not by the doors wi out a sigh
> & felt but every woe of workhouse misery
> (ll. 345–48)

Clare's narrator does not venture to look inside the workhouse, as Crabbe's narrator did. This turning away happens according to Lubin's will. It is said that Lubin might

> [...] tell of all that modesty consceals
> Of all his friends & he has felt & seen
> But usless naming what distress reveals
> As every child of want feels all that lubin feels
> (ll. 363–66)

Though Lubin is figured as a potential spokesperson for 'every child of want', he does not speak to articulate any protest, nor to sublimate human suffering into the sort of harmonizing, transcendent perspective that Wordsworth's Pedlar adopts in 'The Ruined Cottage'. Clare is making the poem's act of concealment visible to his readers; this detail of 'dirty reality' remains uncomfortably present, more awkward for not being expanded upon.

The various depictions of rural cultural practices in 'The Village Minstrel' are the points where the tension between Lubin and the narrator is at its strongest, owing to the former's ambivalent positioning in the village. Lubin's uncertain participation comes into conflict with the narrator's own interest in village customs, and this is demonstrated early in the poem when Lubin is a child:

> The ‘I spye’ haloo & the marble ring
> & many a game that infancy employs
> The spinning top wird from the twitching string
> The boastfull jump of strong exulting boys
> Their sports their pastimes all their pleasing toys
> We leave unsung – tho much such rural play
> Woud suit the theme – yet theyre no lubins joys
> Truth breaths the song in lubins steps to stray
> Thro woods & fields & plains his solitary way
> (ll. 46–54)

While Lubin separates himself from the play, Clare’s narrator indulges in some description, cataloguing names and conveying kinetic excitement in ‘twitching string’, ‘spinning’, ‘wird’ and ‘exulting’. The sentence works up momentum in the rolling anaphora of ‘their sports their pastimes all their pleasing toys’, only to be stopped with a classical ending: ‘We leave unsung’ – a mock-epic declaration of that which is *not* the theme. The narrator’s aside, ‘tho much such rural play / Woud suit the theme’, retrospectively justifies the representation that Lubin has denied; again, concealment is made visible. In articulating Lubin’s withdrawal, the narrator contrasts him as one who, unlike other boys, seeks ‘truth’ in his ‘solitary way’. Clare’s poem attempts to reconcile the ‘truth’ of a realist account, which the narrator seeks to provide, with the more lofty ‘truth’ which Lubin desires. This inclusive registration of village life seeks to find details which Lubin and the narrator both find tasteful, and therefore worthy of representation.

Lubin expresses ambivalence towards rural games: ‘He lovd “old sports” by them revivd to see / But never card to join in their rude revellry’ (ll. 189–90). However, he still socializes at the harvest-home, laughing over ‘each rude rude act’ (l. 582) and joining ‘his mirth & fears wi the low vulgar crew’ (l. 599). Lubin’s participation here gives the narrator license to detail the sort of activities – such as cruel jokes – that do not appear in the representations by the heroic-couplet writers. At the end of the scene, any sense of vulgarity is nullified by the shift to an idealized image of harmony at the

feast, that recalls Bloomfield's nostalgia: each labourer toasts 'the masters health', wishing him 'best of crops to 'crease his wealth' (ll. 600–02).

The poem's subsequent depiction of an annual 'merry rout' is where the movement towards and away from idealization becomes more fraught. In this section, Lubin is a distanced non-participant who only hears 'the echo rabbld fight' (l. 744), and his absence appears to exacerbate the narrator's confusion over what details to include. A sympathetic portrayal of wounded soldiers returning from the Napoleonic Wars is followed by the intrusion of other, rowdy veterans.[109] These men are more vulgar, fuller-bodied figures than the ghostly, quasi-mythical discharged soldier of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*.[110] They get drunk, and one seduces a maid to produce a chain of misery across the community: 'Who leaves poor slighted hodge behind in pain / & many a chiding dame to sorrow & complain' (ll. 742–43). Taylor found Clare's representation of courtship between a 'maid & swain' in this section particularly troublesome, writing 'it wants Delicacy' and proposing to 'star' the whole stanza, which included the lines: 'he talkd so well / She gave the contest up at last to what no words dare tell' (ll. 760–61).[111] Clare duly altered this second line to: '& listnd to his tales till darkness round em fell'.[112] The stanzas immediately following move away from this eroticism to describe romance at the village feast in conventional terms of the pastoral, where the milk maids are 'drest like any ladies gay' (l. 774) and rural love is 'as spotless as the doves' (l. 789).

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[109] Clare writes sympathetically about the returning soldier elsewhere, in 'The Disabled Soldier' (*EP*, I, 125–27) and 'Poor Soldier' (*EP*, II, 396). See also Bloomfield's 'The Soldier's Home', in *Selected Poems*, pp. 160–62.

[110] 'Book IV', ll. 387–469, in William Wordsworth, *The Fourteen-Book Prelude*, ed. by W. J. B. Owen (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 79–92.

[111] Taylor to Clare (10 February 1821), *Letters*, p. 149; Taylor to Clare (17 February 1821), Eg. MS 2250, fols. 333$^{r}$–34$^{r}$. See also *Letters*, p. 157n; Storey mistakes Clare's original version as Taylor's proposed version. On these edits, see Dawson, 'John Clare's Village Job', pp. 266–67.

[112] Clare to Taylor (17 February 1821), *Letters*, p. 157.

However this idealization once again collapses, with the ensuing description of rural games:

> & monstrous fun it makes to hunt the pig
> As soapt & larderd thro the rout he flies
> Thus turnd a drift he plays em many a rig
> A pig for catching o'ts a wondrous prize
> & every lout to do his utmost tries
> (ll. 852–56)

As in 'The Badger', the narrator's excitement coexists with sparse condemnatory gestures: 'lout' is countered by 'wondrous prize', and 'monstrous fun' provides a composite assessment. These games are familiar to Lubin ('he coud tell each whole performance thro', l. 846), but he keeps himself absent, and the narrator highlights his disapproval: 'badger baiting here & fighting cocks / But sports too barbarous these for lubins strains' (ll. 861–62). However, this declaration of self-censorship is immediately overturned, as Clare's narrator is compelled to describe a wrestling match where 'the blood does flow' (l. 883), and a scene of drunken tumult in an ale house.[113]

When Lubin is finally reintroduced at some distance away and acquitted of any participation in these activities, he bears the posture of the solitary genius engrossed in nature, 'Looking around & humming oer a strain' (l. 901). This recalls Edwin's separation from a village dance in *The Minstrel*:

> From the rude gambol far remote reclined,
> Soothed with the soft notes warbling in the wind.
> Ah, then all jollity seemed noise and folly.
> (I, lv)

The difference from *The Minstrel* is that Clare's poem has depicted these entertainments within its inclusive vision. The tension between narrator and Lubin in the account of rough games problematizes the idea of taste that governs the poem's social observation – here, what Lubin has found 'barbarous' has nonetheless been of interest to the

[113] Clare records wrestling at the Helpston feast in his journal (3 July 1825), *By Himself*, p. 236. On his depiction of these activities see Eric Robinson, 'John Clare: Games, Pastimes, Sports and Customs'.

narrator. The uncertainty as to what is suitable for representation is manifest in the poem's sporadic shifts towards and away from idealization. As this chapter will now address, it is in the final part of 'The Village Minstrel', after enclosure, that the idea of taste becomes most stable as a concept – unifying poet, Lubin and narrator.

**After Enclosure: The Attention to Social Groups**

The enclosing of Lubin's landscape happens very suddenly, and this provides the principal subject matter for the remainder of the poem. Enclosure prompts the poem's focus upon some of the more distinctive social groups in the village, and its attention to the widespread sense of displacement. Lubin identifies with these feelings of loss, which provide a parallel to his own experience of cultural disembedding. Paradoxically, from shared feelings of alienation, a new sense of community solidarity emerges.[114]

After enclosure, in Goldsmith's vision, the community disappears; in contrast, Clare's poem shows how the community remains, wounded by these alterations. J. M. Neeson argues that enclosure created tensions between the commoners-turned-labourers and their social superiors.[115] Such tensions are suggested by Clare in 'The Village Minstrel': 'every village owns its tyrants now / & parish slaves must live as parish kings alow' (ll. 1100–01).[116] When Lubin wanders over the 'naked leas' (l. 1228): 'The storms beats chilly on his naked breast / No shelter grows to shield him now no home invites to rest' (ll. 1235–36). He feels the physical changes that the land has suffered;

[114] The seminal work on Clare and enclosure remains Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*. For more recent work on Clare and enclosure, see Andrew Smith, 'Ruins, Radicals and Reactionaries: John Clare's Enclosure Elegies', *JCSJ*, 29 (2010), 37–50; John Goodridge, 'Pastoral and Popular Modes in Clare's Enclosure Elegies', in *The Independent Spirit*, ed. by Goodridge, pp. 139–55; Judith Rowbotham, 'An Exercise in Nostalgia?: Clare and Enclosure', in *The Independent Spirit*, pp. 164–77; Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, pp. 105–33.

[115] See Neeson, *Commoners*.

[116] The word reappears in lines that were cut from 'October' (*MP*, I, 137–43) in *The Shepherd's Calendar* describing gypsies: 'On commons were no farmers claims appear / Nor tyrant justice rides to interfere' (ll. 45–46).

both are now 'naked'. 'Home' may be read metaphorically as referring to the absent trees, but there is an implication of social atomization that is more widespread than inter-class tensions. Clare suggests this disintegration of labouring-class community ties in his letter to the antiquarian William Hone: 'There used to be a common custom [...] inclosure came & destroyed it with hundreds of others – leaving in its place nothing but a love for doing neighbours a mischief & public house oratory that dwells upon mob law as absolute justice'.[117]

However, out of this pessimism, 'The Village Minstrel' suggests that the collective feelings of displacement produced by enclosure are potentially unifying. Enclosure prompts Lubin's movement across the village and its environs, and the poem accordingly examines the most peripheral and vulnerable social groups: shepherds and gypsies. Like Wordsworth's Pedlar, albeit on a smaller scale, there is a sense that Lubin's wandering – far from merely keeping him solitary – leads him to a diverse range of encounters. In order to converse with shepherds and gypsies, he moves across the social boundaries which a poet like Crabbe seeks to maintain. Each group possesses a distinctive set of manners and prejudices, which appear to constitute what might be approaching an individuated cultural identity. Significantly, then, any understanding of solidarity among the poor is accompanied by an awareness of differences. Lubin's mobility points to Clare's own difficulties as someone who, being involved with the outer, polite world, can no longer be sure of his own position within the village, and is beginning to look at the constitution of village society in a way that no labouring-class poet, such as Duck, had previously attempted.

The fact that both shepherds and gypsies are natural 'wanderers' frames Lubin's encounters with them as part of a shared desire to roam freely, which has its roots in nostalgia for the pre-enclosure past. Clare's shepherds demonstrate their difference from

[117] *Cottage Tales*, p. 141.

the villagers in their appreciation of Lubin, predicting 'some future day a wondrous man hed make' (l. 1137). They themselves are hazy figures, quasi-mythical but also historicized. Shepherds were prone to idealization as figures of the pastoral genre, and frequently placed within an ahistorical 'Golden Age'.[118] Alternatively, to a labourer like Clare, the shepherd represented an actual recent – and disappearing – way of life. The 'stadial' theory of history that began to circulate in the late eighteenth century, particularly among French and Scottish enlightenment philosophers, placed the agricultural community as a subsequent historical phase to the pastoral community.[119] The juxtaposition of both communities, at the very point when enclosure is first mentioned in 'The Village Minstrel', provides Lubin with a sharp awareness of historical transition. As the bearers of local memory, the shepherds introduce in this poem the sense of displacement felt across the rural community.

The shepherds tell not only old folk tales, such as the 'feats of robin hood' (l. 935), but also historical accounts of 'cromwells rage' (l. 931): one 'netherd' (a cow-keeper) narrates the tale of 'Woodcroft Castle', a story of a Royalist defeat in the Civil War in Northamptonshire that prefigures the violence of enclosure (an event later described as 'civil wars on natures peace', l. 1050).[120] Clare writes of Lubin:

> & oft wi shepherds he woud sit to sigh
> On past delights of many a by gone day
> & look on scenes now naked to the eye
> (ll. 1120–22)

At this point, Lubin notices that 'shepherds huts' (l. 1117) have disappeared, and by the end of the poem, the shepherds are absent, ghostly figures, sleeping 'neath the churchyard grass' (l. 1237).[121] The shifting appearance and disappearance of the

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[118] *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*, ed. by Barrell and Bull, p. 6.
[119] See Meek.
[120] On this historical event, see Charles Carlton, *Going to the Wars: The Experience of the British Civil Wars 1638–1651* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 320–21. Clare had worked as a boy at Woodcroft Castle, *By Himself*, pp. 67, 69.
[121] Journal entry (25 October 1824) in *NHPW*, p. 195.

shepherds offer the contrasting impressions of time as cyclical and reassuring, and time as linear and haunted by loss and change – a theme which Clare later examines in *The Shepherd's Calendar*.[122]

Like shepherds, the gypsies offer some reminder of a way of life that is disappearing. Anne Janowitz notes that, in the Romantic period, the Gypsy is 'a figure who, living off the commons and waste in an age of enclosure, returns as a quasi-fantastical double to the English cottager'.[123] At the same time, identification co-exists with an awareness of difference, and 'The Village Minstrel' represents the suspicion that Lubin's fellow villagers feel towards gypsies. Clare, unlike other poets of his age, did consort with gypsies, and was himself subjected to scorn from his own community for doing so.[124]

'The Village Minstrel' demonstrates both a desire to record the practices of gypsies, and an ambivalence about their appropriate representation. The gypsies carry their own mystical potential for idealization, as is evident in Clare's joyful exclamation in his early poem 'The Gipsies Evening Blaze' (*EP*, I, 33), 'Grant me this life' (l. 14) – adopting what James McKusick calls 'the sentimental discourse of the "all attentive mind"'.[125] Initially in 'The Village Minstrel', gypsies are mentioned in welcoming terms, when they hold a dance which villagers are 'well pleasd' to join (l. 776). Lubin's

[122] See Tim Chilcott's introduction to his 2006 edition of *The Shepherd's Calendar*.
[123] Anne F. Janowitz, '"Wild Outcasts of Society": The Transit of the Gypsies in Romantic Period Poetry', in *The Country and the City Revisited: England and the Politics of Culture, 1550–1850*, ed. by Gerald MacLean, Donna Landry and Joseph P. Ward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 213–30 (p. 214).
[124] Clare recalls villagers who accused him of criminality for consorting with gypsies, *Autobiographical Writings*, p. 65. For a comprehensive account of Clare's experiences with gypsies, see Claire Lamont, 'John Clare and the Gypsies', *JCSJ*, 13 (1994), 19–31. For other notable studies see Anne Janowitz, 'Clare Among the Gypsies', *Wordsworth Circle*, 29 (1998), 167–71; Ronald Blythe, 'John Clare and the Gypsies', *JCSJ*, 25 (2006), 78–85; Sarah Houghton-Walker, 'Clare's Gypsies and Literary Influence', *JCSJ*, 28 (2009), 71–93.
[125] James McKusick, 'Beyond the Visionary Company: John Clare's Resistance to Romanticism', in *John Clare in Context*, ed. by Summerfield, Haughton and Phillips, pp. 221–37 (p. 228).

sight of them later in the poem, however, illustrates their isolated state, in lines that trip between idealization and realism:

> & you ye poor ragd out casts of the land
> That hug your shifting camps from green to green
> He lovd to see your humble dwelling stand
> & thought your groups did beautify the scene
> Tho blamd for many a petty theft yeve been
> Poor wandering souls to fates hard want decreed
> Doubtless too oft such acts your ways bemean
> & oft in wrong your foes 'gen you proceed
> & brand a gipseys camp when others do the deed
> (ll. 1138–46)

After the narrator regards the gypsies as 'poor' and 'ragd', Lubin's picturesque view that they 'beautify the scene' potentially evades these concerns over their plight. But the narrator then shifts the focus to an informed social analysis, as he considers the blame that is often unfairly levelled at gypsies. This change in perspectives prefigures Clare's 'The Gipsy Camp' (*LP*, I, 29), written between 1840 and 1841, which views the gypsies as 'a picture to the place' before the contrasting realism of the poem's final line: 'A quiet, pilfering, unprotected race' (ll. 13–14).

Clare's poem does not condemn the gypsies for being idle, as Crabbe's and Wordsworth's poems do.[126] But there is a sense that, while it is usually Lubin's distaste that checks the poem's social representation, here his enthusiastic socializing – he loves to 'list their gibberish talk / & view the oddity such ways display' (ll. 1147–48) – is at odds with the narrator's own polite self-distancing, manifest in the words 'gibberish' and 'oddity'.[127] The most condemnatory perspective on the gypsies comes from other villagers, who scorn their fortune-telling:

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[126] 'The Lover's Journey' (1812), ll. 141–95, in *Crabbe*, II, 132–42; 'Gipsies' (1807), in Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes*, pp. 211–12.
[127] On the sense of closeness and distance that characterizes Clare's depictions of gypsies, see Houghton-Walker, 'Clare's Gypsies and Literary Influence', p. 72; Lamont, pp. 25–26.

> Crossing their hands wi coin or magic stick
> How quakt the young to hear what things they knew
> While old experiencd dames knew all the trick
> Who said that all their skill was borrowd from old nick
> (ll. 1170–73)

The sceptical conclusion is spoken by the 'dames', the very proponents of superstitious practices elsewhere in the poem: the passing of 'coin' recalls the dames leaving out 'gold or silver' (l. 115) dropped in water to charm fairies. Their prejudice inflects the final stanza on gypsies in the poem, by which time Lubin is absent. The narrator now regards the gypsies not as 'poor ragd out casts', but 'cunning' and 'most terryfying' to the 'superstitious' (ll. 1174–80).

This ambivalent portrayal indicates what makes gypsies different from the villagers, but also a strong similarity: the shared importance of superstitious beliefs, providing an outlet for hopes and an assurance of good fortune, for which both groups are chastised by their social superiors.[128] There is also, fundamentally, an implication that in the post-enclosure landscape, the sense of being an 'out cast' mirrors the displacement felt by others in the rural community.

'The Village Minstrel' ultimately lists various figures who mourn the changes to the landscape: the woodman and ploughman (ll. 1075–77); the 'poor hedger' (l. 1187) and the 'old shepherd' (l. 1192); the 'toil worn thresher' who yearns for his childhood home (l. 1201). In this final section of the poem, Clare, Lubin and the narrator appear to achieve a unified voice, when the latter states (in lines that Radstock called 'radical slang'): 'Inclosure thourt a curse upon the land / & tastless was the wretch who thy existance pland' (ll. 1091–92).[129] Enclosure is an affront to a collective sense of taste which, it is implied, is shared by all the villagers. Taylor's introduction to *The Village Minstrel* had attempted to explain away Clare's complaint at the destruction of his

[128] Another poem in *The Village Minstrel*, 'The Cross Roads' (*EP*, II, 619–29), shows girls having their fortunes told by gypsies.
[129] Taylor to Clare (6 January 1821), Eg. MS 2245, fol. 271[r].

favourite elm trees on purely aesthetic grounds, as demonstrative of his 'passionate regard [...] for things which were the landmarks of his life'.[130] But taste, as it used in the poem, incorporates more than aesthetic concerns. As Goodridge states, for Clare, '"taste", the realm of the aesthetic, and perhaps (as in sensibility poetry) the moral, is integral to the politics of landscape'.[131] The word is reused in his later attacks: 'The Mores' (*MP*, II, 347–50), written in the early to mid-1820s, refers to enclosure as carried out by 'rude philistines' (l. 65) who show 'vulgar taste' (l. 72); 'The Lament of Swordy Well' (*MP*, V, 105–14), in the 1830s, blames 'tasteless tykes' (l. 59).

Taste, having been a problematic quality in the account of rough rural sports in 'The Village Minstrel', here becomes a more solid, unifying notion. Referring to both the rural community in general and the particular community of Helpston, Johanne Clare claims that Clare 'could find no set of common interests and grievances and aspirations that would allow him to speak for all members of these communities'.[132] But enclosure does provide a subject that enables the solitary poet to become spokesperson. Barrell has linked the impact of enclosure to an emergent class-consciousness:

> [the poor's] resentment of the erosion of their customary rights, of their own needs – which appears to them often as the consequence of that erosion – for charity even when they were in full employment, and of postures of cheerfulness, submission and gratitude they had to take up to receive it, was an important factor in creating a consciousness of solidarity among those who did, or did not quite, qualify for relief, and of difference from those who provided it, which must be understood as class-consciousness: us the poor, them the rich[133]

Williams argues that in many villages, the idea of community was only revived in the nineteenth century, when political and economic rights were fought for – this is an 'active community', different from the mutuality of the oppressed.[134]

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[130] Clare, *The Village Minstrel*, I, p. xx. On Taylor's presentation of Clare in this volume, see Vardy, 'Viewing and Reviewing Clare'.
[131] Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, p. 108.
[132] Johanne Clare, p. 18.
[133] Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, p. 3.
[134] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, pp. 104–07.

Any identification of a political message in 'The Village Minstrel', however, must acknowledge what the poem conceals: the middle and upper classes. Despite the slippery involvement of the literary world, little clue is given as to how Lubin interacts with his social superiors. The poem's most optimistic, nostalgic scenes do not show the bridging between classes that is recalled in 'June' of *The Shepherd's Calendar* (*MP*, I, 75–83), 'When masters made them merry wi their men' (l. 158). The prose account of rural games included in the introduction to *The Village Minstrel* mentions the labourer's joke of making a crane-like puppet which, standing upon no ceremony, 'takes the liberty to break the master's pipe, and spill his beer'; but there is no such participation from any master in the poem itself.[135] In 'The Village Minstrel', the oppressors are not identified as a class, but as the 'tastless'. The bearers of taste, then, may potentially include not only the rural poor, but also Clare's polite narrator and, by extension, his polite readers. Recalling the heroic-couplet writers, this is the point where 'The Village Minstrel' is finally overwhelmed by a moral agenda.

Lubin's sense of being culturally disembedded by his exposure to polite literature finds its parallel in the rural community's sense of displacement. In both cases, the loss is productive: Lubin begins to write, and enclosure gives him a subject; the community experiences a new form of solidarity. The paradox in this parallel – that Lubin's alienation from a community may bring him closer to it – objectifies Clare's own uncertain sense of identity within the village.

However, this parallel also highlights the difference between Clare's representations of Lubin's disembedding and of the community's displacement. One cannot precisely point to the moment of Lubin's cultural disembedding: it uncertainly proceeds from his childhood sensitivity, to his interest in 'poesy', and to his continuing refinement at the end of the poem ('Nor has his taste wi manhood ere declind', l. 1273).

[135] Clare, *The Village Minstrel*, I, p. xxii.

Nor, as has been discussed, does Lubin ever reach an absolute point of alienation: his disembeddedness is continually qualified by an equal sense of embeddedness. Clare's poem shows that, far from being merely 'a village full of strife & noise', the rural community is already infiltrated by outside influences when Lubin is born.

In contrast, 'The Village Minstrel' figures enclosure as a very sudden intrusion, transforming the landscape. Clare would have experienced it as a more gradual process: the Act of Parliament for the Enclosure of Helpston was passed in 1809, and new roads and allotments were staked out before the actual enclosing began around 1813; this process was more or less completed by 1816, though the final Award was published in 1820.[136] Indeed, the historian Paul Langford has emphasized that enclosure was one stage in a long process of improvement.[137]

Enclosure undoubtedly militated against popular recreations, not least because newly privatized land could no longer be used for sports and pastimes.[138] Clare's poem links enclosure to the decline of certain customs: 'There once was hours the ploughmens tale can tell' (l. 1077) indicates a decline in storytelling with the advent of wage labour; Lubin and shepherds recall 'the rural feats of may' (l. 1126) that have disappeared. Such reminiscence – together with Lubin's decision to write – preserves customs in a different way from the repetitive participation that traditionally sustains communal memory.

Houghton argues that 'The Village Minstrel' shows a 'double decline', referring to a decline of festive rituals and a decline of intimacy resulting from Clare's own, increasing personal distance.[139] Such a decline is certainly emphasized in *The Shepherd's Calendar* – set in a time which is 'a shadow of old farmers days', and when

[136] Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, p. 106; Bate, *John Clare*, pp. 46–47.
[137] Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727–1783* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
[138] Malcolmson, pp. 108–09.
[139] Houghton, 'John Clare and Festivity', p. 40.

the narrator complains that his fears of superstition are fled, leaving only a 'real world & doubting mind.[140] In 'The Village Minstrel', however, Lubin shows not so much a decline of intimacy as a persistent ambivalence. In addition, the decline of festive rituals is qualified with an accompanying sense of the community's survival.

Even after enclosure, there is an implication that the 'village feast or noisey fair' still goes on (l. 1255). Keegan has identified the bond that forms between Lubin and his community primarily in this final part.[141] If anything, Lubin becomes more openly sociable, expressing 'warmer fondness for those scenes of mirth / Those plains & that dear cot which gave him birth' (ll. 1267–68). Nostalgia is corrected to a sense of community in the present day, as Lubin returns to the village to mix 'wi his friends' (l. 1270). It is useful to note that Clare's journal indicates the occurrence of rural customs well into the 1820s.[142] E. P. Thompson argues that customary culture persisted during the eighteenth century, in the face of pressures from above; it may be that Clare witnessed a rebellious continuity of customs in his adulthood.[143]

**Conclusion**

Clare, even more so than Bloomfield or Crabbe, handles the realms of past and present uncertainly: there are pains and pleasures in both (note that, even in Lubin's happy younger years, he was still a 'child of want'). 'The Village Minstrel' is interested not merely in change, but in the rural individual's perspective on change – this implicitly problematizes any critical attempt to read Clare's work too readily as pure sociological evidence.

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[140] 'June', l. 154; 'January: A Cottage Evening', l. 332.
[141] Keegan, 'Broadsides, Ballads and Books', p. 17.
[142] *By Himself*, pp. 171–243.
[143] See E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*.

Compared to either the heroic-couplet writers, or the poets of rural subjectivity, 'The Village Minstrel' is a more fluid, uncertain work. It scuppers any expectations that Lubin be either neatly embedded or disembedded. Instead, it dwells in uncertainties: Lubin's attitude towards rural culture; the inclusive or exclusive meaning of taste; the continuity or decline of the community. The poem's apparent inconclusiveness has undoubtedly provoked several critics to dismiss the work as immature, confused, or unhelpfully problematic. My argument has offered a more positive re-evaluation of these ambiguities. I have not attempted to ignore them – for example, by ignoring Lubin's sociability – but instead, I have presented them as very deliberate, and productive.

Lubin's ambivalence, and the accompanying questions of taste, frame Clare's own difficulty in configuring his sense of identity. The uncertainty as to how a community changes between past and present indicates the contrasting certainty that enclosure's physical effects have been provocative and devastating. This perspective on enclosure establishes it as a rallying point for solidarity. Through its complex handling of various poetic influences, 'The Village Minstrel' offers a highly distinctive poetic representation of rural life. More than many critics have recognized, this poem serves an important role both in our understanding of the development of rural poetry in this period, and in our appreciation of Clare's artistic skill.

# Chapter Three

## Female Perspectives: Clare's Courtship Tales

This chapter considers Clare's narrative poems about courtship, written during the 1820s. Focusing on a particular genre, I read these tales as consciously literary productions, engaging with issues that other tale-writers were exploring and showing a strong awareness of what might interest a predominantly middle-class, female audience of that time (though, as Clare reveals in one of the tales, labouring-class females were also potential readers of poetry).[1] For young, middle-class women, the constricting expectations of behaviour in matters of courtship provided by conduct literature and parental supervision were negotiated alongside increased freedom in choosing a marriage partner. I show that in his tales of rural courtship, Clare's portrayal of the duality of freedom and constraint, alongside his developing concern with matters of social mobility, responded to the interests of the female readers whom his publishers assiduously targeted. In short, the experience of the labouring-class female, represented with different degrees of realist detail, provides a parallel for these readers' concerns. Secondly, I argue that Clare also establishes a parallel between his readers' concerns and his own experience as a poet, since he too must respond to the demand for sensitivity. As a labouring-class poet, he is well placed to consider the anxieties that accompany 'refinement', and how this process may be related to a feeling of alienation.

The tales discussed in this chapter contain both moral elements (how the female is expected to act) and regional elements (the detail of rural courtship) that might be of curiosity to a polite audience. Frequently there is tension between these elements, as

[1] I use 'tales' and 'narratives' interchangeably. 'Tale' is in itself a problematic term, since both prose and verse works advertised themselves as 'tales' in the period. In Clare's case, my concern is only with verse tales, and therefore my comparative examples are predominantly verse as well.

Clare destabilizes his moral lessons with realist detail. In line with the broad objective of this thesis – to consider Clare as a social observer – I am interested in how these courtship narratives engage with the problems of representing sexual relations in the labouring-class community. Instructive literature demanded female reticence about sex, and this placed resulting pressure on Clare's representations.[2] Clare's publisher John Taylor had previously been concerned that the passionate episodes depicted by Keats in *Endymion* in 1818, and in *The Eve of St Agnes* in 1819, might offend female readers.[3] The poet's dismissal of these readers would be cutting at least half of his potential audience.[4]

For middle-class female readers, respectability and social advancement depended upon showing refinement – the combination of good manners, propriety and sensibility that would distinguish them from the vulgar. Conduct literature provided the most explicit models for attaining these characteristics. Clare's decision to address these issues may have been prompted by his awareness of John Taylor and James Hessey's greatest commercial success, the sisters Jane and Ann Taylor, who engaged with these subjects in their moral tales and conduct books.[5] Young women were encouraged by conduct books and other cultural forms to 'improve' their manners, but at the same time were warned off unrealistic expectations of social advancement. The interest in 'improving' behaviour also affected males in the period: Vivien Jones links the

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[2] Kirstin Olsen, *Daily Life in 18th-Century England* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), pp. 47–48.

[3] Chilcott, *A Publisher and His Circle*, p. 28; John Taylor to Richard Woodhouse (25 September 1819), in *The Keats Circle: Letters and Papers 1816–78*, ed. by Hyder E. Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 96–97. On the editing of Keats's work, see Zachary Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 262–315.

[4] Chilcott, *A Publisher and His Circle*, p. 41.

[5] Ann Taylor, *Maternal Solicitude for a Daughter's Best Interests* (1813) was probably Taylor and Hessey's most profitable publication. Ann Taylor's conduct book, *Practical Hints to Young Females, on the Duties of a Wife, a Mother, and a Mistress of a Family*, (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1816), which makes explicit that it is intended for 'Females in the middle ranks of society' (p. iii), sold over four thousand copies within eight months of publication. Tim Chilcott estimates that the conduct books of Ann Taylor and her sister Jane made over £10,000 for Taylor and Hessey, between 1814 and 1831, see *A Publisher and His Circle*, pp. 41, 67–68.

popularity of conduct literature, with its emphasis on morality and feeling, to the emergence of 'sensitive masculinity', noting that the 'eighteenth-century new man [...] had to win his mistress through a matching display of refined sensibility'.[6]

Jon Klancher argues that Romantic-period writers 'shaped audiences who developed awareness of social class as they acquired self-consciousness as readers'.[7] Clare's negotiation of the tale genre demonstrates how he sought middle-class female readers for his work, and encouraged in these readers a developed awareness of a social class beyond their own, a female solidarity even. In addition, Clare's own poetic development has its empathetic equivalent in the schooling of his readers in literature about conduct and respectability: in both cases, individuals are expected to acquire an appropriate, standardized form of sensitivity. More than most writers, Clare understood the sense of alienation that might accompany refinement, and the discontinuity between self-improvement and social advancement.

My argument is grounded in the idea that, by consciously writing in the literary genre of the courtship tale, Clare was not stifling his creativity but energizing it. In the process, he offers a unique perspective on rural courtship, caught between the local and the literary worlds. When Anthony Giddens conceptualizes the transition from 'traditional' cultures to a condition of modernity, he attends to the particular kind of reflexivity that characterizes the latter. While 'in oral cultures, tradition is not known as such', in a condition of modernity 'writing expands the level of time-space distanciation', and 'social life is constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices'.[8] This idea can be related to Clare's writing of tales: by participating in a standardized 'literary' culture, he was becoming aware of new ways of looking at local social practices – such as considering how they

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[6] *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity*, ed. by Vivien Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 11.
[7] Klancher, p. 4.
[8] Giddens, pp. 37–38.

might have relevance for a middle-class audience. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* discusses how the novel is a device for the presentation of simultaneity among its readers in 'homogeneous, empty time', conjuring up recognisable social spaces that are comparable to each reader's own, and binding readers together.[9] Clare's tales aim for a similar effect; his readers are encouraged to identify with the experiences depicted, and are pulled into an 'imagined community'.

My chapter begins by placing my work within the critical effort on Clare's tales. I then consider the context for the dual 'regional' and 'instructive' appeal of his tales, by outlining both the historical evidence of rural sexuality in this period and the literary context of the tale as a popular genre. This discussion enables me to show the pressures that were placed on Clare to make his tales both palatable and appealing to a middle-class audience. Turning to the poems, I consider two of his earlier courtship narratives, 'Jockey & Jinney' and 'The Memory of Love', which both show a tension between idealization and realism. These poems demonstrate how sexuality and courtship functioned, and were policed, in the labouring-class community; in the process, they offer only teasing glimpses into female subjectivity.

In the second part of the chapter, I attend to Clare's developing concern with social mobility during the 1820s. I consider various literary responses to social advancement, particularly in the tales of Bloomfield and Crabbe, and address Clare's intervention into this literary territory with two poems, 'Valentine Eve' and 'Opening of the Pasture'. These tales present the courtship of labouring-class females by men of higher social rank, and so engage – in very different ways – with issues of social mobility. The latter tale, in particular, provides a complex understanding of refinement, and perhaps shows Clare's fullest depiction of labouring-class female subjectivity.

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[9] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. edn (London: Verso, 1991), p. 25.

**Critical Context: Tale-Telling in Clare's Work**

The role of women in Clare's poems has often been neglected, if not avoided. Lynne Pearce has expressed regret for her earlier academic work on Clare, claiming that his poem *Child Harold* effectively excludes the female reader.[10] In response, in 1994 Helen Boden called for increased critical engagement with Clare's presentation of females.[11]

Clare's narrative poems have also received relatively little attention from scholars. Goodridge writes, in 2013, 'apart from one usefully introduced selection of Clare's *Cottage Tales*, published in 1993 and now out of print, the narrative aspect of his art has largely been neglected and needs fresh attention if we are to understand its techniques and purposes'.[12] This neglect was previously identified by Eric Robinson, who claimed in his introduction to *Poems of the Middle Period* (1996) that 'these poems deserve a fuller consideration today, as indeed do many other nineteenth-century verse-tales'.[13] The general studies that have appeared on Romantic narrative poetry have tended to ignore Clare's contribution. Stuart Curran's *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, which has chapters on 'The Romance' and 'The Epic', mentions him only in a footnote on Romantic georgic poetry (Bloomfield also receives his sole mention here).[14] Both Hermann Fischer's influential *Romantic Verse Narrative* (first published

[10] Lynne Pearce, 'John Clare's *Child Harold*: The Road Not Taken', in *Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice*, ed. by Susan Sellers (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), pp. 143–56.
[11] Helen Boden, 'Review Essay: Clare, Gender and Art', in *The Independent Spirit*, ed. by Goodridge, pp. 198–208. Simon Kövesi discusses Clare's representations of women in his later, asylum poetry, in 'Sexuality, Agency and Intertextuality in the Later Poetry of John Clare' (unpublished doctoral thesis, The Nottingham Trent University, 1999), p. 102–19.
[12] Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, p. 162.
[13] *MP*, I, p. xix.
[14] Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 237n.

in 1964) and Tim Killick's *British Short Fiction in the Early Nineteenth Century: The Rise of the Tale* contain no mention of Clare.[15]

Some attempts have been made to illuminate the 'narrative' strand of Clare's work. George Deacon's *John Clare and the Folk Tradition* sets out a record of the poet's use of folk ballads and songs and, as Goodridge mentions, the collection *Cottage Tales* provides an invaluable contextual grouping of his narrative poems. Regarding critical assessments of his tales, several scholars have focused on Clare's treatment of the supernatural. Richard Swartz details Clare's struggle to overcome the influence that supernatural tales exercised over his imagination. In *John Clare's Religion*, Sarah Houghton-Walker comprehensively covers the presence of alternative beliefs in the village, and his involvement in them. She notes that folklore presents 'a web of interpretive tools over events to find meaning', and that Clare shows the natural coexistence of popular rituals and organized religion, while retaining his awareness that the superstitious elements in his poetry might be deemed offensive.[16]

In *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader*, Paul Chirico focuses on some of Clare's supernatural and tragic tales. He examines the framework used by Clare in his storytelling scenes, such as how the poet diverts attention onto the audience in 'January: A Cottage Evening', and traces the disenchantment regarding superstitious beliefs in *The Shepherd's Calendar*, which leads to 'a real world and a doubting mind'. Chirico also traces the various sources of the tragic tale 'The Fate of Amy'.[17]

My interest is in courtship narratives rather than Clare's supernatural tales or indeed his tales of night-time criminality.[18] Goodridge has provided the most important

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[15] Hermann Fischer, *Romantic Verse Narrative: The History of a Genre*, trans. by Sue Bollans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Tim Killick, *British Short Fiction in the Early-Nineteenth Century: The Rise of the Tale* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).
[16] Swartz; Houghton-Walker, *John Clare's Religion*, p. 59.
[17] Chirico, *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader*, pp. 107–37.
[18] For examples of the latter, see 'The Lodge House' (*EP*, II, 233–47) and 'The Two Soldiers' (*MP*, I, 291–301).

and extensive critical work in this area.[19] In *John Clare and Community*, he focuses on the framework of Clare's tales: how the poet commonly sets up a charismatic female narrator and audience in order to demonstrate 'what may have been the final flowering of a vibrant, long-established tradition of rural storytelling, one threatened by enclosure and all the other great changes of the nineteenth century'. He elucidates 'Clare's sense that the framing storyteller and her craft, and the way he portrays them, [are] just as important as the tale itself'. Much of Goodridge's interest falls on the storytellers who weave their tales with their domestic labour, rather than the young who, in poems like 'The Cross Roads', 'will cast aside such knowledge'.[20]

Goodridge, in examining Clare's narrative works, selects a particular strand: 'tales of sexual betrayal, told by older female narrators'.[21] Several of Clare's earliest tales – including 'The Fate of Amy' (*EP*, I, 270–84), written before 1808, and 'Crazy Nell' (*EP*, I, 465–69) and 'Dolly's Mistake' (*EP*, I, 532–35), written in 1819 – present tragic narratives of women betrayed in love, often supplied with a moral lesson. This theme commonly appeared in the ballads that were popular among the labouring classes.[22] Clare was conscious, too, of the appeal of 'shockers' to his polite readership; he reckoned that 'Crazy Nell', with its 'Scenes rather terific', would 'undoubtedly suit most novel readers'.[23]

Therefore, Clare's publishers encouraged him to write these tragic tales. 'The Cross Roads or Haymakers Story'(*EP*, II, 619–29), written in 1820 and published in

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[19] Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, pp. 149–89. For other work by Goodridge in this area, see 'Out There in the Night: Rituals of Nurture and Exclusion in Clare's "St Martin's Eve"', *Romanticism*, 4 (1998), 202–11; 'Telling Stories: Clare, Folk Culture, and Narrative Techniques', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 29 (1998), 164–67; '"Now Wenches, Listen, and Let Lovers Lie": Women's Storytelling in Bloomfield and Clare', *JCSJ*, 22 (2003), 77–92; '"The Only Privilege Our Sex Enjoy": Women's Storytelling in Bloomfield and Clare', in *Robert Bloomfield: Lyric, Class, and the Romantic Canon*, ed. by White, Goodridge and Keegan, pp. 159–77.

[20] Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, pp. 187, 181, 185.

[21] Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, p. 7.

[22] Clare's early poem 'Dobson and Judie' (*EP*, I, 172–80) describes a cottage with ballads, songs and woodcuts on the walls, 'Which tell of many-a-murder'd bride' (l. 83).

[23] *EP*, I, 579n.

*The Village Minstrel*, tells the story of Jane, who is seduced and dies with child, and it supplies a conventional moral to the young female listeners: 'shun decietfull men' (l. 219). Taylor responded to the poem: 'It has affected me to Tears every time I have read it'; he expressed a desire for further 'pathetic Narratives' based on 'sad Subject[s]'.[24] Clare eagerly responded, '"Pathetic Naratives" I like much & shall muster up plenty of stories for that matter so spare & save for nothing'.[25] He subsequently wrote 'The Sorrows of Love' (*MP*, I, 165–88), published in *The Shepherd's Calendar*, which describes the ill fate of the betrayed Sally Grey.

These pathetic narratives were explicitly designed to appeal to female tastes. When Clare planned a novel in early 1822, Eliza Emmerson recommended pathos to appeal to the 'exquisite sensibilities of the sex'.[26] She repeated the tastes associated with female readers in a letter in 1826: 'Perhaps you will call me "a silly old woman" – when I tell you than [*sic*] I have shed many genuine tears of *sympathy* over *certain* passages of your "Village Stories" – they came home to my (what once was young) heart!'[27] However, Clare's eventual wariness of writing such 'shockers' was articulated in 1822, while he was writing the poem that would become 'Edmund & Hellen' (*EP*, II, 549–76): 'I know a simple tale of love now a days (like a name without a title) is nothing without at Castrophe mine is the "Suicide" thus much is sufficient'.[28]

My interest is in Clare's less pathetic, less eventful narratives of courtship. A lack of incident was not unremarked; Taylor wrote to Clare in 1821: 'I dare say you will make a good Story of Jockey & Jenny – but to me the Plot seems to want Incidents.'[29] In 1829, Clare wrote to Taylor, responding to another request for more 'action' in his poems:

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[24] Taylor to Clare (14 April 1821), Eg. MS 2245, fol. 311$^{v}$.
[25] Clare to Taylor (18 April 1821), *Letters*, p. 182.
[26] Emmerson to Clare (5 February 1822), Eg. MS 2246, fol. 18$^{r}$.
[27] Emmerson to Clare (15 December 1826), Eg. MS 2247, fol. 240$^{v}$.
[28] Clare to Taylor (19 October 1822), *Letters*, p. 248.
[29] Taylor to Clare (1 May 1821), Eg. MS 2245, fol. 314$^{r}$.

> I think many of the productions of the day that introduce action do it at the expense of nature for they are often like puppets pulled into motion by strings & there are so many plots semiplots & demiplots to make up a bookable matter for modern taste that its often a wonder how they can find readers to please at all[30]

The tales I examine do not fall along a neat cautionary pattern in the way that the pathetic narratives do – and so a tension emerges, where the manifest content of the narrative does not adhere certainly to the attached moral lesson. In the absence of narrative shocks, these tales have their focus accordingly shifted to the rural customs and way of life which they portray; as a consequence, the problems of realism and its limits become more acute. While Goodridge's focus falls on the older storytellers, my focus falls more upon the young listeners, and indeed the female subjects of the tales who are their exemplary representatives.

**Regional Interest: Representing Labouring-Class Sexuality**

The tale occupies an uncertain market status at the time when Clare was writing. The word 'tale' had grown to be a popular label to sell works, in prose and verse.[31] At the same time, soon after Clare began to be published, the verse tale was hit by a sudden decline in popularity, simultaneous with the collapse of the poetry market during the 1820s.[32] In 1820, Taylor encouraged Clare to write a collection of tales that showed the customs of his community.[33] Clare himself recognized that 'a series of little poems connected by a string as it were in point of narative woud do better then a canto poem to

[30] Clare to Taylor (3 January 1829), *Letters*, p. 451.
[31] While in the decade after 1800, 16.8 per cent of new fiction titles called themselves 'Tale/s', this doubled to 34.3 per cent of titles in the 1820s; see Peter Garside, 'The English Novel in the Romantic Era: Consolidation and Dispersal', in *The English Novel 1770–1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles*, ed. by Peter Garside and Rainer Schöwerling, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), II, 15–104 (p. 50).
[32] Fischer, pp. 212–20. On the declining sales of poetry in this period, see Lee Erickson, *The Economy of Literary Form: English Literature and the Industrialization of Publishing, 1800-1850* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000), pp. 26–39.
[33] Taylor to Clare (21 January 1820), qtd in *Letters*, pp. 27–28.

please critics'.[34] This idea would eventually lead into the (subsequently abandoned) proposal to include a tale for every month in *The Shepherd's Calendar*.[35]

Robinson claims that Clare wrote tales 'in reaction rather than in obedience to prevailing fashions', rejecting any striving for popularity.[36] However, one can recognize Clare's individuality without claiming that he was so disdainful of commercial success. The efforts of his publishers to direct his writing, and Clare's compliance, signal a shared interest in what kinds of literature might sell. Wendell Harris outlines the sort of tales that had an 'immediate readership' in the early nineteenth century: 'The first is the edifying or instructive tale inculcating religious, moral, or even economic principles; the second is the regional tale describing the life and manners of a particular people.'[37] To this list might be added the exotic verse romance (Harris likely excludes this kind of tale because it had already enjoyed popularity throughout the eighteenth century).[38] The massive success of Byron's 'Turkish Tales' – *The Corsair* sold 10,000 copies on its day of publication in 1814 – exemplified this particular fascination.[39]

Clare's tales provided 'regional' interest, by detailing rural courtship practices which were unfamiliar to his audience – and, in his images of night-dancing, a dash of the exotic too. As Tim Hitchcock and Barry Reay admit, little is known about labouring-class sexuality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hitchcock declares, however, that that the public aspect of plebeian sexuality in this period was certainly

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[34] Clare to Hessey (4 July 1820), *Letters*, p. 82.
[35] Taylor ultimately suggested that Clare abandon this project two weeks after his publishing house folded – presumably in order to cut costs. He hoped that the tales might still constitute another volume, stating: '"Clare's Cottage Stores" would not make a bad title', Taylor to Clare (undated), Eg. MS 2250, fol. 329$^{v}$. The tales that did appear in *The Shepherd's Calendar* met with an unfavourable reception in one review: 'We like the narrative parts the least: there is but little romance in vulgar life', *Literary Gazette*, 31 March 1827, p. 195, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, p. 201.
[36] *Cottage Tales*, pp. xx, x.
[37] Wendell V. Harris, *British Short Fiction in the Nineteenth Century: A Literary and Bibliographic Guide* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), p. 31.
[38] See Killick, p. 73.
[39] *Lord Byron: Selected Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 223.

'various, robust and frequently explicit'.[40] He points to games such as 'leap frog', which allow for public, sexualized contact between the sexes, and also notes that the alehouse culture fulfilled a role in both encouraging bawdy humour but also 'a degree of controlled sexual behaviour'.[41] John Gillis claims that the labouring poor encouraged 'precocious heterosexuality' among their children – to the dismay of their social superiors – so that they might be paired off while young.[42]

What is evident in these communities is the high rate of premarital sexual activity. Across England, rates of illegitimacy had risen during the eighteenth century and been persistently high into the nineteenth.[43] This increase may be accounted for, in part, by the stricter definition of 'legitimacy' that came about with the passing of Lord Hardwicke's 'Act for the better preventing of Clandestine Marriages' in 1753, which declared that only marriages performed in a church, following the publication of banns or a license, were valid.[44] Several historians indicate a generally tolerant attitude among the labouring classes of the eighteenth century towards births out of wedlock; Bridget Hill finds, in particular, a benign attitude to pre-marital sex, when 'there was no question of an inheritance, and little or no property was involved'.[45] Reay concludes, in his study of Kent labouring-class communities in the nineteenth century, that 'bearing

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[40] Tim Hitchcock, *English Sexualities, 1700–1800* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 9; Barry Reay, 'Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century England: The Social Context of Illegitimacy in Rural Kent', *Rural History*, 1 (1990), 219–47 (p. 219).
[41] Hitchcock, p. 9.
[42] John R. Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 114.
[43] Illegitimacy rates rose from 1.8 per cent of all births in 1700 to 5 per cent in 1790, and from 6 per cent of first births in 1690 to 20 per cent in 1790, see Olsen, p. 37.
[44] Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce: England 1530–1987* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 124; Gillis, pp. 140–42. See also Erica Harth, 'The Virtue of Love: Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act', *Cultural Critique*, 9 (1988), 123–54.
[45] Bridget Hill, *Women, Work, and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 180. See also Roy Porter, p. 163.

children outside marriage should be seen not as a form of deviancy but rather as part of normal sexual culture'.[46]

Policing of labouring-class sexual conduct existed in various forms. The Church provided its own regulation of morals, particularly through the extensive Sunday School movement, and E. P. Thompson records that until well into the nineteenth century, 'the most traditionalist clergy inflicted upon members of the congregation accused of sexual offences (including the conception in advance of marriage) the penance of standing in the church porch in a white sheet'.[47] A certain amount of policing was maintained by the parents and elders of the community. Clare's own repeated depiction of older female narrators indicates how an oral culture provided moral instruction in such matters. Studying the records of Petty Sessions in which a woman who bore an illegitimate child might apply for maintenance from the alleged father, Reay finds 'a framework of moral vigilance and comment' in the rural communities: 'Courting couples came under neighbourhood scrutiny, as is clear from the number of witnesses able to comment on the courtship practices and the various liaisons of complainant and defendant.'[48] Thompson identifies powerful regulatory forces from within plebeian culture: 'some kinds of sexual offenders were not forgiven', and these offenders were subjected to 'ritual hunt' that expelled the hunted from the community's protection.[49]

Such networks of supervision depended on a community being close and 'knowable', to borrow Raymond Williams's term.[50] Labouring classes tended to find

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[46] Reay, 'Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century England', p. 219. James Walvin records that pre-marital sexual activity remained frequent among the lower social ranks into the Victorian age, *Victorian Values* (Harmondsworth: Cardinal, 1988), pp. 120–36.
[47] E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, p. 502. On the influence of Sunday Schools, see Robert J. Hind, 'Working People and Sunday Schools: England, 1780–1850', *The Journal of Religious History*, 15 (1988), 199–218; K. D. M. Snell, 'The Sunday-School Movement in England and Wales', *Past and Present*, 164 (1999), 122–68.
[48] Reay, 'Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century England', p. 235.
[49] E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, p. 489. Goodridge speculates that the socially ostracised Kate in Clare's 'St Martins Eve' may have given birth illegitimately, *John Clare and Community*, p. 155.
[50] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, pp. 165–81.

spouses who lived nearby, having met locally – at church, in the work place, and at celebratory get-togethers such as fairs and country feasts.[51] Clare's 1830 poem 'The Mothers Advice' (*MP*, IV, 5–7) dramatizes the limitations of parental involvement, presenting a mother's warning to her son:

> So take your own trundle – Ill sit & content me
> To think that Ive told ye the best in my power
> & do as ye please since theres nought to prevent ye
> But mind that ye dont pluck a weed for a flower
> (ll. 37–40)

Clare himself was keenly aware of the damaging effects of illegitimacy. His grandmother was abandoned while pregnant by his grandfather, an itinerant Scottish school teacher named John Donald Parker.[52] His father, Parker Clare, was born as

> one of fates chance-lings who drop into the world without the honour of matrimony he took the surname of his mother, who to commemorate the memory of a worthless father with more tenderness of love lorn feeling than he doubtless deservd, gave him his sirname at his christening[53]

Closer to home, Clare covertly suggests that his own wife's pregnancy was what forced the pair into marriage in 1820, recalling that 'patty was then in a situation that marriage coud only remedy'.[54]

In depicting a culture in which sexual activity was comparatively less constrained than his polite audience was used to, Clare was under particular pressure to sanitize his representations. During the 1820s, according to Faramerz Dabhoiwala, 'most commentators agreed that public manners had become more decorous in recent decades, and sexual vice more restrained'.[55] Clare's Evangelical patron Lord Radstock

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[51] Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, Volume One 1500–1800* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), p. 123.
[52] Bate, *John Clare*, p. 135.
[53] *By Himself*, p. 2.
[54] Pet. MS A32, p. 20, repr. in *By Himself*, p. 111.
[55] Faramerz Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), p. 353.

served on the Society of the Suppression of Vice, which in 1817 declared the suppression of 'licentious' books among its aims.[56]

Clare's labouring-class contemporary James Hogg demonstrated the need to sanitize rural sexual relations.[57] Hogg's first collection, *Scottish Pastorals* (1801), met with disappointing sales owing, in part, to its frank treatment of these matters.[58] A decade later, his weekly periodical *The Spy* folded in 1812, a year after its first issue; polite readers, offended by the sexual content, had cancelled their subscriptions.[59] Hogg's alterations to his pathetic narrative 'Sandy Tod: A Scottish Pastoral' are particularly intriguing. The version published in *The Mountain Bard* in 1807 has its female protagonist, Sally, seduced 'by a farmer in the West' (l. 140), and giving birth to a son; in despair, her lover, Sandy, kills himself.[60] In a revised version of 1821, however, Hogg removes the mention of Sally's pregnancy, and refers more evasively to her suffering 'a wound that baffled healing' (l. 137). When Sally dies, Hogg reports that the treacherous farmer, 'careless o' his crime', had 'slain' her (ll. 150–02).[61] This new version curtails Sally's disgrace, figuring her as a sympathetic victim in what is now more obviously a cautionary tale about seduction for young women.

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[56] Lucas, 'Clare's Politics', pp. 157–58.

[57] Hogg worked as a cow-herd from the age of seven and eventually became a shepherd, see Valentina Bold, 'James Hogg and the Scottish Self-Taught Tradition', in *The Independent Spirit*, ed. by Goodridge, pp. 69–86 (p. 71). Clare groups himself, Hogg and another labouring-class writer, Allan Cunningham, together 'as intruders and stray cattle in the fields of the Muses (forgive the classification)', in a letter to Cunningham (9 September 1824). Clare addresses Cunningham as 'Brother Bard and Fellow Labourer', the greeting used by Bloomfield when he wrote to Clare on 25 July 1820; see *Letters*, pp. 302–03. Clare owned six books by Hogg (items 244–49 in *Northampton Catalogue*). For further discussion of the connections between Clare and Hogg, see the special 'Crossing Borders' edition of *JCSJ*, 22 (2003).

[58] Gillian Hughes, *James Hogg: A Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 40. See also James Hogg, *Scottish Pastorals: Poems, Songs, &c. Mostly Written in the Dialect of the South*, ed. by Elaine Petrie (Stirling: Stirling University Press, 1988), p. xiv.

[59] James Hogg, *Winter Evening Tales*, ed. by Ian Duncan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. xiv.

[60] James Hogg, *The Mountain Bard*, ed. by Suzanne Gilbert (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 95–100.

[61] Hogg, *The Mountain Bard*, pp. 360–66.

Clare was warned about the depiction of sexual behaviour early in his poetic career. 'Dolly's Mistake' in *Poems Descriptive* offended both Radstock and Eliza Emmerson with its depiction of seduction out of wedlock.[62] Any impolite details would become associated with his public image. Following his marriage to Patty, which was proudly announced in Taylor's introduction to *The Village Minstrel*, the parson Charles Mossop wrote to him advising him to maintain his responsibilities as a married man.[63]

In an autobiographical fragment, Clare describes being visited at his home by a dandified gentleman:

> [...] he then asked me some insulting libertys respecting my first acquaintance with Patty & said he understood that in this country the lower orders made their courtship in barns & pig styes & asked wether I did I felt very vext & said that it might be the custom of high orders for aught I knew as experience made fools wise in most matters but I assured him he was very wrong respecting that custom among the lower orders here[64]

Clearly offended by the episode, Clare may have felt the need to respond to these kind of assumptions made about sexual behaviour among the labouring classes.

**Instructive Interest: Relating to Middle-Class Readers**

Encouraging Clare to write tales for *The Shepherd's Calendar*, Hessey commented that narratives might help to fix 'a human interest' on the otherwise largely descriptive collection.[65] His comment suggests an additional appeal of Clare's courtship narratives, aside from their 'regional' interest: the experiences of his labouring-class characters might provide a sympathetic, instructive parallel to the experiences of his female,

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[62] Taylor to Clare (12 February 1820), Eg. MS 2245, fol. 37$^{v}$, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, p. 60; Eliza Emmerson to Clare (25 November 1820), Eg. MS 2245, fol. 241$^{r}$, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, p. 109.
[63] Clare, *The Village Minstrel*, I, p. xviii; Charles Mossop to Clare (4 March 1820), Eg. MS 2245, fols. 51$^{r}$–52$^{v}$.
[64] Pet. MS A33, p. 1, repr. in *By Himself*, p. 122.
[65] Hessey to Clare (13 October 1823), Eg. MS 2246, fol. 245$^{v}$. Hessey refers to poems in Pet. MS A30.

middle-class readers. This aspect places Clare's courtship tales in the context of eighteenth-century conduct literature (a genre continued in the early nineteenth century by the Taylor sisters, among others), which, according to Jones, instructed 'how women might create themselves as objects of male desire, but in terms which will contain that desire within the publicly sanctioned form of marriage'.[66] In addition, such literature frequently warned against the dangers of seduction.[67]

Labouring-class females were subject to different constraints in the realm of conduct from his middle-class readers. They did have 'improving' conduct literature aimed at them, but these books did not seemingly exercise as great an influence.[68] Ann Yearsley's 'Clifton Hill. Written in January 1785' outlines the contrast between classes, when the narrator addresses 'Ye blooming maids':

> No high romantic rules of honour bind
> The timid virgin of the rural kind;
> No conquest of the passions e'er was taught,
> No meed e'er given them for the vanquish'd thought.
> To sacrifice, to govern, to restrain,
> Or to extinguish, or to hug the pain,
> Was never theirs; instead, the fear of shame
> Proves a strong bulwark, and secures their fame;
> Shielded by this, they flout, reject, deny,
> With mock disdain put the fond lover by;
> Unreal scorn, stern looks, affected pride,
> Awe the poor swain, and save the trembling bride.
> (ll. 55–66)[69]

Middle- and upper-class females have internalized 'rules of honour' to repress their passions; their modesty is re-characterized as agency, through Yearsley's solemn, striding infinitives, 'To sacrifice, to govern, to restrain'. Labouring-class females, by

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[66] *Women in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Jones, p. 14.
[67] Killick, pp. 80–84.
[68] Alan Richardson, *Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 213.
[69] Ann Yearsley, *Poems, on Several Occasions*, 3rd edn (London: T. Cadell, 1785), pp. 83–100. Clare quotes from 'Clifton Hill' in 'The Woodman or the Beauties of the Winter Forest' (1820), though his source may have been the separate section of the poem printed in *The Parnassian Garland*, ed. by Evans, pp. 182–83; see Chirico, '"The Woodman" and Natural Anthology', pp. 47–48.

contrast, appear more vulnerable to the accidents of seduction: the image of a 'trembling bride' hints at the possibility of pre-marital pregnancy. Goodridge notes that Clare's betrayal narratives may 'remind their listeners how little control they have in their own lives, as was the case for many in the rural world'.[70] Local mechanisms for regulating labouring-class sexuality do exist – through parental supervision, as well as reputation and gossip – but they are not as effective as their middle-class equivalents.

The labouring-class female's vulnerability was coupled with her autonomy in choosing a marriage partner – a choice that she could make with more independence than a wealthier woman.[71] Writing in 1779, the historian William Alexander commented: 'The poor are the only class who still retain the liberty of acting from inclination and from choice, while the rich, in proportion as they rise in opulence and rank, sink in the exertion of the natural rights of mankind, and must sacrifice their love at the shrine of interest or ambition.'[72] Labouring-class autonomy in this regard was enhanced not only by the lack of great estates or dowries, but also by the lessened likelihood of chaperonage, since both parents would normally be occupied with work.[73]

Parents, friends and members of the local community still 'expected to have their say over private lives', as Roy Porter notes.[74] Hardwicke's Act had made it obligatory for all those under the age of twenty-one to have parental consent to their marriage.[75] The choice of marriage partner also acquired extra economic importance following parliamentary enclosure. The removal of non-waged modes of subsistence, through work on the commons and the cottage industry, led to increased dependence of

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[70] Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, p. 161.
[71] Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1977), p. 192.
[72] William Alexander, *The History of Women, from the Earliest Antiquity, to the Present Time: Giving Some Account of Almost Every Interesting Particular Concerning That Sex, Among All Nations, Ancient and Modern*, 2 vols (Dublin: J. A. Husband, 1779), II, 233.
[73] Olsen, p. 36.
[74] Roy Porter, p. 164.
[75] Stone, *Road to Divorce*, p. 124.

whole families on wages and wage earners and had a detrimental effect on the economic position of women within the family.[76]

Clare's own experience reveals the social concerns involved in such decisions. He explained his rejection by Mary: 'when she grew up to woman hood she felt her station above mine at least I felt that she thought so for her parents were farmers and Farmers had great pretentions to somthing'.[77] He also recalls the disappointment of Patty's parents regarding her choice of partner, stating that they favoured a young shoemaker to Clare, who was then working as a lime-burner.[78] Tellingly, he found that his stock rose once his poems gained notice in Stamford, and Patty's previously disapproving friends began to court him themselves.[79] Clare's experience would have alerted him to how courtship especially brings into focus issues of social ambition.

The autonomy of labouring-class females in choosing a marriage partner provided a parallel for the growing (if lesser) autonomy experienced by Clare's middle-class female readers. With new freedoms came confusion: according to G. J. Barker-Benfield, eighteenth-century sentimental novels 'asserted the right of women to marry for love in accordance with their own wishes rather than to be parties to a marriage arranged for mercenary reasons', while at the same time warning 'of the dangers of simply following one's heart' and 'urging that sensibility be tempered by reason'.[80] Middle-class females, it may be said, had further to fall than their poorer counterparts, and marriage provided a guarantee against spinsterhood, as Charlotte Lucas is keenly aware in *Pride and Prejudice*. In 1800, a dowry was still important for the middle

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[76] Jane Humphries, 'Enclosures, Common Rights, and Women: The Proletarianization of Families in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries', *The Journal of Economic History*, 50 (1990), 17–42 (p. 21). K. D. M. Snell has also noted how the capitalization of agriculture in the second half of the eighteenth century led to the undermining of the labouring-class female's potential earning capacity, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 22.
[77] Pet. MS A25, p. 7, repr. in *By Himself*, p. 87.
[78] Pet. MS A32, p. 21, repr. in *By Himself*, p. 112.
[79] Bate, *John Clare*, p. 134.
[80] Barker-Benfield, p. 236.

classes and parents might withdraw financial support if they disapproved of a marriage. But, as Kirstin Olsen states, 'now the young people met at assemblies, halls, and spas; chose their own spouses; (usually) presented the choice to their parents for approval or veto; and then began a round of haggling over the financial settlements'.[81] For middle-class females, these new social opportunities would find their mirror in the rural gatherings detailed by Clare.

**Careful Courtship in 'Jockey & Jinney'**

My chapter now considers two of Clare's early tales – 'Jockey & Jinney' and 'The Memory of Love' – both published in *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1827). These poems offer evidence of labouring-class courtship, responding to 'regional' interest, and both also contain a strong moral element. 'Jockey & Jinney or First Love, A Tale' (*MP*, I, 192–213), written in 1821, presents the more idealized vision: it contains no narrative shocks, describing the courtship between a shepherd and a maid that ends in their marriage. The poem draws upon the popular tradition – 'Jockey and Jenny' recur as the names of lovers in several seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ballads. In 'The Happy Lovers' (printed in 1732), they are the names of an exemplary couple, and the poem ends with the lesson: 'Be constant like them, and your pleasures will last'.[82] Other ballads indicate the pair's need to overcome an obstacle in order to form a union. In some, this obstacle is Jenny's distrust of Jockey's intentions: 'The Scotch Wooing' (1675) has her state, 'Thou Jockey art false I fear, and would Jenny insnare', before he convinces her to marry him; in 'Jockey to the Fair', Jenny wonders whether Jockey will 'ever constant prove', while in 'The Queen of the May', which appears in the

[81] Olsen, p. 36.
[82] 'The Happy Lovers', in *The Hive: A Collection of the Most Celebrated Songs*, 4 vols (London: J. Walthoe, 1732), IV, 169.

eighteenth-century collection *The Goldfinch*, she complains, 'Ah! Jockey, I fear you intend to beguile', until she realizes that Jockey 'is true'.[83] In other ballads, economic concerns intrude into the rural idyll: 'The Loves of Jockey and Jenny' (1684) has Jenny complain that her dowry is inadequate; these worries are repeated in 'All For Love' (1680), before Jockey agrees to take her 'without e're a farthing'.[84]

Clare's poem supplies a different obstacle to courtship: the couple's inability to speak to one another. They communicate through looks and in silence, with the result that 'each as warmly lovd but neither knew' (l. 110); when Jockey finally approaches Jinney, he 'durst not speak for fear of being denyd' (l. 208). This continual, gentle resistance to the active fulfilment of a relationship produces a delicate internalized drama, that appeals to the taste for romance tales exemplified by Keats's 'Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil' (1820), in which the two lovers continually prevaricate during their courtship. Keats has his protagonist Lorenzo urging himself to express his love to Isabella: 'And to his heart he inwardly did pray / For power to speak' (ll. 43–44); an emasculated hero, he can only declare his love once she confirms hers.[85] The exotic tale, based on a story in Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, was likely prompted by Hazlitt's observation of what literature might sell in 1818: 'I should think that a translation of

[83] *The Scotch Wooing: Or, Jockey of the Lough, and Jenny of the Lee* (West-Smithfield: P. Brooksby, 1675); 'Jockey to the Fair', in Deacon, pp. 256–57 (p. 256); 'Song LXIII: The Queen of the May', *The Goldfinch, or New Modern Songster* (Glasgow: J. & M. Robertson, 1782), pp. 52–53.

[84] *The Loves of Jockey and Jenny: Or, The Scotch Wedding* (West-Smithfield: P. Brooksby, 1684); *All for Love, Or, The Happy Match Betwixt Jockey and Jenny* (West-Smithfield: P. Brooksby, 1680).

[85] *John Keats: Complete Poems*, ed. by Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press, 1978), pp. 184–98. Clare read 'Isabella' upon its publication in 1820, when the volume was sent to him by his publishers, see Hessey to Clare (30 June 1820), Eg. MS 2245, fols. 155–56. On the relationship between the two poets, see Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, pp. 59–82.

some of the other serious tales in Boccaccio and Chaucer, as that of Isabella [...] could not fail to succeed in the present day'.[86]

Clare's 'Jockey & Jinney' is not set in the context of fantasy, but grounded in contemporary rural life. While the popular-ballad versions tend to focus on Jockey and Jenny as an isolated pair, Clare's poem indicates how sexual relations function within an all-seeing community. The presence of parental authority is nothing new in rural courtship tales – Hogg's 'Willie an' Keatie' (1801) has the female dutifully returning home to 'ease' her parents (l. 145), before she can meet with her lover.[87] The interest of 'Jockey & Jinney' lies in its morally respectable characters wrestling with the need to obey or transgress parental advice; they have to carry out, however mildly, the 'sexual trespass' that Goodridge and Kelsey Thornton have briefly suggested as a theme in Clare's work.[88] Jinney does not rely on conduct books; rather her 'fear of shame', to borrow from Yearsley, derives from the lessons of her parents: 'She heard their counsels & their truth believd / With their advice thro life she journeyd on' (ll. 44–45). She must ultimately speak to Jockey in 'spite of what her mother said of men' (l. 81).

Jockey also shows exemplary modesty, when he worries about visiting Jinney's home:

> Where jealous dames or grannys might reside
> & take his visit on the blackest side
> To think him one who came with vile excuse
> Their artless Jinneys ignorance to seduce
> (ll. 125–28)

His self-consciousness mirrors Clare's hesitation, expressed in a later poem, about approaching a female: 'Snares are so thickly spread in womans way / The common

[86] Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. by G. H. McWilliam, 2nd edn (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. 326–30, 829n; *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by P. P. Howe, 21 vols (London: J. M. Dent, 1930), V, 32.
[87] Hogg, *Scottish Pastorals*, pp. 13–20.
[88] Goodridge and Thornton, p. 127n.

ballad teaches men betray'.[89] Jockey's sensitivity and solitariness, recalling Lubin in 'The Village Minstrel', renders him unusual among labouring-class males:

> For Jockeys taste was not the vulgar hinds
> He lookd oer nature with enlightend minds
> & joyd like them ere love destroyd his rest
> To be the wild woods solitary guest
> (ll. 305–08)

In the poem, it is night time when decorum can be safely cast aside. In one passage, Jockey indulges in a fantasy:

> 'Ah powerfull night was but thy chances mine
> Had I but ways to come at joys as thine
> Spite of thy wizard look & sable skin
> The ready road to bliss tis thine to win
> [...]
> Young Jinney ripening into womanhood
> That hides from day like lilys while in bud
> To thy grim visage blooms in all her charms
> & comes like eve unblushing to thy arms'
> (ll. 255–58, 261–64)

Jockey's polite, polished register, with its inverted syntax ('The ready road to bliss tis thine to win'), is countered by the strangeness of his vision – imagining the monstrous being of 'night' in erotic union with Jinney, in a departure from the poem's matter-of-fact content. This interlude contrasts the 'unblushing' woman of Jockey's fantasy, who has no consciousness of modesty, with the real-life Jinney who is conditioned to meekness.

The break from modesty only comes at a night-dance, when Jockey and Jinney finally speak. Her dress partially fulfils his dream-vision:

> Oer her white bosom loves delicious bed
> A silken hankerchief was loosly spread
> That hid its swelling sweets in carless ways
> & still left room for armorous eyes to gaze
> (ll. 405–08)

Their meeting demonstrates the pressures that village life imposed on night time for romantic liaisons. Roger Ekirch observes that, in pre-industrial communities,

[89] 'I often longed when wandering up & down...' (1832–37), *MP*, V, 262 (ll. 5–6).

'Adolescent conduct after dark prompted widespread concern, less the risk of midnight elopements and clandestine marriages than opportunities for carnal license.' Informal dances held in stables and barns could escape parental scrutiny.[90] Clare himself 'frequented dancings for the sake of meeting with the lasses', and first ventured to speak to his wife Patty on an evening when he had gone 'to fiddle at Stamford'.[91]

The pair, however, remain obedient to authority – 'The dance must stop & parents be obey'd' (l. 468) – and Jinney resists the idea of him 'night visiting' or 'bundling' with her**:** 'She dare not risk the hazard or the blame / To take a stranger to a chiding dame' (ll. 509–10).[92] Her parents listen to her excuses 'tween a frown & smile' (l. 526):

> They knew their daughters manners up to this
> Nor yet had doubted of her doing amiss
> Her father hinted his advice in time
> Tho well he knew hed done the little crime
> & while he guessd the late hour savourd love
> He check'd the dame nor venturd to reprove
> So all was right [...]
>
> (ll. 527–33)

The syntactical arrangement of 'Tho well he knew' does not definitively reveal whether the father's 'little crime', in his youth, refers to what Jinney has done – walking with a lover – or something more indelicate. Perhaps for its discolouring effect on the rural idealization, this particular couplet (ll. 529–30) was cut from the published version.

Jockey and Jinney present a moral pair at the end: they marry only after securing their 'friends consent' (l. 597), and, as in several of the popular ballads, her 'Virtue & industry' relieve her of the need to offer a dowry: 'Them Jane possest & they was all desir'd' (ll. 605–06). The happy ending of this idealized tale, however, is disrupted:

> He lookd with raptures on his lovley bride
> Whose fondness coud not overcome her fears
> She smild returning but she smild in tears

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[90] Ekirch, pp. 194, 196.
[91] Pet. MS A25, p. 7; Pet. MS B7, p. 81, repr. in *By Himself*, pp. 87, 90.
[92] On 'bundling' see Gillis, pp. 30–31; Ekirch, pp. 197–202.

> & when her husband urgd the reason why
> She coud not tell – unless it was for joy
> (ll. 618–22)

The half-rhyme on 'joy', straining at the fatalism of the heroic couplet, indicates the jarring potential for disappointment. In demonstrating this movement from enchantment to disenchantment, Clare was adopting a familiar theme of romances, as exemplified in another of Keats's poems published in 1820, 'La Belle Dame sans Merci'. Throughout Clare's poem, Jinney's inability 'to tell' has been symptomatic of her modesty, but this modesty now seems less reassuring, as suggested by the additional moral that Clare provides: 'First love how sweet ah woud it longer last' (l. 623).

In 'Jockey & Jinney', Clare frames courtship within a sanitized moral narrative, offering an instructive portrayal of modesty and virtue. The ambiguity of Jinney's response at the very end is unexpected, but does not diminish the respectability of his characters. In contrast to this poem, the social observation in 'The Memory of Love' is notably less idealized.

**Alienated Sensitivity in 'The Memory Of Love'**

'The Memory of Love, A Tale' (*MP*, I, 232–53), written in 1820, adopts the literary figure of the forlorn Romantic lover for its protagonist, who is both sentimental and morally respectable. Robin, an old man, tells of how he once fell in love with a maid, who mysteriously rejected him. Clare uses the acceptable framework of Robin's narration to contain details of rural sexuality – particularly, the night-dances held by gypsies, and labouring-class men's predatory attitudes to courtship – which are potentially more offensive than anything in 'Jockey & Jinney'.

In much of Clare's work, storytelling is carried out by females to other females, but this poem is an exception, providing an insight into masculine attitudes to courtship.

While in ‘The Cross Roads’, young girls chatter about ‘loves delightfull themes’ (l. 11), here the men demonstrate amoral, almost sadistic attitudes to seduction. They gossip

> Of those they sought & fools that had believd
> & dreamd of marriage till they woke decievd
> Twas thought no sin if hearts they only won
> To make them ach they thought it precious fun
> (ll. 15–18)

Robin, who hears these tales ‘tween a sigh & smile’ (l. 19), recalls his own methods of courtship:

> ‘I courted beauty till the freak was past
> & then found others prettier then the last
> I wood & won them as a sort of pride
> & then sought others till I was denied’
> (ll. 31–34)

The speed of Robin’s transitions between lovers is carried in the quickening rhythm of ‘then found others’ and the sing-song alliteration of ‘wood & won’. In addition to the conduct of males, the poem represents a sexual culture in which females take an active role. Young women call to Robin on his way to work: ‘The young girls hallood merrily & shill / If I woud take a partner to the mill’ (ll. 93–94). Later, attending a fair, he rejects ‘the fond encroachments of some simpring maid / Pulling my sleeve & urging whispers low’ (ll. 318–19).

The poem represents a night-dance with greater detail than the equivalent scene in ‘Jockey & Jinney’. This dance is organized by gypsies, a detail which would have been provocative to polite sensibilities:

> ‘At length some gipsies on our comon came
> & as a change to may nights even game
> Maids in the gipseys nook proposd a dance
> & I went too & dreamd upon the chance
> For summer eves to servants then supplyd
> Sweet leisure hours when toil was thrown aside
> Masters & misses too woud join the play
> & ramp as equals in the sports of may
> [...]

> & we have playd & dancd when day was bye
> Till the moons horns crept half way up the sky
> Young miss & master servant man & maid
> & none woud scold nor question why we staid'
> (ll. 177–84, 187–90)

Members of different social classes participate, ultimately crowded in the chiastic line, 'Young miss & master servant man & maid'. The activity is levelling and democratic, as all attendees 'ramp as equals' (a line that was cut from the published version).[93] The fluid excitement of this escape from the usual routines of 'may nights even game' is evoked in the immediate trochaic inversion on 'Maids in', leading to the waltzing, dactylic rhythm of 'Masters & misses too'.

The attendance of masters and misses at a gypsy dance contrasts with the parentally approved dances among the gentry found in such a novel as *Pride and Prejudice*.[94] In Britain, gypsies were frequently condemned for their apparent sexual liberty, as they consorted with each other out of wedlock.[95] However, the potential indecorousness of Clare's social arrangement is countered with its semblance of a fantastical space.[96] Romances often imagine scenes in which heroines can act freely, without parental authority; Clare's night-time space fulfils a similar function: 'none woud scold nor question why we staid'.

The poem shows the prevalence of gossip and the significance of reputation in a small labouring-class community. At the dance Robin's fellow villagers react with vitriol to the maid, for being an outsider:

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[93] On the edits made to this volume, see Robinson and Summerfield; Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship*, pp. 252–61.

[94] It is worth noting Clare's observation, in his angry rant at 'primpt up misses' following the censorship of *Poems Descriptive*: 'they blush to read what they go nightly to balls for & love to practice alas false delicasy', Clare to Hessey (10 July 1820), *Letters*, p. 83.

[95] Christopher Hill, *Liberty Against the Law: Some Seventeenth-Century Controversies* (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 1996), pp. 131–41.

[96] The perceived exoticism of gypsy night-dances is exemplified in an article in the *Literary Gazette*, when an observer watches gypsies in the Basque country dancing around a fire: 'This sight had something fantastic in it, which struck the imagination very forcibly', 14 June 1817, p. xxi. Clare later presents a positive description of a gypsy dance in 'The Camp', *LP*, I, 457–58; see also his prose account in *By Himself*, p. 82.

> ‘Some sneerd contempt & whisperingly abusd
> & others turnd away & seemd confusd
> To see me chuse a stranger from the throng
> & shun the partners I had known so long’
> (ll. 207–10)

Robin has acted outside the expectations of the face-to-face community; additionally, the maid’s attendance indicates that she is independent enough to attend a dance far from her own ‘local’ supervision. Bate perceives ‘The Memory of Love’ to be a very personal poem, drawing upon autobiographical reminiscence about Patty (whom Clare initially met while working away from home, as Robin does), Betty Sell (whom Clare wooed at Stamford Fair) and Mary (the focus of lost love).[97] The lines above, considered metaphorically, might also refer to Clare’s sense of alienation in the village, attributed to his mixing with higher classes and ‘shunning’ his peers.

Robin’s ultimate isolation indicates the monolithic expectations of gender roles in the rural community. While courting the maid, he is both hesitant and courteous towards her, and following his rejection he descends into a show of suffering that aligns his story with the Romantic, literary trope of the forlorn male lover who bears an unusual amount of sensibility, such as Goethe’s hero Young Werther, or Keats’s Lorenzo in ‘Isabella’ and Lycius in ‘Lamia’ (1820).[98] The eventual outcome for all of these figures is death: Werther kills himself, Lorenzo is murdered by Isabella’s brothers, and Lycius dies of grief. By contrast, Robin has survived, chastened, into old age – like the beguiled, lovesick Kate in Clare’s 1823 poem ‘St Martins Eve’ (*MP*, III, 269–78), he is now an outsider.

As has been mentioned, Vivien Jones identifies the emergence of the ‘eighteenth-century new man’ who shows a type of sensitive masculinity; but in the sexual matrix of Robin’s labouring-class community, an equivalent show of sensitivity

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[97] Bate, *John Clare*, p. 315.
[98] Clare’s awareness of Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (first published in English in 1779) is evident in ‘Supposd to be utterd by Werter at the Conclusion of his last Interview with Charlotte’ (1808–19), *EP*, I, 296.

counts for little.[99] Robin resembles the inadequate and ineffectual romantic heroes who appear in Keats's tales: as Jacqueline Labbe states, Keats 'poeticises an uncomfortable, perhaps unacknowledged awareness of [masculinity's] weaknesses'.[100] The difference, however, is that Clare places this 'weak' masculinity within the earthy context of contemporary village society: what Robin felt 'was tender pure & true', in contrast to the 'vulgar dregs of love' that other men know (ll. 25–26). Robin's alienation is manifest in his infantilized state: unable to find joys in 'dance & revel' (l. 325), he joins 'the childens play games on the moor' (l. 372). He reports, with spitting plosives, the scorn of his fellow adults:

> 'My partners as they passd woud point & say
> Theres love sick robin wi the boys at play
> Maidens woud think me justly servd & smild
> To see crossd love had made me twice a child'
> (ll. 405–08)

As with 'The Cross Roads', where the young maids grow 'impatient' (l. 287) listening to the lecturing old woman, the young men around Robin do not learn, struggling to conceal their laughter at his tendency to 'cling / Wi joy to such a silly seeming thing' (ll. 23–24).

Like 'Jockey & Jinney', 'The Memory of Love' shows only a limited view of female subjectivity, in the figure of the maid. Robin regards her as operating by a code of conduct that comes close to Yearsley's expectations of middle-class females, stating: 'Good manners seemd to urge her to consent / She blushd & yielded & away we went' (ll. 195–96). Her rejection of him is ultimately ambiguous, couched in the clinical, dispassionate language of exchange:

> '"Your hearts not mine" she said "& I must shun

[99] *Women in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Jones, p. 11. The failure of the sensitive male in rural courtship is also illustrated in Clare's dialogue 'The Rivals: A Pastoral' (*MP*, I, 214–31), published in *The Shepherd's Calendar*, in which the brash Richard appears to win Mary's heart, in favour of the courteous Simon.

[100] Jacqueline M. Labbe, *The Romantic Paradox: Love, Violence and the Uses of Romance, 1760-1830* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 86.

> Your urgd returns for mines already won
> What ever proofs your vows or words make known
> I cannot give you what is not my own"'
> (ll. 235–38)

Losing her heart to another might indicate her helpless passivity in this arrangement, but might also be a conventional expression of falling in love; her uncertain excuse shifts the moral focus of the narrative onto Robin's own conduct.

He provides this moral interpretation, telling his listeners: 'Laugh not my boys when slighted maidens mourn / For fear your follys may be servd in turn' (ll. 37–38). Clare's use of the third-person narrator allows him to present moralizing talk critically, at one remove. In this instance, there is a slight discrepancy between moral and narrative. While some contemporary readers thought the moral suited the story, Robin's now-reduced state is not evidently a direct result of his past misdeeds; more obviously, it has been caused by his lack of impulsive rural masculinity, in failing to court the maid successfully.[101] Following his exclusion from the sexual culture of the village, the potential partners that are now left for young women are the laughing, predatory men who ignore his warnings.

In 'Jockey & Jinney' and 'The Memory of Love', Clare demonstrates the duality that young labouring-class individuals experience in courtship: enjoying freedom (young people can court at night away from parental supervision) but also constrained by expectations (Jinney must maintain her modesty, and marries despite her reservations; Robin should only court a girl from his own village). This conflict between freedom and constraint reflects the experience of Clare's middle-class female readers.

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[101] Clare's friend Frank Simpson describes reading 'The Memory of Love' to a group: 'one admired the moral & connexion of the Story another rejoiced at the punishment of the once reckless Hero of the Tale', letter to Clare (7 December 1826), Eg. MS 2247, fol. 236$^{r}$, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, p. 198.

Clare is also beginning to forge a parallel between the experiences of his female readers and his own feelings of confinement and displacement as a labouring-class poet. In both tales, the need to show respectability is a confusing and not entirely positive experience, resulting variously in the delay of love's consummation or in its denial. In particular, Robin's development into a sensitive man of feeling can be read as a process of 'refinement', that ultimately results in him acquiring a different way of reflecting on his social conditions but also alienates him from his peers. While Robin's show of sensitivity would have been more acceptable among the middle classes, Clare's readers may have experienced their own, equivalent dilemmas: their immersion in conduct literature and the analysis of behaviour may have rendered them anxious and uncertain of their own social positions.

**'Valentine Eve' and Social Elevation**

My chapter now addresses how Clare continues to engage with these issues in two of his later courtship tales, 'Valentine Eve' and 'Opening of the Pasture'. These poems are marked by a new concern with social mobility. 'Valentine Eve' is a sweetly moral tale of social elevation; in contrast, 'Opening of the Pasture' presents a less idealized, more nuanced representation of the difficulties experienced by labouring-class women, and shows the role of literature in matters of courtship and social expectation.

In writing about social mobility in the mid-1820s, Clare would have been thinking about what might sell at a time when the poetry market was beginning to falter. This subject had previously been examined by many successful writers of the period, including Austen, Bloomfield and Crabbe. The Taylor sisters exemplify the attitude of much cautionary literature on the matter, by warning young females against the desire for social elevation. Jane Taylor's prose tale *Lucy's Wishes* has a middle-class girl

dreaming of becoming rich, before her mother gently chastises her, telling that her condition is the best of all, though 'no situation [...] can make us perfectly happy in this world'.[102] Didactic literature aimed at the labouring classes, such as Hannah More's *Cheap Repository Tracts* (1795–98), repeated this conservative lesson, encouraging self-improvement while also teaching readers to be content with their social stations.[103] Conduct literature had a balance to negotiate, between the need to 'improve' readers and the need to maintain social control: these 'refining' books might perversely provoke a wish for social elevation – as Jones states, they could 'stimulate and empower the desire they seek to deny', and thereby be 'potentially liberating'.[104]

Clare's 'Valentine Eve' (*MP*, III, 69–90), written in 1824, encourages the hopes of social elevation – in this case, among labouring-class girls – against which such writers as the Taylor sisters cautioned**.** On Valentine's Eve, when the young girls are listening out for the 'prophecys of coming joys' (l. 5), the female storyteller tells them:

> Your fine love letters might be worth your smiles
> If 'stead of coming from some creeping giles
> Rich lovers sent them as it once befell
> To one young maiden I remember well
> (ll. 15–18)

According to this view, 'worth' is only measured by wealth. The narrator shows disdain for the working men of her village: 'each young farmer guest / Was little better then a clown at best' (ll. 233–34).

Clare was evidently persuaded that such a tale as 'Valentine Eve', presenting a young woman's social elevation, would suit the tastes of the market.[105] Edward Drury, John Taylor's cousin and a bookseller, suggested the subject matter upon which the

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[102] Jane Taylor, *Lucy's Wishes, Or, The Folly of Idle Thoughts* (New York: Mahlon Day, 1836), pp. 13–14.
[103] Richardson, pp. 213–14.
[104] *Women in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Jones, p. 17.
[105] Taylor omitted the poem from *The Shepherd's Calendar*, perhaps because he lost the manuscript, see letter to Clare (8 April 1826), Eg. MS 2247, fol. 162$^{r}$; Clare to Taylor (27 March 1826), *Letters*, pp. 372–73.

poem was partly based: the true story of the 'Cottage Countess' Sarah Hoggins, a farmer's daughter who married the tenth Earl of Exeter. She met the Earl when he briefly lived in a cottage in Shropshire, keeping a low profile following his first wife's elopement (on obtaining the license to marry Sarah in 1790, the Earl gave his name as 'John Jones of Great Bolas, yeoman'). Sarah would subsequently give birth to the future Marquess of Exeter, Clare's patron. Drury's letter claims that this tale would appeal to Clare, since it 'would be employed on your favourite subjects of virtue, beauty, worth, in obscurity, & advanced through their merits into high rank'.[106] In a strikingly similar proposal, Taylor also suggested that a popular subject for a poem might be his own anecdote about 'a rich Farmer's Son from Yorkshire', disguised as a travelling harvester, who married a farmer's daughter.[107]

The story of a person of higher birth in disguise provided a popular subject, familiar in both literature and oral tales. Both Drury and Taylor suggested Allan Ramsay's *The Gentle Shepherd* (1727) as a model for Clare's tale, while other examples from the period include the protagonists of exotic tales such as Byron's *The Corsair* and Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*.[108] Clare was also familiar with the folk myth of Robin Hood secretly being the Earl of Huntingdon, and the local tale of King Charles crossing the Fens dressed as a labourer, with the help of landlord 'Mucky' Porter, to escape Oliver Cromwell.[109]

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[106] Drury transcribed an obituary of the Countess in *The Monthly Magazine*, March 1797, p. 239, repr. in *Cottage Tales*, pp. 135–37; Edward Drury to Clare (19 July 1820), Eg. MS 2245, fol. 180$^{r}$. On Sarah Hoggins, see Bate, *John Clare*, p. 161. On Drury's influence early in Clare's career, see Bob Heyes, 'Selling John Clare: The Poet in the Marketplace', *JCSJ*, 24 (2005), 31–40.

[107] Taylor to Clare (5 December 1821), Eg. MS 2245, fol. 388$^{r}$–388$^{v}$.

[108] Clare had seen two rival theatrical versions of *Ivanhoe* on his visit to London in March 1820, see Bate, *John Clare*, p. 167.

[109] Eg. MS 2245, fol. 180$^{r}$; Joseph Ritson, *Robin Hood: A Collection of All the Ancient Poems, Songs, and Ballads, Now Extant, Relative to That Celebrated English Outlaw* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1820), p. iv; Hugh Lupton, *Norfolk Folk Tales* (Stroud: The History Press, 2013), pp. 143–48.

However, the work to which 'Valentine Eve' bears closest similarity is Bloomfield's 'The Broken Crutch' (1806), which Clare claimed was 'inimitable and above praise'.[110] Bloomfield's poem describes the successful courtship of Peggy, a poor girl, by Herbert Brooks, a squire. The well-told tale of an aristocrat heartlessly seducing a young maiden is evoked when Bloomfield reports the speech of a libertine who has his eye on Peggy, only to deflate the possibility of this happening: 'Such was not Herbert' (l. 49). 'The Broken Crutch' plays on the disruption of expectations throughout, as the harmonious love story reveals occasional, fractious inter-class tensions, only to nullify them. Bloomfield's labouring-class community is rife with suspicion of the higher classes: Peggy has been schooled in cautionary narratives, and community policing is exerted to the extent that her father, John, sends her uncle to stop the union with Herbert, carrying his broken crutch – a symbol of the father's loss of dependency on his child, and now a weapon of inter-class warfare. Yet Bloomfield continually undermines the seriousness by inserting comical characters, such as the tedious old lady whom Gilbert, the uncle, consults (ll. 192–214), and Nathan the cart-driver who gets drunk and falls asleep (ll. 265–80); these episodes introduce a patronizing perspective from above, which safely contains the poor as bumbling and ineffective.

Despite the poem's happy ending, some social tensions still linger. The prospect of violence is quashed with unlikely ease, when Gilbert discovers that Peggy has already married Herbert and thus has her honour protected. When Gilbert admits that he meant to knock down Herbert with the crutch, he is met with affectionate laughter, and Herbert then offers to be John's new metaphorical crutch, asking him to 'lean on me' (l. 338) – an image of paternalist generosity. However, John's final speech, hinging on its trochaic 'If', warns of retribution on the wealthy, as he wishes

[110] Clare to Cunningham (9 September 1824), *Letters*, p. 302; *Bloomfield: Selected Poems*, pp. 106–15.

> '*That brave good gentlemen would not disdain*
> *The poor, because they're poor*: for, if they live
> Midst crimes that parents *never can* forgive,
> If, like the forest beast, they wander wild,
> To rob a father, or to crush a child,
> Nature *will* speak, aye, just as Nature feels,
> And wish – a Gilbert Meldrum at their heels.'
> (ll. 370–76)

Portraying the rich as beasts, John subverts the common conception of the poor as animals to justify the prospect of future rebellion. The sense of social harmony is further destabilized by the tale's consciousness of historical change, and the violence to the land that has since been carried out by the rich and powerful: it is set in an idyllic 'fairy land' (l. 60) that is also the pre-enclosure past, having since undergone the 'scythe of desolation call'd "Reform."' and suffered 'the murderous axe' (ll. 68, 71). The revelation that, since the events reported, Herbert's mansion has burnt down – with no reason given – is particularly unsettling when juxtaposed with John's warning.[111]

Clare's 'Valentine Eve' concedes to an idealized view of rural life that might appeal to readers, but allows little room for realism. Unlike 'The Broken Crutch', it does not explicitly show any conscious awareness of historical change: Kate, who is now 'Madam Meers', still lives nearby at 'oakley hall' (l. 19) – echoing the patriarchal paradise of Oakly that provides the setting in Bloomfield's *May-Day With the Muses*.[112] Clare notably alters the source material on Sarah Hoggins by reducing the social rank of his male hero, the Squire: 'He was no lord tho he was full as great / A country squire with a vast estate' (ll. 343–44). In so doing, he positions Kate's social trajectory more closely to the aspirations of his middle-class readers.

According to the *Monthly Magazine* obituary, the Earl of Exeter drew suspicion and scorn while under disguise for flouting his wealth. In contrast, Clare's Squire is a

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[111] Lucas speculates whether Herbert lost his fortune, and asks 'Is this the work of nature or of man?', in *Bloomfield: Selected Poems*, p. 11. On the poem's conception of a lost way of life, see Lucas, 'Bloomfield and Clare', pp. 65–66.

[112] John Lucas states this 'can hardly be a coincidence' but acknowledges the poem's closer resemblance to 'The Broken Crutch', 'Bloomfield and Clare', p. 67.

morally admirable figure; borrowing from Taylor's anecdote, he is a hard worker, disguising himself among the Irish harvesters.[113] He shows paternalist generosity, loosening 'when none perceived from out his hand / Some wheat ears now & then upon the land' (ll. 103–04). He is distinguished not by his wealth, but by his manners, refusing to join in when the other workers 'urge a vulgar joke / At passing maids' (ll. 37–38); like Robin in 'The Memory of Love' (but preserving his masculinity), he throws into relief the rough behaviour of labouring-class men. When he finally reveals his identity, the entire village reacts with stunned deference: the yard dog and geese fall silent, and the old women who had 'called the stranger by worse names than clown' now drop 'their courtseys to the coach' (ll. 266–67). The theatricality of this scene curiously resembles the highly self-conscious, postured appearances that the gentry made occasionally to the lower orders in the eighteenth century, impressing upon them the display of rank.[114]

Kate is also a moral paragon, a Cinderella-like figure of modesty rewarded, but with little revealed about her subjectivity. Like Bloomfield's Peggy, who attracts Herbert by showing 'nature's untaught grace' (l. 345), she does not seemingly undergo any process of refinement; instead, it is her lack of vanity that supplies the inward value that the Squire recognizes. She is not entirely passive in their courtship, being anxious 'to meet him in her best attire' (l. 77), and dressing in white at the 'harvest home' so that she resembles the '"queen of fairey land"' (l. 150).[115] But she stands in contrast to her vain sisters, who are 'dressed in muslin gowns' (l. 239); instead, Kate 'romped about in play & joined in toil / While they would sit & not a finger soil' (ll. 225–26, the

[113] Clare expresses his sympathy for Irish workers in 'The Irish Emigrant' (1819–20), *EP*, II, 433–34. See also *CFTP*, pp. xlviii–xlix.
[114] E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, pp. 45–46.
[115] In an eighteenth-century popular ballad, *The Roving Maids of Aberdeen's Garland* (Edinburgh: [n. pub], 1776), rural maidens dressed in white to attract suitors: 'There's lasses bright, turns out at night, their sign is a white apron'.

same ennobling rhyming words used when Jockey and Jinney became husband and wife).

However, the gratuitous realist detail that Clare does include – the role of Kate's father, who is not required by the moral tale – adds an intriguing element of tension to an otherwise harmonious narrative. The parental pressure continually placed on any labouring-class female like Kate may have been recognisable to Clare's middle-class female readers. In contrast to the casual forgiveness shown by Jinney's parents, the narrator recalls her concern when Kate and the Squire leave a feast at night, for 'had aught met the fathers jealous sight / Farewell to fun & frolic for the night' (ll. 173–74). Wishing her to marry a local neighbour's son who is a farmer, Kate's father views her as a commodity: he 'dreamed of gain / & talked of marriage as he would of grain' (ll. 153–54) and hopes that 'bonny Kate will sell her beauty well' (l. 212). Appropriately, Clare makes a significant alteration to Drury's source material by having the Squire reveal his wealthy status before proposing marriage. In contrast to John's suspicion of wealth in 'The Broken Crutch', for Kate's father, 'The coach was plenty to buy his consent' (l. 278).[116]

This undercurrent of financial concerns is maintained at the close of the tale. The Squire's optimistic declaration that Kate being 'ignorant of wealth was caught by love' (l. 296) is made questionable by the rumours of his high-born status that have already circulated in the village. In the celebrations that follow their engagement, Kate appears silent, 'still & shoy', and her father whispers in her ear: '"A good receipt neer makes a bargain wrong / So Kate says he burn nothing with your tongue"' (ll. 325–26). While the Squire can use his 'winning tongue' (l. 91), a phrase that carries more than a hint of deception, Kate must keep her destructive tongue silent – further stifling her subjectivity.

[116] In William Hazlitt's version of the story, the Earl only reveals his identity after marrying Sarah, *Hazlitt*, X, 68.

Drury's recognition that Clare would enjoy the Countess's advance 'through [...] merits into high rank' suggests that Kate's rise might provide an autobiographical parallel to the poet's own experience. Clare may have had sympathy with Kate's necessary show of modesty, but it is difficult to match her passive social rise to the poet's own uncertain sense of place. The limitation of the idealized representation of 'Valentine Eve' is that it shows social elevation, but with very little discussion of the process of refinement or adaptation that Kate might undergo. Only once she is married is she dislocated from her original social rank. Clare's own experience of refinement – and the alienation that this might entail – was far more complex, and it is in 'Opening of the Pasture' that he explores these issues in greater realist detail.

**Reading and Refinement**

Clare's 'Opening of the Pasture' is particularly remarkable among his work for its demonstration of how extensively literary culture infiltrates the rural community**:** in the tale, Bloomfield's 'The Broken Crutch' is read not by an exceptional individual (such as Lubin), but by common maids. The poem explores the effects of reading, and its relationship to refinement, and thus participates in a field of debate that had engaged many writers of the period.

Bloomfield's tale 'Alfred and Jennet', published in *May-Day With the Muses* in 1822, offers a positive account of how reading leads to the acquisition of the correct manners and taste, which are crucial to bringing about social elevation.[117] Alfred, a wealthy young man who is blind and lives with his widowed mother, falls in love with Jennet, a yeoman's daughter who assists at their house. Since the pair are brought together by their love of music, Simon White concludes: 'The union of Alfred and

[117] 'Alfred and Jennet', in *Robert Bloomfield: Selected Poems*, pp. 165–75.

Jennet represents the power of song and indeed poetry to break down the barriers of social distinction, and in doing so it represents the "triumph" of "nature's music".'[118] However, in order to reach the stage where the pair marry, Bloomfield indicates that Jennet has undergone a process of self-improvement that is catalysed by her varied reading:

> The Sacred History, or the volumes fraught
> With tenderest sympathy, or towering thought,
> The laughter-stirring tale, the moral lay,
> All that brings dawning reason into day.
> (ll. 990–93)

Her polite schooling also involves poetry: 'She read the poets, grave and light, by turns, / And talk'd of Cowper's "Task," and Robin Burns' (ll. 1062–63).

Bloomfield represents Jennet's refinement as a straightforward process – perhaps a mark of the poem's elegiac quality, suggestive of an idealized past.[119] Jennet initially has a 'wild laugh' (l. 967) but following her schooling, Alfred asks her:

> 'This morning, Jennet, why did you delay,
> And talk to that strange clown upon your way,
> Our homespun gardener? how can you bear
> His screech-owl tones upon your perfect ear?'
> (ll. 1100–03)

The cacophonous 'screech-owl tones' provokes the disharmony manifested in the half-rhyme of 'bear' and 'ear' – indicating Alfred's consciousness of the definite distinction between refined and vulgar sounds. In contrast, Jane Austen shows the widespread uncertainty as to what constituted 'refinement' among the gentry. In *Emma* (1816), a failure to cultivate the correct manners and attitudes is evident in the character of Mrs Elton, the daughter of a merchant who marries a clergyman. She believes herself to be

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[118] Simon J. White, *Robert Bloomfield, Romanticism and the Poetry of Community*, p. 145.
[119] On the elegiac aspect of Bloomfield's poem, see John Lucas, 'Hospitality and the Rural Tradition: Bloomfield's May-Day with the Muses', in *Robert Bloomfield: Lyric, Class, and the Romantic Canon*, ed. by White, Goodridge and Keegan, pp. 113–41 (pp. 136–37).

refined, but Emma Woodhouse, whose family has a landowning rather than commercial background, finds her to be a 'little upstart, vulgar being'.[120]

At the same time, conduct writers showed anxiety about whether the reading habits of young females (exemplified by Jennet) might have inappropriate psychological effects, thus pointing to the disjunction between 'refinement' and 'social elevation'. Commonplace books, which were targeted at females among the 'upper income' group, printed extracts of verse because these examples of polite literature were seen to have improving effects.[121] However, conduct writers considered 'romance' tales, in particular, to be dangerously disruptive, since they offered unrealistic expectations beyond the social control of readers' families.[122] Hannah More complained that 'unprofitable reading' would corrupt middle-class women and distract them from 'more wholesome studies'.[123] John Bennett, a writer of several books about education, argued in *Letters to a Young Lady* (1803) that a passion for poetry in a young woman 'frequently inspires such a romantic turn of mind as is utterly inconsistent with all the solid duties and proprieties of life'.[124] In Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817), too, Catherine Morland's opinions are shown to be distorted by her exposure to gothic novels.

Parallel to these concerns about the reading habits of middle-class females were emergent anxieties about labouring-class readers in the Romantic period. Literacy rates

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[120] Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. by Richard Cronin and Dorothy McMillan (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 301.
[121] William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 226.
[122] St. Clair, p. 282. On warnings about young women's reading, see also John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, p. 160; Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998); Richardson, pp. 167–212.
[123] Hannah More, *Moral Sketches of Prevailing Opinions and Manners, Foreign and Domestic*, 3rd edn. (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies, 1819), p. 247.
[124] Rev. John Bennett, *Letters to a Young Lady, on a Variety of Useful and Interesting Subjects*, 2 vols (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1803), I, 204.

grew significantly among the English labouring poor in the early nineteenth century.[125] By the 1820s, writers were faced with a mass 'Reading Public' involving a plurality of interests – including literate, poor workers who showed a substantial ethic of self-improvement. Alan Richardson writes that while the moralizing tract-fiction of More seemed outdated, looking back to an ethos of social subordination, it became 'increasingly evident, as the nineteenth century progressed, that an appeal to the laborer's interest would succeed where recommendations of patience, deference, and childlike submission had failed'. Debates emerged as to whether imaginative literature would have a positive or negative effect on the lives of the working people.[126]

Entering into these debates, 'Opening of the Pasture' avoids a straightforward moral lesson on reading and refinement, and instead shows a greater narrative emphasis on the subjectivity of its characters. In this regard, Clare's poem may be said to herald a trend in tale-writing that Killick has identified by the second half of the 1820s: the didactic moral tale was in decline, and there was a 'newfound freedom amongst improving writers [...] A strict Christian code was still important, but it was no longer the sole arbiter of content [...] Moral tales became psychologically active.'[127] The uncertain application of a moral to real life in 'Opening of the Pasture' links it back to Crabbe's 'The Widow's Tale', which demonstrates how a standardized lesson – cautioning against seeking refinement beyond one's station, and showing suspicion of polite reading habits – may be unsettled by the untidy realism of the narrative.

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[125] Lawrence Stone, 'Literacy and Education in England 1640–1900', *Past and Present*, 42 (1969), 69–139 (p. 109). See also R. S. Schofield, 'Dimensions of Illiteracy, 1750–1850', *Explorations in Economic History*, 10 (1973), 437–54.
[126] Richardson, p. 214. On the mass reading public, see also Klancher, pp. 76–97.
[127] Killick, p. 114.

'The Widow's Tale' was published in *Tales* (1812), the volume which Clare had read when he attacked Crabbe's realist project.[128] Crabbe's protagonist, Nancy, is a farmer's daughter who has been educated at a 'school in town' (l. 2) and, on returning home, is unsuited to openly rough farm life.[129] She is caught in the 'border land' which applies to so many of the protagonists in Crabbe's tales: an uncertain, liminal stage between the rite of separation (from a parent) and the rite of aggregation (into the role of the wife).[130] At first, she rebels against her father, who wishes her to marry a local young farmer, Harry Carr. She then consults a refined Widow in the village, who tells her to marry Harry. The Widow warns against the desire for social elevation: 'Yet high and low, you see, forbear to mix; / No Beggars' eyes the hearts of Kings transfix;' (ll. 202–03). Books are blamed as the source of delusions, when the Widow warns Nancy off the 'fair dreams [...] Of never-tasted joys' (ll. 134–35) which are cultivated by reading. Nancy follows her advice, marrying the farmer and so escaping the dangers of poverty.

However, Crabbe's narrative does not entirely 'fit' this moral lesson. First, Nancy seeks social separation from the workers on the farm but not, explicitly, social elevation. As Edwards observes: 'Romantic fiction helped to give [Nancy] ideas above her station, even encouraged her to pay *no heed* to station' [my italics].[131] Indeed, the Widow's own social position is ambiguous: Nancy is initially drawn to her for seeming 'kind' (l. 73), the word implying both generosity but also equivalence; subsequently, the Widow tells Nancy that, for conversing with 'one so poor, / Yours were the kindness' (ll. 92–93) – 'kind' now places the Widow as Nancy's social inferior.

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[128] Clare to John Taylor (7 January 1821), *Letters*, pp. 136–38. On the psychological interest of Crabbe's tales, see Beth Nelson, *George Crabbe and the Progress of Eighteenth-Century Narrative Verse* (London: Associated University Presses, 1976).
[129] *Crabbe*, II, 99–110.
[130] Edwards, *George Crabbe's Poetry on Border Land*, p. 21.
[131] Gavin Edwards, *Narrative Order, 1789–1819: Life and Story in an Age of Revolution* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 128.

Secondly, the Widow discourages Nancy from following a passionate life, but pursues it herself. She retains her attachment to her former, romantic (but poor) lover, requesting that she be buried alongside him at her death. As Peter New states, the Widow's idea 'that romantic love can be dismissed simply as a falsifying dream, is to some extent a myth itself, developed by the widow in self-defence'.[132] When she states that her books are 'oft'ner read from duty than delight' (l. 128), she admits: '(Yet let me own, that I can sometimes find / Both joy and duty in the act combin'd;)' (ll. 129–30). The Widow's aside acknowledges the importance of literature – in Crabbe's own interest, of course – but leaves it ambiguous which books may be useful; the mingling of 'joy' and 'duty' might point respectively to romantic and conduct literature. At the end of the poem Nancy's father, who previously discouraged reading, changes his view of the Widow by acknowledging 'this benefit of books' (l. 409) on his daughter's conduct. Nancy's marriage to Harry involves mediation on both sides: 'The coarser manners she in part remov'd, / In part endur'd, improving and improv'd' (ll. 379–80). Harry's adaptation resembles the 'feminization' of man's sensibility that Jones identifies in the eighteenth century.

These narrative complications qualify Crabbe's pre-applied warnings: reading may in fact be beneficial for young women, and may not specifically lead to a desire for social elevation; Nancy may retain her tastes while remaining in her social rank. These ambiguities reflect the confusions for a middle-class female reader. Similarly, in 'Opening of the Pasture', Clare complicates any standardized view on refinement. His poem displaces the concerns of middle-class females to a tale about the lower orders. At the same time, this work is one of Clare's fullest representations of labouring-class female subjectivity.

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[132] Peter New, *George Crabbe's Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1976), p. 158.

**'Opening of the Pasture': A Dialogue on Courtship**

'Opening of the Pasture – Love & Flattery' (*MP*, I, 254–75), written between 1823 and 1824, is a pastoral dialogue between two maids, Lucy and Mary, who are milking their cows. It is set in spring, the symbolic time of new life; Clare describes the wren

> Who neath the hovels thatch with spring-hopes blest
> Began to hang & build its curious nest
> Of hair & feathers & root mosses green
> It watched about & pickt its feathers clean
> (ll. 9–12)

The women too are preparing, metaphorically, to build their own homes. The wren's choice of 'feathers clean' indicates a concern with appearances throughout the dialogue, as the girls discuss prospective suitors. The pastoral dialogue was a form frequently used by eighteenth-century women poets to explore a variety of social themes, often subversively.[133] Clare uses it to consider courtship and the possibilities of social advancement through the eyes of rural females.

The different perspectives of the two females allow Clare to create a discursive space in which he unsettles any unified view about whether a labouring-class female should seek social elevation. Lucy seeks a partner of a higher class, being 'sick of plough mens vulgar ways' (l. 71) and their possession of 'no more manners then a colt broke loose' (l. 87). In contrast, Mary cautions Lucy against aspiration, and has a fated view of one's social status:[134]

> The coarsest jointure & the hardest toil
> Is ever sweet while theres a friend to share
> The heavy lot thats fallen to our care

[133] Paula R. Backscheider, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry: Inventing Agency, Inventing Genre* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2005), pp. 52–54. See also Ann Messenger, *Pastoral Tradition and the Female Talent: Studies in Augustan Poetry* (New York: AMS Press, 2001).

[134] The characters Lucy and Mary appear in Clare's dialogue 'Pastoral 2nd – Jealousy' (*MP*, I, 276–90), written between 1823 and 1824, in which they take up similar positions regarding the choice of suitors. In comparison to 'Opening of the Pasture', there is less detail in this poem of the romantic advances made by the higher classes.

(ll. 169–71)

Mary constructs a socially stable, pastoral ideal of sweet toil, similar to Bloomfield's conception of 'chearful servitude' ('Spring', l. 30) in *The Farmer's Boy*. Her conservatism is grounded in cautionary folk advice, when she quotes a song: 'Theres mischief lurks beneath a flatterers tongue' (l. 102). Lucy, resembling the bored young girls in 'The Cross Roads', complains that Mary talks 'of sermons that are out of date' and speaks like 'an old almanack a year too late' (ll. 378–79). While More's pastoral dialogue *The Search after Happiness* (1762) had its young ladies being taught temperance and humility by an ancient shepherdess, Urania, Clare's females are given no guidance; having supplied an ending where Lucy is persuaded by Mary's words, he tellingly removed it from the final version.[135] As well as reflecting the concerns of his middle-class readers, they also register Clare's anxiety: Lucy, preferring the manners of the superior class, seems alienated from her peers; at the same time, Mary reads Bloomfield's poetry, which briefly unsettles her own sense of social position.

The maids' encounters with courting men usually take place at evening or night. Ekirch notes, 'During the day, social oversight and the requirements of work, among the lower and middle orders, sharply curtailed opportunities for sexual transgressions.'[136] Dusk allows Lucy and Mary to speak of their 'evening thoughts of love' (l. 7), their privacy enabled by their hiding in 'a closes nook' (l. 1). Their loquacity can be contrasted with the relative silence of the females in 'Jockey & Jinney' and 'Valentine Eve', passive figures who bear close parental supervision; Lucy and Mary do not mention their parents. There is, instead, a stronger sense of their having to negotiate

[135] In this ending – absent from the copy-text version in Pet. MS B8 – Lucy finds herself 'of a wavering mind'. She is tempted to seek out her rural courter 'poor Simon' again: 'His plain hearts like a Gem in meaner case / I cannot put a better in its place'. Lucy now places new importance on the 'plainness' she disregarded. See *MP*, I, 273n; *Cottage Tales*, p. 124. Clare mentions Hannah More to characterize the moralistic 'Dramas' that the parson James Plumptre had sent him, in a letter to Markham E. Sherwill (3 May 1820), *Letters*, p. 56.
[136] Ekirch, p. 191.

problems of courtship with increased independence, taking advice from each other and, as it emerges, from polite literature. At the same time, they appear particularly vulnerable to the aggressive advances of men.

Lucy and Mary's fragile autonomy in matters of courtship bears relation to the fragile status of the land on which they work. Goodridge finds in Clare's more 'shocking' narratives about sexual betrayal a metaphorical link between the betrayal of woman and the betrayal of the landscape: 'We could say that his poetry is constantly concerned with loss and betrayal, human/male rapaciousness, the politics of exploitation. This theme may also be seen to relate to the theme of control (or lack of control) over one's environment, and one's existence and destiny.'[137] Spring is the time when the common fields were opened for pasturing cows or sheep – a practice that had been frequent in Clare's local area in the eighteenth century.[138] In Helpston, according to Barrell, it is possible that 'there were villagers who before the enclosure had kept cows, but at the enclosure had been unable to persuade the commissioners of their right to do so'.[139] The poem's setting is historically uncertain and politically charged. Mary states that she works for a master, but the image of the women milking cows is evocative, at least, of pre-enclosure life working independently on the commons (the first award for the enclosure of Helpston was passed in 1809), while the fact that she reads Bloomfield's 'The Broken Crutch' (published in 1806) places it in the very recent past.[140]

The interacting community of 'Opening of the Pasture' is more socially diverse than the sealed labouring-class community typified in 'Jockey & Jinney'. If 'The

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[137] Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, p. 165.
[138] Neeson, *Commoners*, p. 317.
[139] Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, p. 215.
[140] As regards the poem's tone of nostalgia, it may be significant that it was one of the first poems Clare copied out following his move to Northborough in 1832 (Pet. MS B8, p. 61). Clare sketched Glinton Church in the margin at the point when Mary speaks for the first time (his childhood sweetheart Mary was from Glinton), see Bate, *John Clare*, p. 391.

Broken Crutch' attempts to nullify social tensions, 'Opening of the Pasture' interrogates more closely the divisions between various groups. A pressing concern of gender relations in the eighteenth century had been: 'How is an innocent servant girl to act when her wicked master decides it is his right to seduce her?'.[141] It was a question that met with a response in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), and that also frequently occupied conduct literature.[142] 'Opening of the Pasture' frames a similar problem, as it reveals, from below, the dangers to which labouring-class females were routinely exposed from men of higher classes. Mary tells how her master calls her from her work at night:

> [he'll] joke the while
> That my fair looks was never made for toil
> & says tis pity that so fine a face
> Neer met with favours for a better place
> I sneak away & blush out right for shame
> & mutter madness tho I fear to blame
> Yet he shall never make my weakness win
> (ll. 276–82)

Her 'fear to blame' prompts her to remain silent about such a situation; only in this hidden dialogue can she articulate her concerns.

When Mary rejects the advances of a 'foolish fop' wearing 'gay white stockings' (ll. 370–71), he is savage in his rebuttal:

> He'd talk with other girls & said though I
> Had got a face that might the proof belie
> Yet I was one of lifes low clownish breed
> & want of manners made me plain indeed
> (ll. 366–69)

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[141] J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (London and New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), p. 94.

[142] Lance Bertelsten, 'Popular Entertainment and Instruction, Literary and Dramatic: Chapbooks, Advice Books, Almanacs, Ballads, Farces, Pantomimes, Prints and Shows', in *The Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660–1780*, ed. by John Richetti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 61–86 (p. 70).

These men both provoke Mary by drawing attention to the external evidence of refinement: her master tells her that her face merits 'a better place', but the fop claims that she ultimately appears 'plain'.

These types of remarks explain the girls' perennial concern with appearances and falsehood. Mary warns about the deception of the 'dressy beau' (l. 99), and claims that 'By looks the gentleman is poorly told' (l. 232). Lucy, in contrast, scorns the pretentiousness of labouring-class men:

> A scarlet waist coat is their common wear
> Tis ploughmens livery – that I cannot bear
> & then a ribbon dangles from his hat
> He thinks himself a down right squire with that
> I hate such tawdry whims & blockhead taste
> A gipsey looks much better when hes drest
> (ll. 77–82)[143]

The only males whose appearance is reliably consistent with their refinement, and whom both women regard highly, are the upper classes. Mary encounters a Lord at night, identifiable by his good manners as he 'touched his hat & made a bow' (l. 242), and is flattered by his conduct: 'Such pleasant actions better shows a man / Then proud pretending cox comb fooleries can' (ll. 256–57). The episode indicates that Mary, too, may be enticed by the allure of higher-class living, and her moral stance is then further complicated by her interest in polite literature.[144] She reveals that a poor youth gave her a copy of 'Bloomfields Poems' (l. 292) and instructed her to read 'The Broken Crutch', telling her: 'Theres luck [...] your face might get as much' (l. 297). Clare represents

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[143] Another of Clare's romantic tales, 'Going to the Fair' (*MP*, III, 91–118), written between 1828 and 1830, contrasts the obnoxious 'Footman Tim in his gilt gaudy suit / Tapping with pride his cane upon his boot' (ll. 251–52) with the good, humble servant Simon, as suitors for Mary.

[144] On the reading habits of the labouring classes in this period, see Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900*, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 240–59; St. Clair, pp. 339–56. Barry Reay notes that in rural areas during the nineteenth century, there may have been a substantial number of 'hidden' female readers of books, 'The Context and Meaning of Popular Literacy: Some Evidence from Nineteenth-Century Rural England', *Past and Present*, 131 (1991), 89–129.

Bloomfield's poem as a work that encourages social elevation. Mary compares herself to Peggy:

> – I loved the poems & the story too
> But with the lady I had small to do
> I owned no face to stir a poets pen
> While common praise belongs to common men
> (ll. 298–301)

Despite Mary's scepticism – again, the proof of value centres on her 'face' – Bloomfield's work makes her more ambivalent towards the desire for social elevation than at any other point in the dialogue:

> Twas not my inclination & desire
> To set my cap at farmer Gent or Squire
> But Bloomfields Poems theyre so sweet to hear
> They live with me like neighbours all the year
> & when the rooks their nests & noises bring
> To the tall elm trees at the early spring
> So true their rapture with the tale agrees
> I almost see the Hall between the trees
> & when I cross the plank that strides the brook
> Oer eastwell green – I even stop to look
> For Mary Meldrum & the shooting squire
> So green the story comes my thoughts admire
> (ll. 304–15)

The rooks offer a literal parallel to seeking 'elevation' by residing in the tall trees. The contrast introduced by 'But Bloomfields Poems' is revelatory, allowing Mary to imply – without explicitly admitting – that the book flatters her hopes of social advancement. In a conversation that continually uncovers falsehoods, it is Bloomfield's work which offers some sort of 'truth', realized in Mary's visions and concurrently in her sympathies. As conduct writers had warned against, she is momentarily seduced by imaginative literature.

At a time when the market for poetry is in decline, Clare is offering a new identity for Bloomfield's (and his own) potential readers. He is more obviously inviting middle-class women to compare themselves with labouring-class females, as if they read the same literary texts. Clare is interested in how print culture might impact upon

the most important decision that a labouring-class woman could make. E. P. Thompson writes: 'where oral tradition is supplemented by growing literacy, the most widely circulated printed products, such as chapbooks, almanacs, broadsides, "last dying speeches" and anecdotal accounts of crime, tend to be subdued to the expectations of the oral culture rather than challenging it with alternatives'.[145] In 'Opening of the Pasture', however, printed works unsettle conventional wisdom – exemplified by Mary's fatalistic folk lessons – with a dynamic alternative.

Mary, in her exposure to polite literature, undergoes her own process of 'refinement' which bears similarity to Giddens's theory of disembeddedness, in that the disembedded individual becomes aware of new ways of looking at social practices, re-examining them in the light of 'incoming information'. The penetration of polite culture into rural life creates new conflicts for the labouring-class female. In contrast to Lucy's taste for a higher-class way of life, Mary's habit of reading poetry and her thoughts of social elevation do not prove to be entirely disruptive to her sense of social position. She is not the naive female reader that conduct literature often imagines, but a self-conscious one, acknowledging that the kind of events narrated in 'The Broken Crutch', and indeed 'Valentine Eve', are commonly found in books: 'We read of servants cast in fortunes way / Who bye & bye grow ladys' (ll. 336–37). Like Crabbe's Nancy, she can reconcile herself to her social position, without neglecting her polite interests.

Nevertheless, shortly after discussing Bloomfield, Mary now offers a less complacent view on her poverty:

> – Tis pity that distinctions so confounds
> That flimsy paper marked with many pounds
> Should make its rude possessors gentlemen
> & give them lisence but with tongue & pen
> To deal out mischief at their idle will
> & ruin maids – yet men of honour still
> While men with nothing but an honest fame
> Who leave the world as poor as when they came

[145] E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, p. 8.

> By having nothing bear all sorts of scorn
> & stand in prides way like a worthless thorn
> Worth stands for nought where moneys worth stands first
> & poorer folks are sure to be the worst
> (ll. 422–33)

While ‘worth’ meant ‘wealth’ in ‘Valentine Eve’, here Mary’s wearied repetition of the word exposes her confusion, and threatens to render the term meaningless. Her speech suggests the metaphorical connection between the maid’s and the land’s vulnerability in the enclosure image of the ‘worthless thorn’ standing in the way of ‘pride’ (she mentions beforehand another of her suitors, ‘Mr Pride’ (l. 412)). The reference to men with ‘tongue & pen’ also points specifically to Clare’s own experience, in a brutal literary market: he conceives of the critics as ‘rude’ gentlemen, from whom he bears ‘all sorts of scorn’.

Clare is building various metaphorical links in this speech, summoning a collective of the vulnerable and virtuous comprised of ‘men with nothing’, Mary, Lucy, the land, and himself. However, these parallels also serve to highlight differences, and it is too simple to declare that Clare’s moral conclusion is to place himself as a poor victim of the rich. He has a sympathetic connection, contrastingly, to both Lucy’s sense of alienation and Mary’s (highly complex) sense of belonging. Clare’s difficulty in placing himself in their dialogue, and in the wider collective that he establishes in Mary’s speech, stems from another difficulty – that of determining his place in society. Equally, his dialogue responds sympathetically to the attitudes that some of his middle-class female readers may have felt towards social elevation, precisely by revealing the complexity of labouring-class attitudes.

**Conclusion**

Across these tales, to varying degrees, Clare indicates a tension between the instructive framework and realist detail. He shows that his own attitudes in matters of respectability, refinement and social elevation were more complex than any straight moral could contain, and by articulating these attitudes he forges a sympathetic parallel between himself and his female readers. 'Opening of the Pasture' is the artistic high-point of the tales discussed in this chapter, being the most revelatory in its depiction of the 'dirty reality' of rural life. In 'Jockey & Jinney' and 'The Memory of Love', Clare sanitizes potentially unsavoury details of rural courtship by adopting a moral framework, while also conveying a sense of exotic freedom; in 'Valentine Eve', his technique is to present an even more idyllic view of rural life, offering little sense of the procedures of courtship. It is in 'Opening of the Pasture' that Clare provides his most insightful view of the predicament of labouring-class females. Within this tale, he attempts to recapture the important, provocative nature of poetry, and thereby justify its relevance to readers of diverse social backgrounds.

My chapter has reassessed the role of the female reader in Clare's work, an aspect that undoubtedly still deserves further critical examination. I have argued that Clare provides an important perspective for our understanding of labouring-class females, and how contemporary middle-class females may have related to their experiences. By focusing on Clare's less 'shocking' courtship tales, I have shed light upon a strand of his work which has received insufficient critical attention until now, and argued for their particular importance in understanding Clare's negotiation of the problems of realist social observation.

Far from being an isolated dreamer, unconcerned by the tastes of the literary market, Clare chose to write the courtship tale because it was a popular form. His

participation in this genre does not stifle his poetry, but energizes it. Challenged to engage with the interests of his readers, he was invited to engage with his own position as a writer and productively explore different ways of looking at the complex dynamics of rural courtship.

# Chapter Four

## National Perspectives: Finding a Sense of Order

> I had never been above 8 miles from home in my life and I coud not fancy england much larger then the part I knew
>
> (*Autobiographical Writings*, p. 58)

This extract from Clare's autobiographical writings recalls a point in his adolescence, prior to 1807, when his uncle invited him to work as a clerk in Wisbech, forty miles from Helpston.[1] The image presented here of Clare, despite his youth, corresponds with much of the critical approach to his work. A consensus has developed that he is a 'local' poet, who writes about 'the part [he] knew'; his work focuses on activity which is precisely observable, in his rural community.

In this chapter, I examine Clare's attempts to represent a sense of a larger order, beyond the rural community – as when, in the quotation above, he speaks of the ability to 'fancy england'. To do so, Clare must lift his gaze from the realm of concrete observation, to describe the kind of relations which cannot be directly observed, and which therefore have to be imagined. His poetry engages with various discourses on the nation in his time, during a period of political crisis. Through his attempts to imagine ideas of order, Clare demonstrates increasing scepticism as to whether one can find any unifying ideas of a larger, national community. This chapter, then, examines the problem of representation on a national scale, rather than at a local level.

My chapter traces Clare's developing scepticism chronologically. Two national events, in particular, provide focal points for the discussion: the battle of Waterloo in 1815, a moment of imagined unity; and the 'Captain Swing' riots that took place across rural England between 1830 and 1832, a moment of social disorder. Some of Clare's earliest poems represent harmonious configurations of a larger community: the idea of a

[1] Bate, *John Clare*, pp. 67–74.

divine hierarchy, which binds all of man together; and the glory of military victory, which specifically unites the nation in celebration. In the decade or so after Waterloo, his work shows increasing disillusion concerning any fantasy of belonging to a larger, hierarchical community. His poems on enclosure express locally focused discontent, but it is his poems on coins in the mid-1820s that extrapolate this anger to a corrupted image of the nation, questioning the idea of a national order based on economic relations.

The labourer's disillusion raises the possibility of a new way of imagining the nation, related to a developing 'class-consciousness'. In the latter part of my chapter, I attend to how Clare's poem on the 'Swing' riots, 'The Hue & Cry', demonstrates an ambivalent response to this idea of solidarity. The 'Swing' riots present a point of difficulty for Clare, as he is confronted with two politically opposed models for imagining the nation: the vertical conception, representing an idealized image of the sealed community; and the horizontal conception, that 'radical' views in the period were perpetuating. This poem shows his dismay with both radical and conservative influences, as he perceives that in each case ideas of collectivity collapse under the weight of self-interest.

Developing chronologically, Clare's scepticism may be linked to the changing historical circumstances. The victory at Waterloo marked an important, unifying moment, giving rise to a period of national euphoria. Linda Colley's *Britons* emphasizes the Napoleonic wars as crucial to the formation of British identity: while fighting the French, the nation could reach a state of self-definition by opposing itself to a hostile Other.[2] The euphoric aftermath of Waterloo simultaneously entailed a new anxiety: how to maintain the same sense of nationhood in a time of peace. Philip Shaw recognizes the paradoxical quality of the historical moment: 'At once the symbol of national perfection

[2] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*, 2nd edn (London: Pimlico, 2003).

and the point at which symbolization fails – for henceforth the shape of the nation is hazy and undetermined, open to contestation from within – we might do well to conceive of Waterloo as a wound or fissure in the text of historical memory.'[3] At a national level, the fractious political mood in the years after Waterloo was signposted by various incidents: the Spa Fields demonstrations, organized by Spencean radicals in December 1816; the suspension of Habeas Corpus between 1817 and 1818, which allowed radicals to be arrested without trial; the 'Peterloo' attacks on supporters of reform in 1819; and the repressive legislation of the Six Acts that followed, to limit press criticism.[4]

During the post-war period, the rural labourer had particular reason for discontent. The English economy was depressed, and the poor rates were rising. The passage of the Corn Law in 1815, by a parliament motivated by landed interests, kept prices of corn and therefore bread artificially high. Despite the peace, taxes and rents were maintained at their wartime rates. Across the country, farmers reacted by cutting back wages and the numbers of labourers they employed – although, in comparison to most rural areas, Helpston was relatively healthy in terms of employment opportunities during the period after enclosure**.**[5] Nevertheless, the disappearance of common rights under the process of agricultural improvement undoubtedly caused additional hardship among the poorest. The movement from long-term employment and boarding to temporary, usually seasonal, day labour, meant not only an uncertain future for labourers, but also an altered, fractious relationship with their social superiors, particularly farmers.[6]

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[3] Philip Shaw, *Waterloo and the Romantic Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 6.
[4] P. M. S. Dawson, 'Poetry in an Age of Revolution', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. by Curran, pp. 48–73.
[5] Helsinger, p. 103; Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, p. 209.
[6] Neeson, *Commoners*, pp. 5–15. See also Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660–1900*, p. 9.

A manifestation of rural discontent came at the 'Captain Swing' riots – a catch-all term for various rural disturbances which occurred between 1830 and 1832 in the south and east of England, and which reached their height in Clare's own neighbourhood in December 1830 and January 1831.[7] The 'Swing' riots present a moment of open rebellion across a large part of the country, and therefore an important precursor to – if not a direct cause of – the passage of the Great Reform Act of 1832.

In addition to these historical circumstances, one can also map Clare's scepticism onto his changing conception of himself as a poet. *The Shepherd's Calendar* had proved to be a failure in comparison to his earlier collections, selling only 425 copies by the middle of 1829.[8] Perhaps in reaction to these receding prospects, Clare began to write for provincial newspapers, and thus addresses local readers of a social status closer to his own. This did not lead, however, to him becoming a radical voice in the manner of William Cobbett. Indeed, Clare's faltering attempts to imagine the nation also show that he finds even his local community to be alienating and unknowable. Clare ultimately reaches a point of self-consciousness: like other writers of rural life, he too is an opinion-maker, exploiting his community by presenting an image of it for his own gain.

**Critical Context: Clare as a National Poet**

The political aspect of Clare's writing has received comparatively less interest than his nature poems and love poems, as Eric Robinson observes in the important collection, *A Champion for the Poor: Political Verse and Prose*.[9] So far, the critical attention to Clare's political work has often been preoccupied with establishing his party allegiance.

[7] E. J. Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1969), p. 19.
[8] Bate, *John Clare*, p. 308.
[9] *CFTP*, p. ix.

John Lucas, while accepting that he cannot prove it unambiguously, emphasizes the latent radical quality of Clare's writing which was apparently stifled by his editors, and Leonora Nattrass takes a similar approach; P. M. S. Dawson has tempered this estimation of Clare's radicalism, reassigning the poet's views under the term 'common sense'.[10]

A prose fragment of Clare's indicates his weariness of political partisanship: 'the terms Wig & Tory & Radical are only distinctions between the actors in the play'.[11] The slipperiness of his views is indicated by the fact that he wrote for both conservative newspapers such as *The Bee* and radical ones such as John Drakard's *Stamford Champion*.[12] Robinson recognizes Clare's inconsistency while asserting that he was 'conservative rather than radical'. He attempts to find the one certainty in the poet's politics: 'essentially he presents the same outlook through all his work – the local reactions of a poor man in Helpston [...] His politics are local, or at most regional, rather than national'. As poems such as 'The Parish' show, Clare views politics through the impact on the observable community: 'He is less concerned with the tithe as a general economic problem, than with his parson's transformation into a hunting, shooting, carriage-riding member of the gentry as a consequence of the commutation of the tithe.'[13]

This familiar emphasis on the 'local' quality of Clare's views has been countered, more recently, by critics who have demonstrated the poet's considerable involvement in intellectual circles far beyond his locality. Alan Vardy – while admitting that 'much more research remains to be done' before we can be certain of how Clare

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[10] Lucas, 'Clare's Politics', pp. 148–77; Leonora Nattrass, 'John Clare and William Cobbett: The Personal and the Political', in *The Independent Spirit*, ed. by Goodridge, pp. 44–54; P. M. S. Dawson, 'Common Sense or Radicalism? Some Reflections on Clare's Politics', *Romanticism*, 2 (1996), 81–97.
[11] Pet. MS A45, p. 31, repr. in *CFTP*, p. 293.
[12] Alan Vardy, 'Clare and Political Equivocation', *JCSJ*, 18 (1999), 37–48 (p. 39).
[13] *CFTP*, pp. xiv, xv.

viewed himself politically – emphasizes the poet's correspondence with national figures such as William Hone and James Montgomery, and his involvement in the intellectual circle of *London Magazine*.[14] The work of Mina Gorji and Paul Chirico has also been important in refuting the idea of Clare as a culturally and intellectually isolated figure.[15]

Lucas and Elizabeth Helsinger have both made the case for Clare as a 'national' poet. Lucas admits that Clare finds it difficult to assert solidarity with others: 'He is more often in a prolonged, conceivably unending retreat, partly occasioned by those experiences of separation that leave him deeply unsure about where to locate a sense of community other than somewhere "back there", in the past.'[16] Nevertheless, Lucas claims that Clare offers a certain kind of 'Englishness', precisely because of his 'outlaw' status: 'Being English could typically come to mean a set of complementary but more often contradictory awarenesses, including those of class, regionalism, and perhaps gender'. Because Clare's voice challenges and disrupts totalizing national myths, 'as it *must* do, it has to be registered as specifically English'.[17] The difficulty with this line of argument is that it becomes truistic: Clare is English, so long as one defines 'Englishness' as essentially individual, protean, non-unifying.

Helsinger argues that Clare's 'peasant poetry' is potentially 'national' because it crafts a language for England's dispossessed. She observes how Clare's depiction of the rural scene resists its appropriation as a metaphor for Englishness based on possessive individualism. Instead, in his enclosure poems and his later, 'green language' poems, Clare articulates an alternative understanding of relations to the land, invoking 'use' rather than ownership as the basis for national subjectivity. However, Helsinger is still hesitant in affirming Clare's work as fully representative of a class-consciousness: 'To

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[14] Vardy, *John Clare, Politics and Poetry*, p. 167.
[15] Mina Gorji, *John Clare and the Place of Poetry*; Paul Chirico, *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader*.
[16] Lucas, *England and Englishness*, pp. 148–49.
[17] Lucas, *England and Englishness*, pp. 7, 160.

imagine different relations of perception and a new language is not equivalent to creating them.'[18]

My argument shares Vardy's conviction that the 'local' aspect of Clare's politics has been over-emphasized. However, while Vardy concentrates on the evidence of Clare's interest in national, political issues, I am more concerned with the tensions that emerge between the local perspective and the ideas of larger orders, or rather, 'national' perspectives, in his poetry. It is these tensions that both Lucas and Helsinger encounter, and which problematize their attempts to figure Clare as a 'national' poet. My chapter considers these tensions as productive ones, which increasingly preoccupy Clare's poetry and which ultimately lead him to increased self-consciousness.

**Imagining the Nation**

In most of the poems discussed in this chapter, I am interested in Clare's conceptions of the 'nation'. Generally, by nation he refers to England rather than Britain, though sometimes these are interchangeable; there are also poems under discussion, particularly 'The Hue & Cry', which are seemingly 'about' the nation without ever specifying what it is. This ambiguity is reflective of Clare's own struggle to conceive of a suitable national model.

In considering how ideas of the 'nation' come about, I am largely drawing upon the theory conceptualized by Benedict Anderson, who identifies the period in which Clare lived – the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – as the point of emergence for 'nationalism'. Anderson defines the nation as 'an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign'. Two mechanisms of print capitalism, in particular, contribute to this imagining: the novel and the

[18] Helsinger, p. 158.

newspaper. Thus, when reading a newspaper on the same day, individuals who will never meet one another are linked in 'homogeneous, empty time'.[19]

Therefore, nationalism is a psychological phenomenon, and this is what primarily distinguishes Anderson's theory from Ernest Gellner's earlier, influential account of nationalism. According to Anderson, Gellner 'assimilates "invention" [of the nation] to "fabrication" and "falsity", rather than to "imagining" and "creation"', and thus 'implies that "true" communities exist', outside of this imagining. Anderson's retort is that 'all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined', and therefore that communities 'are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined'.[20]

Anderson's theory inevitably invites certain criticisms: Helsinger claims that it does not account for those who are removed from print culture, and 'displaces rather than resolves the question of membership: whose imaginations, whose consciousness do we consult?'[21] However, Anderson's theory is especially relevant for a discussion of Clare's work, since his poetry is engaged with various, competing 'imaginings' of the nation, and finds the limitations of these views. It should be noted, too, that Clare's poetry demonstrates how models of nationalism could be carried imaginatively among the unlettered labouring poor. News of wars reached the villages, and, as Robinson states, issues of the Corn Laws and of agricultural unrest 'were discussed throughout the nation – in parliament, on the hustings, in pubs, in ballads and chapbooks, in vaudeville

[19] Anderson, pp. 6, 24. Elie Kedourie places a similar date to nationalism's emergence in Europe, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in *Nationalism*, 4th edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

[20] Anderson, p. 6. Anderson is referring here to Ernest Gellner's *Thought and Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964); Gellner subsequently expands his theory in *Nations and Nationalism*, 2nd edn (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

[21] Helsinger, p. 11. Anthony Smith similarly argues that Anderson's theory bypasses 'the need to give an overall structural explanation of historical groups of nations', as well as querying how the theory accounts for an individual not only imagining the nation, but loving it and being willing to die for it; Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 142.

shows and in newspapers' – among them the *Stamford Mercury*, which had been running since 1695.[22] The unstable realm of public opinion crossed over from print culture into conversation, which infected all ranks of society.

**Clare's Early Conceptions of Social Order**

Clare's earliest poems are not without social complaint. As has been mentioned, his poem 'Helpstone' raged at 'Accursed wealth', resulting in the displeasure of Lord Radstock.[23] The early poem 'On Mr – locking up the Public Pump' (*EP*, I, 16) targets the individual who 'to nor Cats nor Dogs one crumb bestows' nor to the 'begging Wretch' (ll. 12–13), and predates similar complaints in 'The Parish' about Old Saveall who 'in dry times locks up his very wells' (l. 444). Another early poem, 'Chubs Reply' (*EP*, I, 111–12), begins, 'Nature unequal modelizes all / Some she makes great and others mighty small' (ll. 1–2), a couplet that might be initially be read as conservative acceptance, were it not for the fact that this smallness is attributed to a snobbish, middle-class fop who is duly humiliated by the labourer Chub. This poem concludes with a more levelling pronouncement: 'For Madam Wit no chuser of her place / Is often cloath'd in rags as well as lace' (ll. 43–44).

None of these poems, however, could be regarded as an attempt to imagine beyond the village. Even in 'Helpstone', where a national procedure of parliamentary enclosure is exerting its visible effects, the poem's complaint is local, repeatedly turning on the narrator's elegiac attachment to his 'native place' (l. 71). A rare instance in Clare's early work where complaint is lifted to national-scale imagining is in 'Lobin Clouts satirical sollilouquy on the times' (*EP*, I, 137–38) – framed dramatically as the

[22] *CFTP*, p. x; *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism in Great Britain and Ireland*, ed. by Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor (London: Academia Press, 2009), p. 514.
[23] Eliza Emmerson to Clare (11 May 1820), Eg. MS 2245, fols. 118$^{r}$–21$^{v}$, repr. in *Critical Heritage*, p. 61.

rustic voice of a character, and therefore kept at a certain distance from Clare himself. In his soliloquy, Lobin the labourer curses his master, with grim foreboding: 'So I mun wait an' I shal' see him sarv'd' (l. 25). When he ponders how other masters might act, he concludes that 'uthers ar' os bad' (l. 28), and that even one bad master is enough to 'foul a very nation throf an' throf' (l. 36).[24]

When Clare comes to imagine a larger sense of order in his earliest works, his attempts more commonly fall upon a conservatively minded sense of his place within a stable, vertically organized hierarchy. This sense is evident in two poems which this chapter now discusses: 'On seeing a Lost Greyhound in winter', which evokes a divine order, and 'Waterloo', which celebrates a national one.

**'On seeing a Lost Greyhound in winter' and The Great Chain of Being**

'On seeing a Lost Greyhound in winter lying upon the snow in the fields' (*EP*, I, 202–04) was published in *Poems Descriptive* in 1820, but written far earlier, probably between 1807 and 1809.[25] This places the poem at an intriguing point: during the Napoleonic wars, and prior to the effects of enclosure in Helpston.[26] In the poem, Clare's narrator encounters an abandoned greyhound and offers it sanctuary, invoking the idea of the Great Chain of Being which hierarchically links God, men and animals:

> For dogs as men are equally
> A link in natures chain
> Form'd by the hand that formed me
> Which formeth naught in vain
> (ll. 25–28)

[24] For a discussion of 'Lobin Clouts...' and 'Chubs Reply', see Stephen Colclough, '"Labour and Luxury": Clare's Lost Pastoral and the Importance of the Voice of Labour in the Early Poems', in *John Clare: New Approaches*, ed. by Goodridge and Kövesi, pp. 77–90 (pp. 83–86).
[25] *EP*, I, 571n. Clare writes, 'the Lost Greyhound was made while going and returning from Ashton one winters day', *Autobiographical Writings*, p. 102.
[26] 1809 was when the Act for the Enclosure of Helpston was passed, see Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, p. 106.

The claim that nothing is formed 'in vain', and the later reassurance that God will provide 'a shelter warm and drye / With every thing beside' (ll. 35–36) for both narrator and animal, suggest an idea of 'natures chain', in which God and the narrator both provide care.

The 'Great Chain of Being' – asserting that man had to act with responsibility to his inferiors, animals – was an idea that frequently circulated in the writings against cruelty to animals in the period.[27] Clare's poem recalls the poetry of sensibility: Burns's 'To a Mouse', written in 1785, exemplifies how this type of poetry moves from considering the object of compassion to imagining a larger sense of harmonious order – what his narrator refers to as 'Nature's social union' (l. 8).[28] This sensibility makes any acts of cruelty (and disruptions to that order) appear deeply unnatural in the context of natural benevolence.[29]

In 'On seeing a Lost Greyhound in winter', the Great Chain of Being is mapped onto human society, and thus the poem also attends to a larger order of a different, political sort – a stable hierarchy among men – as the greyhound metaphorically stands for the poor who are unemployed out of the harvest season:

> Like thee lost whelp the poor mans help
> Ere while so much desir'd
> Now harvests got is wanted not
> Or little is requir'd
> (ll. 13–16)

Robinson claims that in this poem Clare supports the idea of the Great Chain, 'which posited that every part of creation was in that position in which God had placed it, so

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[27] Soame Jenyns wrote: 'as we see that the lives and happiness of those below us are dependent on our wills, we may reasonable conclude, that our lives, and happiness are equally dependent on the wills of those above us', 'On Cruelty to Inferior Animals', in *Elegant Extracts in Prose, Selected for the Improvement of Young Persons*, 10th edn (London: Rivington, 1816), p. 956. See also Malcolmson, p. 136.

[28] *Burns*, I, 127–28.

[29] See Barker-Benfield, pp. 235–36. Clare makes a similar poetic gesture in another poem in *Poems Descriptive*, 'The Robin' (*EP*, I, 124–25), where the narrator offers sanctuary to the bird from a neighbouring man with a gun.

that the social hierarchy was part of the divine plan, and should be accepted as such'.[30] Vardy, in contrast, argues that 'the poem actually interrogates the sanctity of such hierarchies and struggles to free itself from them [...] It can more easily be read as a levelling image than an endorsement of aristocratic privilege.'[31]

Vardy's argument carries some weight, since much of the poem's concentration falls upon the poor condition of both the greyhound and the labourers. There is an obvious tension in the fact that Clare represents the abandoned poor as slaves ('now the over plus will be / As useles negros all', ll. 17–18), yet uses the idea of a chain as a reassuring image, in which all are protected by God:

> All life contains as't were by chains
> From him still perfect are
> Nor does he think the meanest link
> Unworthy of his Care
> (ll. 29–32)

According to this reading, Clare is satirizing the idea that reward is promised for constraining, hard labour – in a similar fashion to Blake's 'The Chimney Sweeper' in *Songs of Innocence* (1789), whose narrator concludes with the loaded moral: 'So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm' (l. 24).[32]

The sentiment of 'On seeing a Lost Greyhound in winter' falls somewhere between Robinson's and Vardy's interpretations, its ambiguity residing in the looseness of the central metaphor. In one sense, the metaphor is appropriate: the greyhound and the poor are both victims, and (as I have previously discussed) portraying the poor as animals that need to be controlled is a common trope in the rhetoric of social domination.[33] Clare may have had in mind Shakespeare's *Henry V*, where the king's 'Cry "God for Harry! England, and Saint George!"' speech employs the same image

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[30] *CFTP*, pp. liii–liv.
[31] Vardy, *John Clare, Politics and Poetry*, p. 168.
[32] *Blake: The Complete Poems*, ed. by W. H. Stevenson, 2nd edn (Harlow: Longman, 1989), pp. 68–69.
[33] Thomas, pp. 45–46.

regarding the lowest ranks of his men – 'I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips, / Straining upon the start' (III. 1. 31–32) – to imply energetic loyalty.[34] However, Clare's metaphor is also strained by the fact that he is writing within the mode of sensibility. Expressing pity to a solitary animal, as Burns does, is morally affirming; but when the animal comes to represent a whole mass of labourers, a response of pity appears inadequate and unsatisfactory. In particular, when the narrator offers to take in the greyhound at the end of the poem, the metaphor falters: he cannot 'take in' the labouring population too.

'On seeing a Lost Greyhound in winter' does not maintain the strong satirical tone that Vardy wishes to read into it, but its ambiguity still unsettles any comfortable message of conservatism. It may be that Clare, in his immaturity, does not sufficiently question the idea of the Great Chain, or its appropriateness within a social context. A less patronizing view, perhaps, is that Clare reproduces this perspective of pity while demonstrating his ambivalence towards such a gesture. The poem demonstrates an early attempt to find a sense of order beyond his local community, even if the result is unconvincing.

**'Waterloo' and Military Patriotism**

While 'On seeing a Lost Greyhound in winter' evokes a divine order, Clare presents an image that is expressively of the 'nation' in his poem 'Waterloo' (*EP*, I, 208–11), estimated to have been written in 1815. Throughout the 1820s, Clare would continue to write patriotic poems of military celebration; the years immediately after Waterloo, however, provide the greatest concentration of these poems. 'Waterloo' presents the victory as enabling a transcendent moment of unity.

[34] *Shakespeare*, pp. 639–71.

The sense of a national consciousness in Helpston is most evident in Clare's anecdotes on the period of the Napoleonic Wars. He recalls that in 1803, while aged ten, he witnessed his fellow villagers gathered 'at their doors in the evening to talk over the rebellion of '45 when the rebels reached Derby & even listened at intervals to fancy they heard the french "rebels" at Northampton knocking it down with their cannon'.[35] In the spring of 1812 – having turned eighteen the previous summer, and thus being eligible for military service – Clare joined the Eastern Regiment of the local Northampton militia.[36] He wrote of this period: 'the country was chin-deep in the fears of invasion & every mouth was filled with the terrors which Bonaparte had spread in other countries'.[37] Stephen Conway writes that in the mid-eighteenth century 'the militia remained sufficiently regionally based to act as a focus for local sentiment'; however, Colley links the massive expansion of militia in Britain after 1794 to the growth of a democratizing national consciousness.[38] Clare records the intense interest on the day he was sworn in:

> [...] the morning we left home our mothers parted with us as if we was going to Botany Bay & people got at their doors to bid us farewell & greet us with a Job's comfort that they doubted we should see Helpstone no more[39]

Newspapers played a crucial role in mediating knowledge of Waterloo across the country.[40] Clare's local newspaper, the *Stamford Mercury*, reprinted the *London*

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[35] *Prose*, p. 47.
[36] Bate, *John Clare*, pp. 77–78.
[37] *Prose*, p. 46.
[38] Stephen Conway, 'War and National Identity in the Mid-Eighteenth-Century British Isles', *The English Historical Review*, 116 (2001), 863–93 (p. 865); Linda Colley, 'Whose Nation? Class and National Consciousness in Britain 1750–1830', *Past and Present*, 113 (1986), 97–117 (p. 114).
[39] *Prose*, p. 47. Clare's militia experience ultimately only involved a couple of weeks of training, but as an enlisted soldier he was liable to be called up for service from 1812 until 1816, see Bate, *John Clare*, p. 79. See also Bob Heyes, 'John Clare and the Militia', *JCSJ*, 4 (1985), 48–54.
[40] In Britain, the number of provincial papers rose from 50 in 1782, to over 100 in 1808, to 150 by 1830, see Jeremy Black and Donald M MacRaild, *Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 131.

*Gazette*'s announcement proclaiming the 'Glorious News!' of the victory.[41] David Wilkie's painting *Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Gazette of the Battle of Waterloo* (1822), presented a miscellaneous crowd out on the street, reacting triumphantly to this same announcement on 22 June 1815.[42] The diversity of the crowd – including soldiers, casually dressed workers and women – assembled in a poor part of London, presents the idea of a nation united across social ranks. Indeed, the awareness that a Stamford man or woman might have of reading the same report as their countrymen precisely accords with Anderson's theory of how the nation came to be imagined**.**

In some cases, the patriotic celebrations that followed accord to an elite-approved and controlled sense of nationalism: for example, it was reported that in Hampshire the Marquis and Marchioness of Buckingham 'gave an entertainment to upwards of 600 poor persons [...] in celebration of the late glorious victory'.[43] At the same time, however, Colley notes that the national consciousness which the Napoleonic wars prompted among the working classes may not have been mere acquiescence to the wishes of the elite; indeed, for many social conservatives in the period, 'placing a premium on service to the nation was opening the door dangerously wide to a meritocracy'.[44]

Clare's 'Waterloo' repeatedly acknowledges the involvement of all social ranks in the celebration, making its opening appeal to two sets of recorders:

> Ye tip-top Southeys first in fame
> Ye poets worthy of the name
> Arise arise great Bards arise
> And sound your harps beyond the skies
> Ye finest songsters of the plains
> Ye Bloomfields sing your sweetest strains

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[41] *Stamford Mercury*, 23 June 1815.
[42] David Wilkie, *Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Gazette of the Battle of Waterloo* (1822), Wellington Collection, Apsley House, London.
[43] *Bury and Norwich Post*, 5 July 1815.
[44] Colley, 'Whose Nation?', p. 106.

> Touch your top notes and highest strings
> While England round with musick rings
> (ll. 1–8)

The narrator relegates his own song as among the 'meanest of the tunefull train' (l. 12); but since, as Bloomfield proves, even 'finest songsters' have a voice – a phrase who dualism approximates that of 'peasant poet' – Clare has established a space in which his poem can carry from beyond the plains, across a national community ('Britain' and 'England' are used interchangeably in this poem).

As this opening indicates, 'Waterloo' is delicately poised between a levelling celebration and one that respects the order of rank. The war heroes are 'all alike in Fame / None more worthy of the name' (ll. 77–78). However, this praise retains a consciousness of the superior, emblematic Briton, Wellington, in whom national loyalties are centred:

> British courage bold & true
> Fir'd the noble army through
> Gen'rals Privates all as one
> Each at heart a Wellin[g]ton
> (ll. 81–84)

As the soldiers return from battle, the narrator declares: 'I from my labour will away' (l. 33); his labour is covertly equated with the war effort to which it has economically contributed. There is a knowing allusion to the rural poet's usual fare, as if Clare is producing what is expected of him:

> Now it comes adieu to toil
> And my rural strains awhile
> Englands Victory now prevails
> Over loves unfinish'd tales
> Yes yes my bosom's fir'd from you
> Ye British flowers at Waterloo
> (ll. 39–44)

Euphoria – but also a hint of its ephemerality – is conferred by the repetitions of 'now' and 'yes', the latter repetition adding an extra, breathless stress to the line.[45] The poem

[45] Clare amended 'When' to the more immediate 'Now' (l. 39), see Nor. MS 1, p. 142.

draws on the resources of national poetry, its triumphalism carrying echoes of the pre-battle speech in *Henry V*: the levelling glory conferred on all the soldiers resembles Henry's 'For there is none of you so mean and base / That hath not noble lustre in your eyes' (III. 1. 29–30); 'Sheath your swords and march for home' (l. 66) triumphantly echoes Henry's description of English fathers who 'from morn till even fought, / And sheathed their swords for lack of argument' (III. 1. 20–21).

When Clare's narrator imagines the battle, the bloody scene is idealized as a demonstration of national valour:

> Smoak decends to hide the slain
> Britons wounded – glorious sight!
> With redoubl'd fury fight
> Prolong it fancy – let me view
> How Britons faught at Waterloo
>
> Whats Commanded now the cry
> 'Charge like Britons' rend the sky
> O! the savage blade is drawn
> Now the bloody work comes on
> Off they start Huzza's the noise
> O! your Courage british boys
> Now the soldier's valour's try'd
> Soldiers flail on Englands side
> Fancy rest – the trumpet blew
> Victorys gain'd at Waterloo
>
> (ll. 50–64)

The caesura after 'Britons wounded' gives way to a poetic invocation: 'fancy' is called upon to 'prolong' the vision. Anderson argues that the roots of nationalism are connected with death, hence the importance of the tomb of the unknown soldier: the idea of the nation looms out of an immemorial past.[46] The vision of courageous self-sacrifice in 'Waterloo' supports an idea of the nation that can transcend death. At the same time, Clare explicitly contains the 'bloody' scene – 'Fancy rest' breaks off the vision – as if dwelling too long on the mortal cost of war might compromise the poem's optimism.

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[46] Anderson, p. 11.

Other poems by Clare provide conventional translations of military suffering into glory, such as the early poem 'Death or Victory' (*EP*, I, 301–02); 'Death of the Brave: A Song' (*EP*, I, 248–50), written between 1815 and 1817; and the 1818 poem 'The Battle' (*EP*, I, 539–40). Another early poem, 'Hail England old England my Country & home' (*EP*, I, 38–39) celebrates England's heroes for their aggression, as the 'dread of the world' (l. 6). All of these, including 'Waterloo', were unpublished, but there are indications that Clare knew that such sentiments might be popular with a polite audience. The subtitle of 'The Battle' – 'an A Air Intended for a Dramatic Entertainment, "The Man of my Chusing"' – implies a particular (if unidentified) gentlemanly audience. In 1819 Clare offered the laudatory 'Lines on Wellington' (*EP*, I, 54–55) for publication in the *Stamford Mercury*, though it was rejected by Edward Drury for being 'ungrammatical'.[47]

It is curious that Clare continues to produce this patriotic verse at a time of increasing political tension. In the wake of Peterloo in August 1819, Clare was writing poems like 'Impromtu on the Battle of Alexandria in Egypt' (*EP*, I, 461), a nostalgic celebration of Britain's victory over France in 1801. Radstock, a naval captain, would have been an approving reader of such poems – but it is worth remembering that Clare only became acquainted with him for the first time in 1820, shortly after the first edition of *Poems Descriptive*.[48] In 1826, Clare planned some poems on the subject of naval warfare, writing to Taylor: 'I shall insert some imitations of the Provincial Poets in Sea Songs Love Ballads &c &c'.[49] One result was an unpublished series of sea songs (*MP*, IV, 90–99), offering praise to Sir Richard Grenville (1541–91), an English sea captain, and Queen Elizabeth. In addition, 'Nelson & the Nile' (*MP*, IV,100–05), a celebration

[47] Drury to Clare (undated), Eg. MS 2250, fol. 119$^{v}$; Clare wrote to Drury: 'I could wish to hear of this Trifle being in Mr. Newcombs "Mercury" next week – this would be taken a Great favour', Pet. MS A3, p. 132; see *Letters*, p. 9n.
[48] See *Letters*, p. 35n.
[49] Clare to Taylor (1 December 1826), *Letters*, p. 387. See also Emmerson to Clare (23 October 1826), Eg. MS 2247, fol. 219$^{v}$.

of Nelson's victory at the battle of the Nile in 1798, was printed in the *Stamford Champion* on 5th June 1830, and in *Drakard's Stamford News* three days later.

Clare's production of patriotic poems, nevertheless, contrasts with his other expressions of national discontent following the war. In the wake of Waterloo, a latent, unifying force was the collective pity and gratitude expressed towards returning veterans. In Clare's vicinity, newspapers advertised a charity ball and theatrical performance as well as church services of thanksgiving, and collections were made in Stamford from house to house for the families of deceased soldiers and wounded veterans, so that 'every inhabitant of this borough will have an opportunity of joining in the general contribution'.[50] His poem 'Poor Soldier' (*EP*, II, 396), written between 1819 and 1820, exposes an unintended consequence of such appeals. A returning veteran begs for 'a crust', only for a speaker to respond: 'deeply my bosom does grieve / To tell thee a crust is the height of my store' (ll. 22–23). Here, the patriotism that Clare's other poems championed is deflated by the domestic experience of deprivation**.**

My chapter now examines how such expressions of discontent increasingly come to infect Clare's conceptions of the nation during the 1820s, as images of disunity begin to appear alongside poems of patriotic celebration. The manifestation of disunity is particularly evident in his 'Coin' poems, in which the idea of a stable, vertically organized national economy is shown to be corrupted. This realization invites Clare to consider, more fully, alternative ways of imagining the nation.

**Growing Disillusion**

Clare addresses his country in a conventionally conservative tone in 'England' (*EP*, II, 69–71), written in April 1820. The narrator states that England 'shoudst be free' (l. 50),

[50] *Stamford Mercury*, 7 July 1815; 28 July 1815; 11 August 1815.

but at the same time warns, 'be patient & bear your chains lightly' (l. 45). Those 'false prophets' (l. 18) who proclaim freedom recall the Parliamentarians – the 'rebel hypocrites' (l. 27) – of the Civil War:[51]

> Look at thy state in their power – was it freedom
> Laws broke & kings murderd was that to be free
> While basest of savages lurkd to succeed 'em
> (ll. 29–31)

Clare sent this poem to Taylor with the remark, 'I think I shall stand a chance for the Laureat Vacancy next time it turns out!!!!'.[52] Nevertheless, Clare's conservatism was not merely parroted to appease polite readers, but was also deeply felt in his vitriolic opposition to the changes wrought by parliamentary enclosure.

Both Lucas and Helsinger have seized upon Clare's anti-enclosure poem 'The Mores' (*MP*, II, 347–50) as evidence of his emerging national solidarity with the labourer: Lucas writes that it articulates 'a representative English experience', while Helsinger finds the poem to be important in demonstrating a new political consciousness in Clare.[53] The poem's use of the general categories of 'labour' and 'poor' – 'Inclosure came & trampled on the grave / Of labours rights & left the poor a slave' (ll. 19–20) – certainly suggests a sense of disillusionment that might be shared among the labouring poor, regarding the arrangement of social and economic relations. However, the poem's perception of modernization's threat to the traditional community, particularly in its description of the enclosers' 'rebel schemes' (l. 79 – recalling the 'rebel hypocrites' in 'England'), also expresses a conservative response.

Clare's sentiment in 'The Mores' resembles what E. P. Thompson identifies as the paradoxically traditional and rebellious character of eighteenth-century plebeian

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[51] On Clare's sympathies with the Royalist cause in the Civil War, see James McKusick, 'William Cobbett, John Clare and the Agrarian Politics of the English Revolution', in *Radicalism in British Literary Culture, 1650–1830: From Revolution to Revolution*, ed. by Timothy Morton and Nigel Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 167–82.
[52] Clare to Taylor (19 April 1820), *Letters*, p. 51.
[53] Lucas, *England and Englishness*, p. 150; Helsinger, p. 148.

culture: 'The conservative culture of the plebs as often as not resists, in the name of custom, those economic rationalizations and innovations (such as enclosure, work-discipline, unregulated "free" markets in grain) which rulers, dealers, or employers seek to impose.'[54] Such a paradox continues to feature in nineteenth-century radicalism: as will be discussed, there is a conservative nostalgia inherent in the political writing of Cobbett.

Clare's expressed attitude towards enclosure might be deemed 'representative' of the labourer's experience. However, the difficulty in making claims for 'The Mores' as a 'national' poem is that its focus is confined to a specific locality, drawing upon visible data. There is no indication that Clare is thinking about a region other than the fens, and the poem does not launch into any imaginative consideration of a larger sense of order that might have equal relevance beyond the village, as 'On seeing a Lost Greyhound in winter' or 'Waterloo' variously do.

Clare more obviously channels his disillusionment into an engagement with the national economic order in the 'Coin' poems that he writes later in the decade: 'Bless thy old fashioned copper face', 'Thou king of half a score dominions' and 'Address to an old Halfpenny' – all of which have been ignored in Clare criticism. In each of these works, an encounter with an abandoned coin prompts the narrator to consider his own place, in a post-enclosure context, within a system of economic relations that extends far beyond the village.

[54] E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, p. 9.

**The 'Coin' Poems and the Economic Order**

As Neeson emphasizes, enclosure revealed 'the new reality of class relations'.[55] Barrell notes, 'one important motive to enclose was often, precisely, to deprive the labourer of his right of access to commons, to make him more dependent on his wages, and thus to create a surplus of labour and keep wages low.'[56] The 'Coin' poems assess this new dependency.

By the time Clare wrote the poems, there had been substantial withdrawals and introductions of different halfpennies in circulation. A new issue of halfpennies was made between 1798 and 1799.[57] In consequence, during the early nineteenth century, members of the public spontaneously began to refuse the old halfpennies which had been issued from 1719 to 1774; accordingly, from 1814 to 1817, the Mint issued a withdrawal for these older coins.[58] In other words, the older halfpennies stopped being legal tender because of an interplay between government policy and mass public opinion. Both of these causes, crucially, are disconnected from the idea of labour being valued according to face-to-face, local relations. Further issues of coin were then introduced during the post-war years to stabilize the economy, which included the minting of new halfpennies for George IV in 1825.[59]

The sociologist Anthony Giddens theorizes that money is 'a disembedding mechanism', intrinsically involved in the development of modernity and the '"lifting out" of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across

[55] J. M. Neeson, 'The Opponents of Enclosure in Eighteenth-Century Northamptonshire', *Past and Present*, 105 (1984), 114–39 (p. 138).
[56] Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, pp. 232n–33n.
[57] John Craig, *The Mint: A History of the London Mint from A.D. 287 to 1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), pp. 264–65.
[58] Craig, pp. 266–67.
[59] G. P. Dyer and P. P. Gaspar, 'The New Technology and Tower Hill, 1700-1966', in *A New History of the Royal Mint*, ed. by C. E. Challis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 398–606 (pp. 482, 488).

indefinite spans of time-space'.[60] He borrows from Georg Simmel's theory that 'trust' in monetary transactions is linked to 'public confidence in the issuing government'; this trust, then, may be distinguished from the 'weak inductive knowledge' involved in many forward transactions, as when a farmer decides whether or not to sow depending on the likelihood that a field will bear grain in the future.[61] Of course, concern about the practices of the issuing government was not new by Clare's time: during the eighteenth century, for example, 'public credit' was a widespread subject of discussion. But these variations in coinage in the nineteenth century might have reinforced the labourers' consciousness of being connected to a national economy, in which the decisions of distant politicians, far beyond local contexts of interaction, directly affect the money in their pockets. Therefore, Giddens's theory of disembedding helps one to understand the sense of alienation that a man like Clare might have felt during these economic developments.

Alongside this economic context, there was also a literary context for the 'Coin' poems. Among the items in Clare's personal library were the collected issues of *The Adventurer* – a twice-weekly periodical which originally appeared in the mid-eighteenth century – presented to him by Radstock in 1820. One of these issues, from 1753, contains a prose story entitled 'The Adventures of a Halfpenny', written by Bonnell Thornton under the pseudonym, 'Tim Turnpenny'. This story offers an early example of the money narratives that proliferated in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[62]

'The Adventures of a Halfpenny' is narrated by a counterfeited halfpenny, recalling its movement and influence through the integrated network of a commercial

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[60] Giddens, pp. 21–22.
[61] Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. by Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (London, Henley and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978; published in German, 1907), p. 178–79.
[62] See Aileen Douglas, 'Britannia's Rule and the It-Narrator', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 6 (1993), 65–82.

society: 'If I have encouraged debauchery, or supported extravagance; I have also rewarded the labours of industry, and relieved the necessities of indigence.'[63] The halfpenny has undergone brutal attempts to alter its identity – it was, at one stage, covered in quicksilver to look like a shilling, but repeated use led to its recovering its original state, and it is now 'very much battered' yet recognisable; retaining its true, if counterfeit, identity.[64] In money narratives, the enemy of the coin is usually the miser, the hoarder who restricts the movement on which it thrives.[65] Thus, in this story, the halfpenny recalls its own point of crisis, when it was given as a Christmas box to a child: 'I lost, therefore, the very essence of my being, in the custody of this hopeful disciple of avarice and folly; and was kept only to be looked at and admired'.[66]

Clare's 'Coin' poems may be viewed as poetic codas to this type of eighteenth-century money narrative. In each, the coin is denied a voice, and no longer has a value in the primary circuits of exchange; the sense of stasis is absolute. Rather than supplying fast-moving prose which details a coin's movement, Clare's examinations take the meditative form of the lyric poem. In each of these works, he does not transmit political complaint through a rustically caricatured 'voice of labour', such as Lobin Clout's; instead, the narrative voice tends to be worldly and expressed in a polite register, though seemingly belonging to a figure of humble status.

'Bless thy old fashioned copper face' (*MP*, II, 328–30), written between the mid-1820s and the early 1830s, addresses a coin of recent circulation, minted for George III (1760–1820). The narrator recalls the glamorous life of this copper coin, which in its heyday circulated among the crowds at the 'Ascot races' (l. 41). Indeed, the

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[63] Tim Turnpenny, 'Adventures of a Halfpenny', *The Adventurer*, 3 April 1753, repr. in *The Adventurer*, ed. by John Hawkesworth, Samuel Johnson, Richard Bathurst and Joseph Warton, 2 vols (London: C. Cooke, 1801), I, 228–33 (p. 232); no. 43 in *Northampton Catalogue*.
[64] *The Adventurer*, ed. by Hawkesworth and others, p. 230.
[65] *British It-Narratives, 1750–1830: Money*, ed. by Liz Bellamy (London; Brookfield, VT: Pickering & Chatto, 2012), p. xlii.
[66] *The Adventurer*, ed. by Hawkesworth and others, p. 231.

coin acted as a 'saviour' to all ranks of society, 'From Stemphens hatch to honest paviour' (ll. 20–21), evoking the idea of a linked commercial society based on mutual interdependence that was evident in 'Adventures of a Halfpenny' and many other object narratives of the period.[67] In Clare's conception, the coin even received special assurances from the state: 'To call thee aught but royal money / Were nothing else but down right treason' (ll. 32–33).

Colley states, 'the only outlet for popular nationalism which the British government felt able safely and consistently to encourage during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars was the cult of the monarchy'.[68] The image of the king on a coin ought to be emblematic of stability, but in this poem, as with the other 'Coin' poems, such stability has been lost. The ending of George III's reign has corresponded with the halfpenny's decline in status, and the poet views the coin as the victim of flatterers:

> The very head of G 3rd
> Wont pass for coin amid the herd
> Of money mongrels – but intered
> With other fames
> Tis scouted like a very <turd>[69]
> Of fouler name
>
> (ll. 42–48)

In many of Clare's village poems, work is presented as a matter of local habit and routine – thus the woodman, as discussed in the first chapter, conducts his labour in a manner that appears almost naturalized. By contrast, in this poem, the unstable national value of the copper coin – a coin that was particularly associated with the labouring

[67] Deidre Lynch, 'Personal Effects and Sentimental Fictions', in *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-narratives in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. by Mark Blackwell (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007), pp. 63–91 (p. 74).
[68] Colley, 'Whose Nation?', p. 109.
[69] Clare's Oxford editors use these marks to determine that the word is uncertain or illegible.

classes – impacts upon the instability of the worker's new dependency on wage labour.[70]

A coin's loss of status in also marked in 'Thou king of half a score dominions' (*MP*, V, 156–60)**.** This is likely a later poem: it marks the end of George IV's reign, and was probably written following the coronation of William IV on 8th September 1831. The narrator is in awe to address George IV's image on the coin:

> For do you know tis somthing grand
> So poor a lot as mine
> Should hold your portrait in my hand
> Though but a copper coin
> (ll. 13–16)

This effect emboldens the narrator to speak about the state of the poor within a national economy:

> [I've] thought & told ye many things
> Though treason may be such
> What common people think of kings
> When taxed about so much
> (ll. 21–24)

This complaint does not result in a specific attack on the monarchy; rather, the narrator imagines himself as a king, so that he might attack those who take the taxes: 'How I'd shop off each cunning knave / That took the taxes part' (ll. 27–28). However, the identity of these knaves is given no further definition, as the poem abruptly changes subject away from political complaint, to reflect on Clare's own condition as a poet. The narrator establishes an identification between the poet and the fallen king: 'ye're so far from pomp & strife / I fear your powers like mine' (ll. 41–42). The king's former flatterers notably belong to the literary realm – 'the regiment of letters' (l. 65); having

[70] When new coins were issued in 1797, a proclamation announced that George III was 'graciously pleased to give directions that measures might be taken for an immediate supply of such copper coinage as might be best adapted to the payment of the laborious poor in the present exigency', *London Gazette*, 29 July 1797, repr. in the *London Evening Post*, 1 August 1797, p. 553.

once offered him birthday tributes in 'pomp heroics strutting odes' (l. 86), they have since abandoned him.

'Address to an old Halfpenny' (*MP*, II, 152–55), dated mid-1820s to early 1830s, more effectively elides political concerns with a consideration of Clare's poetic career. As in the other poems, the coin is an object betrayed, a victim of 'new fashions' (l. 9) which is now 'not worth a beggars thank ye' (l. 11). Clare presents the now-reduced state of the coin using the imagery of a shipwreck: 'Thourt stranded where the meanest shun ye / A wreck forgotten' (ll. 29–30). Shipwreck imagery recurs in his poetry, both to depict national crisis, as in 'The Summons' ('The ship of state was deemed a wreck', *MP*, IV, 482–93 (l. 161)), and personal devastation, as in the asylum poem 'I Am' ('the vast shipwreck of my lifes esteems', *LP*, I, 396–97 (l. 10)); in this poem, the ambiguity points to both interpretations.[71]

Clare names public figures in the verse, in order to consider the national economy:

> The gipsey tinker man with lawless fettle
> May bruise thee into brods o metal
> Theres none his lawless tricks to settle
> P[ee]l G[urney]ys jiant
> Though thou wert clouting C[ob]b[e]ts kettle
> Would not say fye ont
> (ll. 31–36)

The last three figures were associated with the centralized control of currency: the banker Samuel Gurney is alluded to, as is Robert Peel, who had chaired the committee that recommended the resumption of cash payments tied to the price of gold, leading to the 1819 legislation commonly known as 'Peel's Bill'.[72] Rural MPs welcomed this act, because it lessened the influence of financial speculators in the City of London; Cobbett, however, criticized this currency policy, arguing that it would increase the

[71] On other examples, see Edward Strickland, 'The Shipwreck Metaphor in Clare', *JCSJ*, 8 (1989), 17–23.
[72] Boyd Hilton, *Corn, Cash, Commerce: The Economic Policies of the Tory Government, 1815–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 37–48.

burden of the National Debt and further the distress of the rural poor.[73] Collectively, these figures are influencing the wages of every labourer in every community; they have supplanted the king's image as the new location of national stability, or rather instability. Later in the poem, Clare groups together the 'G[ur]n[ey]s P[eel]s & B[arin]gs' (Alexander Baring was attacked by Cobbett for supporting Peel's Bill), typifying them as 'wasps for honey' (ll. 51–52) who are motivated only by self-interest.[74]

For Clare, juxtaposed with this national context of public figures is the visible local context, of the gypsy who knocks the coins into 'brods' (meaning 'brads' or 'nails'). This is manipulation of money in a very different sense, as the halfpenny's face value is disregarded in favour of its immediate use value as metal. The coin's uncertainty of value, and the thoughts of alienation that this generates, point to Clare's own unstable position as an author. He recognizes that 'John Clare' the person is not identical with 'John Clare' the poetic commodity, who circulates among the polite urban readership according to his fluctuating face value, subject to the vagaries of opinion. When the narrator states that 'neither ryhme nor reason' (l. 5) can restore the halfpenny to its former glory, the phrase carries the self-consciousness of the failing writer.

The final stanza's image of the Gordian knot points to both readings of the poem: as a statement on the national economy, and on the poet's career. Clare describes a common fiddler playing his simple tune, who draws admiration from a naive crowd:

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[73] Eric J. Evans, *Sir Robert Peel: Statesmanship, Power and Party* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 12; *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 13 November 1819, pp. 353–75.
[74] *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 21 January 1826, pp. 238–41.

The Gordian knot was like a fiddle
Where wonder gapes at diddle diddle
Till what seemed music in the middle
To farces grown up
Self interest soon finds out the riddle
& breaks the show up
(ll. 61–66)

The 'Gordian knot' is the Classical metaphor for an intractable problem, referring to the knot which could not be untied until Alexander the Great cut through it. The phrase was employed in Clare's own time in political discourse, and it tellingly appears in an article on 'England and France' in *The Examiner* in 1823, a newspaper which he frequently read. The author of this piece attacks Cobbett, before arguing: 'In France, all forms, laws, customs, which stand between power and its object, tyranny and its victim, are cut like the Gordian knot, if that is necessary, or time is saved by it.'[75] Clare uses the 'Gordian knot' image in a similar fashion – to mean the apparently stable system of English laws and customs – with the result that the knot is cut. At this moment, the audience see the fiddler for what he is, not a sophisticated musician, but someone who merely distracts them with a banal tune ('diddle diddle'). Clare's image refers to the scepticism which the common people now have in their national economy, enlightened out of their naive faith. The self-interest of various opinion-makers has been exposed, which has destabilized 'trust' in money. This is a less reassuring – and more atomizing – conception of self-interest, than the benevolent, binding effects identified by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776).

The fiddler image also works to draw attention to the exposure of Clare's own market value. Clare has been complicit in crafting his 'peasant poet' image, providing the popular music of rurality – 'diddle diddle' – which the market demanded of him. To

[75] *The Examiner*, 14 September 1823, p. 593. On *The Examiner*, see Eric Robinson, 'John Clare and the Newspapers: Reader and Contributor', *JCSJ*, 6 (1987), pp. 37–47. There is a record of Peel using the phrase in the House of Commons in 1816 to describe the difficulties of the Irish policy: 'He was inclined to think that the difficulties and evils which encompassed Ireland, formed a Gordian knot, which could not be cut, and which only the gradual lapse of time could unravel.' *Liverpool Mercury*, 3 May 1816, p. 346.

imagine that the coin and the poem contain their own value, outside of the marketplace, is to enact the romantic writer's fantasy of fame based on inherent poetic quality.[76] However, as ever, one must bear in mind Clare's contradictory impulses: while expressing this disillusion as an Englishman, he was still writing patriotic, militaristic poems. In addition, he demonstrated his continuing entrepreneurial spirit in the late 1820s, informing Taylor that he wished to have his work published in Ackerman's *Forget Me Not, The Spirit of the Age* and Watts's *Souvenir*, and to have his books advertised in *Drakard's Stamford News*; as will now be discussed, he was also being published in newspapers in the 1830s.[77] While maintaining his distaste for 'fashion', Clare undoubtedly wanted to see his work sell.[78]

While 'On seeing a Lost Greyhound in winter' and 'Waterloo' offer expressions of contentment within a vertically organized, larger order, in the 'Coin' poems Clare articulates his sense of alienation. The 'Coin' poems' disillusion about a national economic order based on mutual interdependence gestures towards – without directly expressing – another kind of order that might be realized among the enlightened workers who have been betrayed by their masters. This is an idea of the nation constructed horizontally around opposed class interests, that approximates 'class-consciousness'**.** My chapter will now discuss this emerging idea, as I turn to Clare's writing at the time of the 'Swing' riots.

**Class-Consciousness**

[76] On the disdain felt by Romantic writers, such as Keats and Wordsworth, towards the 'literary market', see Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1850*, new edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961), pp. 50–53.
[77] Clare to Taylor (3 April 1828), *Letters*, pp. 423–6.
[78] On Clare's attitude to the tastes of the literary market, see Sam Ward, 'Clare in Fashion', *JCSJ*, 21 (2002), 33–51.

E. P. Thompson defines the difference between class experience and class-consciousness:

> The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born – or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not.[79]

Thompson argues that during the 1820s, working people 'learned to see their own lives as part of a general history of conflict between the loosely defined "industrious classes" on the one hand, and the unreformed House of Commons on the other'; but only from 1830 did English working-class consciousness become more clearly defined.[80] Gareth Stedman Jones also finds an absence of genuine working-class consciousness in the 1820s, since the 'language of class' in this period continued to be, in fact, the 'language of radicalism'. Radicalism was a 'vocabulary of political exclusion whatever the social character of those excluded', and therefore 'it could never be the ideology of a specific class'. In this period, it spoke for the unrepresented, rather than establishing an identifiable working-class consciousness; only in 1832 did the 'people', in radical terms, come to mean the 'working classes'.[81]

Jon Klancher, however, seizes upon radical writers precisely as producers of 'class awareness': between 1790 and 1830, they were the only writers who attempted 'to make an audience that would coincide with a class'.[82] Klancher argues not that radical discourse was 'expressed' by the working class, but that this discourse actively formed that class's 'ideological and interpretive map', by opposing its audience to other audiences. The radical text was meant 'to bind one reader to another *as* audience, a

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[79] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, rev. edn (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1968), p. 10.
[80] Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 782.
[81] Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 104–05.
[82] Klancher, pp. 8, 136.

readership the radical writer both confronted and spoke for in a complex rhetorical act of "representation"'.[83] Similarly, Ian Dyck argues that rural workers 'emerged with class consciousness rather sooner than is sometimes thought'. Dyck traces in the work of William Cobbett a transition from a vertical, 'countryman' conception of rural society unified across social ranks, to a horizontal understanding of class differences, when farm workers came to see 'that their interests were in sharp conflict with those of their employers'. This transition was finally accomplished at the 'Swing' riots, but even prior to this, Cobbett 'knew that the farm workers of the 1820s were inclining towards a sophisticated recognition of class society in rural England'.[84]

My chapter now principally considers Clare's poem 'The Hue & Cry' (*MP*, IV, 518–43), which was written at the time of the 'Swing' riots in 1830 – a point when, according to these various accounts, 'class-consciousness' at least shows signs of emergence, if not being as fully formed as it would be later in the nineteenth century. Therefore, I consciously refer to 'class-consciousness' as an incipient phenomenon, which might be regarded as a developing 'horizontal awareness' among workers. Indeed, the chrysalis state of class-consciousness helps to explain Clare's own scepticism towards any idea of collectivity among workers across a national scale. As Colley states, 'class and nation in Britain at this time were not antithetical but two sides of the same historical process'.[85] For Clare, both national consciousness and class-consciousness are problematically indeterminate, as he repeatedly finds difficulty in forging a sense of a larger community.

**'The Hue & Cry' and the 'Swing' Riots**

[83] Klancher, pp. 103, 100.
[84] Ian Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 74.
[85] Colley, 'Whose Nation?', p. 100.

The rural disturbances that constituted the 'Swing' riots began in Kent in the summer of 1830, and spread to Clare's local area by December.[86] Across the south and east of England, mobs gathered and marched, farmers suffered rick-burning and attacks on their livestock, and anonymous letters foretelling violence were distributed and signed by the name of 'Swing'. According to Carl Griffin, these disturbances were partly responsible for politicizing many rural workers, brought together in their opposition to agrarian capitalism; in contrast, Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé argue that the riots were 'essentially a labourers' movement with essentially economic ends' rather than political ones.[87] Roger Wells has qualified this perception of the rioters as labourers, claiming that rural craftsmen, urban protestors and even some farmers (who wished to aggravate the workers against the clergy and tithe payments) also participated in the unrest.[88]

Clare's 'The Hue & Cry' was published anonymously in the local, radical newspaper, the *Stamford Champion* on 11th January 1831. The poem concerns a mysterious old man who leads the common people to rebellion, both within a village and, later in the poem, across the nation. Stephen Colclough argues that Clare's anonymity in 'The Hue & Cry' gives him 'free range' to express his 'radical voice', and Robinson broadly agrees; Dawson's view is more qualified, stating that the poem's

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[86] Sylvia Thompson lists twenty-five incidents in Northamptonshire between 26th November and 30th December, involving arson, machine breaking and incitement to riot, though Hobsbawm and Rudé only list thirteen. The latter also list fourteen incidents in Lincolnshire and ten in Cambridgeshire in the same period. There were three incidents of arson in Deeping Fen, a place particularly well known to Clare. In all three counties, incidents continued to happen, but only sporadically, during 1831. Thompson attributes the quelling of 'Swing' disturbances in Northamptonshire in the new year to the introduction of charitable measures for the poorest, and the influx of special constables. Sylvia Thompson, 'On the Verge of Civil War: The Swing Riots 1830–1832', *Northamptonshire Past and Present*, 64 (2011), 68–80 ; 'Appendix III: Table of Incidents' in Hobsbawm and Rudé, pp. 311–58.

[87] Carl J. Griffin, 'The Violent Captain Swing?', *Past and Present*, 209 (2010), 149–80; Hobsbawm and Rudé, p. 220.

[88] Roger Wells, 'Mr William Cobbett, Captain Swing, and King William IV', *The Agricultural History Review*, 45 (1997), 34–48 (p. 47).

'radicalism is less a matter of overt propaganda than, one might say, of sensibility'.[89] Vardy argues that the poem expresses an equivocal attitude towards the motives behind the riots: Clare 'satirised extremists on all sides', and parts of the poem 'indicate Clare's understanding of the riots as a political strategy, and, furthermore, provide evidence of a bitter recognition of the temporary nature of any benefits gained'. Still, Vardy argues, while expressing contempt for party politics Clare showed a 'radical' view in questions of reform, and poems like 'The Hue & Cry' 'represented sincere efforts to be 'a champion for the poor', as he supported 'a "common sense" call for constitutional reform'.[90]

My reading of 'The Hue & Cry' agrees with these critics that Clare's sympathy is weighted towards the radical cause, and with Vardy's identification of the poet's equivocal attitude towards politics. My interest, however, is in how Clare's poem dramatizes his problematic efforts to be a 'champion for the poor', in its transition from the local sphere, in which his sensibility is radical, to the national sphere, in which he is generally sceptical of both 'conservative' and 'radical' methods of imagining the nation. Clare finds that radical solidarity fragments as individual self-interest is revealed. This discovery provokes self-consciousness: his poem ultimately turns away from any concerns as a 'champion for the poor', to his own, isolated concerns as a writer.

**Radical and Conservative Perspectives: Cobbett and Mitford**

While in the previous poems discussed in this chapter, Clare expresses sentiments that might be categorized as 'conservative' or 'radical', it is in 'The Hue & Cry' that he more actively engages with how these political perspectives provide images of the

[89] Stephen Colclough, 'Voicing Loss: Versions of Pastoral in the Poetry of John Clare, 1817–1832' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Keele, 1996), p. 175; *CFTP*, p. xlii–xliii; Dawson, 'John Clare – Radical?', *JCSJ*, 11 (1992), 17–27 (p. 21).
[90] Vardy, *John Clare, Politics and Poetry*, pp. 173–74, 187.

nation. These terms are themselves problematic, and Clare acknowledged the ambiguity of political positioning: 'the meaning of [Radical] being indefinite like Wig & Tory I cannot say what it means tho I have often heard it bruted in ministerial papers'.[91] I use the terms 'conservative' and 'radical' to mean not so much definitive positions as opposing attitudes on the question of reform, whose respective methods of imagining the nation were particularly evident in the responses to the 'Swing' riots. In order to illustrate these positions, the perspectives of William Cobbett and Mary Russell Mitford on rural discontent are especially useful. By attending to these, one can identify the tendencies that characterized the nationally focused discourse into which Clare was entering when he wrote 'The Hue & Cry'.

Styles of radical responses differed between those which focused on local causes of complaint, and those which advanced their cause using symbolic generalities. The 'songs of complaint' that circulated through broadsides and oral transmission exemplify the former tendency, recording particular grievances. In contrast, Robert Taylor's play *Swing; Or, Who are the Incendiaries?* (1831), which tells the tale of an honest, hard working family called the 'Swings', takes an allegorical approach to emphasize shared concerns among workers across the nation – recalling the style of one of the most influential radical satires in the period, George Cruikshank and William Hone's *The Political House That Jack Built* (1819).[92]

It was the aim of Cobbett to reconcile these two tendencies of radical writing – local particulars with symbolic generalities – by recording concrete observations on

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[91] Clare to Taylor (1 February 1830), *Letters*, pp. 499–500. On the different types of 'radicals' in this period, see Dawson, 'Common Sense or Radicalism?'.

[92] 'Reverend' Robert Taylor, *Swing; Or, Who Are the Incendiaries? A Tragedy, Founded on Late Circumstances, and as Performed at the Rotunda* (London: Richard Carlile, 1831); William Hone and George Cruikshank, *The Political House That Jack Built* (London: W. Hone, 1819). On 'songs of complaint', see Marcus Wood, *Radical Satire and Print Culture, 1790–1822* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 215–16. On the 'cheap-literature craze' from 1827 to 1832, and its link to the social and political crisis, see Altick, p. 332; Ian Haywood, *The Revolution in Popular Literature: Print, Politics, and the People, 1790–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 104.

various discrete communities in order to promote a sense of common interests among 'chopsticks' (village workers).[93] His ideal configuration of society was the stable English village: rather than subscribe to a doctrine of full equality, he desired that the rural elite maintain their responsibilities to the workers. When it became increasingly clear in the post-war years that these duties would not be fulfilled, Cobbett focused his energies on inducing the common labourer to a horizontal awareness, allowing him to identify with others of his class whom he has never met.

Cobbett's method is to attend to local evidence, from which he presents the nation as a network of power and exploitation. He has to mediate between the realms of the 'local' and the 'national', in order to convince the labouring poor in any one village that the policies of the government have contributed to their hardship.[94] During the 1820s, illiterate labourers would often assemble in pubs to hear his publications being read aloud, which they would then discuss.[95] Cobbett himself sought out the widest possible readership: in November 1816 he introduced *Two-Penny Trash*, a cheaper format of his *Political Register*, which led to tens of thousands of artisans and labourers reading it; the publication was revived in July 1830.[96] By the time that the riots reached Clare's locality, Cobbett claimed in the *Political Register* that the workers were the perpetrators of arson attacks around the country and – more provocatively – that in reducing tithes, these acts of 'working people produced good, and great good too'.[97]

Leonora Nattrass argues: 'Like Cobbett's, Clare's close identification of personal experience with political change suggests, at the level of content, that personal experience is a legitimate yardstick by which to measure the impact of economic

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[93] See Alun Howkins and C. Ian Dyck, '"The Time's Alteration": Popular Ballads, Rural Radicalism and William Cobbett', *History Workshop Journal*, 23 (1987), 20–38.
[94] On this problem of radical rhetoric, see Helsinger, p. 139.
[95] Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 782.
[96] Klancher, p. 101. See also Altick, p. 325.
[97] *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 11 December 1830, p. 937.

policies.'[98] She supports her argument with reference to Clare's 'Lamentations of Round-Oak Waters' and 'Remembrances'. But these enclosure poems, which attend to Helpston, also illustrate a fundamental difference between the two writers that must be kept in mind: Clare wrote about the single locality which he knew, while Cobbett drew upon his experience of an enormous range of different localities. In 1832, Clare himself would express a dismissive view regarding Cobbett in a letter to Marianne Marsh – admittedly Clare's social superior (she was married to the Bishop of Peterborough): 'I look upon Cobbett as one of the most powerful prose writers of the age – with no principles to make those powers commendable to honest praise'.[99]

In contrast to Cobbett, the conservative writer Mary Russell Mitford imagined 'England' as represented in the rural village protected from the disruptive forces of modernity, and thus she denied class-consciousness. Her belief that the stable, idealized community might be under threat from disruptive influences echoes the view of the antiquarian Francis Grose in his *Provincial Dictionary* (1787):

> [...] for, formerly, in countries remote from the metropolis, or which had no immediate intercourse with it, before news-papers and stage-coaches had imported scepticism, and made every plowman and thresher a politician and free-thinker, ghosts, fairies and witches, with bloody murders, committed by tinkers, formed a principal part of rural conversation, in all large assemblies, and particularly those in Christmas holydays, during the burning of the yule-block.[100]

Grose's position is to write as a nostalgic enlightener, looking back on a time before links were forged between rural communities and the outside world. Mitford's project, however, is to deny these links in the present-day. Though she would write about Clare, it is unclear whether Clare ever read Mitford; nevertheless, she serves as a pertinent

[98] Nattrass, pp. 52–53.
[99] Clare to Marianne Marsh (early January 1832), *Letters*, p. 560.
[100] Francis Grose, *A Provincial Glossary; with a Collection of Local Proverbs, and Popular Superstitions* (London: S. Hooper, 1787), pp. vii–viii.

analogue.[101] Just as Clare wrote about Helpston, and the naturalist Gilbert White provided a self-contained image of Selborne, Mitford's story collection *Our Village* (first published in 1824, and subsequently expanded up until 1835) concerns the community she knows in Three Mile Cross, in Berkshire.[102]

'Even in books I like a confined locality' (I, 1), Mitford declares at the start of the book, but her later addition to the collection, 'The Incendiary. A Tale', illustrates how the 'Swing' riots disrupt this sense of isolation, as external forces intrude. Mitford primarily blames outsiders for the riots: 'the leaders in this affair could not have been common labourers' (II, 292). If these influences are removed, a harmonious community may be restored. A similar view is expressed in another, anonymous conservative response to the riots, *A Dialogue on Rick-Burning* (1830). In this play, set in a 'confined' village, characters list various outsiders – including the French, Irish papists, and Cobbett – as potential suspects of the arson attacks. Buried in the midst of this confusion is the characters' hesitation about levelling blame at the local workers themselves.[103]

In 'The Incendiary', Mitford suggests that her ideal has been shattered: 'all brought close to us a state of things which we never thought to have witnessed in peaceful and happy England [...] Such events are salutary, inasmuch as they show to the human heart its own desperate self-deceit.' (II, 287). This is a point of self-conscious

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[101] Mitford wrote a chapter on Clare in Mary Russell Mitford, *Recollections of a Literary Life, Or, Books, Places, and People*, 2 vols (London: Richard Bentley, 1857), II, 147–62. Mitford's piece is most famous for its account of Clare in the asylum, based upon her unnamed friend's and Cyrus Redding's recollections of visiting the poet. She praises his poems and claims that, over time, 'the popularity diminished as the merit increased' (though, seemingly, she is unaware of *The Shepherd's Calendar*). Mitford's summary view on Clare is that he had been removed 'from the homely work but the certain reward of the plough, to cultivate the always uncertain, and too often barren and unthankful fields of literature' (p. 157).

[102] Mary Russell Mitford, *Our Village: Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery*, new edn, 2 vols (Paris: J. Smith, 1842). Volume and page references are taken from this edition. Mitford's volumes were intended, by their high price, to be read in drawing rooms and subscription reading rooms, see Altick, p. 319.

[103] *A Dialogue on Rick-Burning, Rioting, & C. between Squire Wilson, Thomas the Bailiff, Hughes (Wilson's Steward), Harry Brown (a Labourer)* (London: Gilbert & Rivington, 1830).

crisis for Mitford: her previously idyllic representations of village life have been self-deceiving. Both she and Clare were keenly aware of their responsibilities as recorders of a particular community.[104]

For radicals, truth is located through exposure of corrupt structures of power. As Thomas Paine states in *Rights of Man* (1792): 'such is the irresistible nature of truth, that all it asks, and all it wants, is the liberty of appearing.'[105] For conservatives like Mitford, locating the truth is more uncertain; she relies on her representation of a knowable village, 'where we know every one, are known to every one, interested in every one, and authorised to hope that every one feels an interest in us' (I, 1). Truth, here, is manifest in the sense of a continuing, stable community – regional loyalties akin to Burke's notion of 'the little platoon we belong to in society'.[106] By preserving order at a local level, a conservatively minded national order may be assured.

The overlap between Cobbett and Mitford is their shared veneration for 'old England', expressed in the harmonious, nostalgic vision of rural society. The vision resembles a paternalist structure of social relations, as described by E. P. Thompson: a society 'of vertical rather than horizontal divisions', that 'has implications of warmth and of face-to-face relations which imply notions of value'.[107] For Cobbett, this way of life has been betrayed, and a newly horizontal class-consciousness is now required; for Mitford, it has been damaged by outsiders, but may potentially be restored if outsiders are expunged (her tale ends with a sentimental, happy ending in which two local men on trial are acquitted).

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[104] Mitford says, of a young woman in the village, 'What would she say if she knew I was putting her into print?' (I, 53). The remark mirrors Clare's anxiety about the reaction of his fellow villagers: 'they hardly dare talk in my company for fear I shoud mention them in my writings', Clare to Taylor (8 February 1822), *Letters*, p. 230.
[105] Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man, Common Sense, and Other Political Writings*, ed. by M. Philp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 210.
[106] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France: And on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to That Event. In a Letter Intended to Have Been Sent to a Gentleman in Paris*, 2nd edn (London: J. Dodsley, 1790), p. 68.
[107] E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, pp. 20, 24.

**Newspapers and Clare's New Role as a Poet**

These examples of radical and conservative perspectives illustrate the readiness of writers to interpret the riots in different ways. Clare would have been particularly aware of the importance of local newspapers in exacerbating 'Swing' paranoia (in his vicinity, both conservative and radical papers condemned the violence).[108] The people already knew that riots were happening elsewhere in the country: in November 1830, an article in the conservative newspaper *The Bee* assured readers that it was 'convinced' this rioting would not spread to the Stamford area, since labourers were paid well and had abundant employment.[109] When disturbances did happen in the vicinity, the *Cambridge Chronicle* provided a vivid description of the burning of a farmer's premises in Stowgate, and printed extracts from 'Swing' letters. The newspaper expressed uncertainty concerning the identity of the perpetrator:

> On Thursday morning, the 16th inst. about nine o'clock, a person of rather gentlemanly appearance, about 60 years of age, was seen passing through Stradishall, ten miles from Bury, in a decent gig, and was observed to drop some papers, which on being picked up were found to be of an inflammatory, but very incoherent nature, threatening 'to put the farmers in bodily fear, &c. if the labourers were not better paid,' and signed with the formidable name of '*Swing*'.[110]

A letter of Clare's at the time echoes this paranoia:

> I have made a few more enquir[i]es respecting those strangers whom the 'Hue & Cry' leads me to suspect are the [?creators] of those horrid mysterys that darkness envelops & daylight discovers – The Gig was very light & apparently small for two men to occupy one was dressed in a light great coat & the other in a dark one they came in at a end of the town no strangers ever enters as it is a bye road leading no where but to bye places[111]

This passage points to the social context of 'The Hue & Cry's creation: it is unusual for Clare, a poet we are more used to seeing drop down to write among the bushes, to

[108] Vardy, 'Clare and Political Equivocation', pp. 39–40.
[109] *The Bee, or, Stamford Herald and County Chronicle*, 26 November 1830.
[110] *Cambridge Chronicle*, 24 December 1830.
[111] Clare to Frank Simpson (late December 1830), *Letters*, p. 522.

compose his poems after conducting 'enquiries' among his fellow men. This work professedly emerges from the realm of opinion, both from the reading of newspaper reports and from an informal social survey among members of his community.

The 'Swing' riots presented a moment where Clare's conception of himself as a poet of local attachment was fundamentally altered, in two ways. First, the occurrence of the riots in his vicinity meant that his local first-hand perceptions suddenly acquired a 'national' character. His poems on parliamentary enclosure demonstrate the impact of a national policy, but as I have stated, their discussion tends to be confined within local parameters. In writing on the 'Swing' riots, however, Clare was uncomfortably engaged with the interplay between local grievances and a growing sense of class interest. He found (as he had predicted) that 'to escape the hell of party-politics critisism is impossible'; he couldn't help but engage with the discourse of imagining the nation.[112]

Secondly, Clare's conception of himself was altered by his change of audience, as he increasingly contributed poems to local newspapers during the late 1820s.[113] There is a sense that, throughout his published poetry collections, Clare was representing his locality for a polite readership which is potentially 'national'. Writing for local newspapers meant that he was addressing an audience that was closer to him, both socially and geographically. Eliza Emmerson expressed her concern a year before, when she discovered that Clare had been invited to write for a local magazine:

> I cannot advise you on the subject of publishing your 'little vol. of trifles', unless I could *know more* of the *merits* of the case – certainly, I do not think you ought to publish a Volume in your *own part* of the World.[114]

Vardy argues that Clare's magazine publications had the potential of expanding his readership, 'especially in the Midlands and northward, and among the emergent literate

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[112] Clare to Hessey (17 May 1821), *Letters*, p. 190.
[113] See Robinson, 'John Clare and the Newspapers'.
[114] Emmerson to Clare (21 December 1829), qtd in *Letters*, p. 491n.

middle classes'.[115] 'Middle class', here, may not precisely cover the audience that newspapers attracted: indeed, clues as to the nature of this audience are offered by Clare himself. Newspapers frequently offered discussion of agricultural matters, and Clare gives an image of the farmers reading newspapers at the beginning of 'January: A Winters Day' in *The Shepherd's Calendar*: 'He shakes his head & still proceeds / Neer doubting once of what he reads' (ll. 19–20). The audience of provincial newspapers, then, incorporates the lower end of the rural middle classes, and elsewhere Clare suggests that this readership might be extended to the ranks below: 'in our unletterd villages the best of the inhabitants have little more knowledge in reading then what can be gleaned from a weekly Newspaper, Old Moors Almanack, and a Prayer Book on Sundays at Church'.[116]

> Writing in the early 1830s, Clare assesses his role as a poet:
>
> I am not a member of parliment but I am the representative of an increasing number of constituents who look up to me to represent their wants & protect their interests & welfare because they are unable to do it themselves[117]

The use of the term 'constituents' appears ironical at this point, in the run-up to the 1832 Reform Act, and thus perhaps refers to the 'unrepresented'. Alternatively, 'constituents' implies an equal or subordinate social rank to Clare, rather than all of the unrepresented people; its connotations of regional representation render it ambiguous whether his 'constituency' stretches beyond his immediate locality.

**Clare's 'Old Man' and Political Ambivalence**

Clare's anonymity when publishing 'The Hue & Cry' allowed him a certain freedom of expression, but Emmerson worried that some of his patrons might take offence at the

[115] Vardy, *John Clare, Politics and Poetry*, pp. 117–18.
[116] *Autobiographical Writings*, p. 15.
[117] Pet. MS A53, p. 17, repr. in *CFTP*, p. 280.

poem.[118] She later advised him regarding the question of Reform to be '*friendly* on the score of *poesy*, & have nothing to say on *Polotics* for you have *patrons*, & friends on each side of the question'.[119] His use of the ballad form is suggestive of a village culture in which rustic singing about political events was common practice.[120]

At the same time as writing 'The Hue & Cry', Clare added lines to his satire 'The Summons' (*MP*, IV, 482–93) that show more openly his support for the radical cause.[121] In a poem which deals in symbolic generalities, with only loose reference to contemporary events, Clare inserted an episode in which the old man passes a prison and expects to find 'knaves & robbers all', but instead discovers: 'That those sent there for speaking truth / Exceeded those for crime' (ll. 152–56). Appearing as it did in the *Stamford Champion*, edited by John Drakard, this passage seemingly refers to the Tory-led prosecution of radical journalists like Drakard in the 1810s and early 1820s.[122]

The new passage also articulates Clare's disdain for the country's political rulers:

> The ship of state was deemed a wreck
> & savage were the broils
> For some said those who manned her deck
> Were those who shared her spoils
> (ll. 161–64)

The passive 'was deemed', as well as the vague pronouns 'some' and 'those', reflect an uncertainty of authority in these discussions, as if the truth of 'politics' is obstructed by rumour. Clare repeats this image of the nation as a ship caught in a storm in an undated prose passage:

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[118] Emmerson to Clare (7 February 1831), Eg. MS 2248, fol. 328$^{r}$; Emmerson to Clare (17 October 1831), Eg. MS 2248, fols. 395$^{v}$–396$^{r}$.
[119] Emmerson to Clare (9 November 1831), Eg. MS 2248, fols. 400$^{r}$–400$^{v}$.
[120] Clare imitates ballad-singing about political events in another of his satires at this time, 'Familiar Epistle to a Friend' (*MP*, IV, 508–17), printed in the *Stamford Champion* on 14th December 1830.
[121] Clare to John Drakard (November 1830), *Letters*, p. 521. 'The Summons' appeared anonymously in *Drakard's Stamford News* on 25th September 1829, and the new version appeared in the *Stamford Champion* on 30th November 1830, see *CFTP*, p. 254n.
[122] Edward Vallance, *A Radical History Of Britain: Visionaries, Rebels and Revolutionaries – The Men and Women Who Fought for Our Freedoms* (London: Little, Brown, 2009), p. 295.

> Radicals having no share in the harvest grow clamorous in mobs & raise a hue & cry against laws & propertys which prevents them from possesing it themselves these are the 'sea roamers' who are watching for storms & looking out for oppertunitys to share in the plunder.[123]

The editors of *A Champion for the Poor*, Dawson, Robinson and David Powell, claim that Clare uses the term 'sea roamers' to mean 'opportunistic scavengers', but I find this passage to be a more ambivalent analysis of the problems that radicals faced.[124] Radicals are condemned for their opportunistic desire to 'share in the plunder'; but they are turned into plunderers by their very exclusion from the political process, having 'no share in the harvest'. Clare disapproves both of this exclusion and its result.

In 'The Hue & Cry', Clare's political uncertainty is centred in the figure of the old man. In the early nineteenth century, as Eileen Janes Yeo states, different social groups commonly employed 'rival versions of the same legitimating discourses', attempting 'to seize the moral power conveyed by concepts like "the People" or "the useful and productive classes"'.[125] In this manner, Cobbett's and Mitford's appropriations of the English village exemplify rival versions of a single image. Whereas in 'The Summons' the old man – representing death – takes people by surprise, in 'The Hue & Cry' he is a known unknown, and therefore liable to appropriation by different groups as a symbol. The old man's reputation is confused in the 'noise' of the poem, which is primarily the noise of rumour, aggravated by 'newspapers flying about / With rumours great lies & inventions' (ll. 143–44). His physical appearance is uncertain – 'some said his clothing was light lackaday / & some said his cloathing was black' (ll. 51–52) – and concurrently he is half-heard by witnesses, as if half-created in their own imaginations: attending a meeting of local magistrates, the people hear 'a voice from the crowd it might be from the sky' muttering

[123] Pet. MS A45, pp. 31–32, repr. in *CFTP*, p. 293.
[124] *CFTP*, p. 304n.
[125] Yeo, p. 151.

'nay' (ll. 183–84) and creating suspicion, whispering that the authorities' 'reasons were idle & bad' (l. 188).

In Clare's poem, conservatives view the old man as a Cobbett-figure or a sign of the French invasion, while radicals figure him in various heroic ways: as a folk hero with supernatural connotations, a religious figure of fury, and a political figure of reform. Clare's poem problematizes these 'rival versions', or rather, this collective misrecognition, by showing that the 'meaning' of the old man threatens to become unintelligible. By the end of 'The Hue & Cry', the old man is appropriated not as a political symbol at all, but as a focus for Clare's individual concerns as a writer. Anderson's theory of the nation attends to the importance of a common language in unifying people.[126] For Clare, the corrupted meanings of the 'old man' and later in the poem, 'reform', feed directly into his scepticism as to whether a satisfactory idea of the nation can exist.

**'The Hue & Cry': Disturbances Within the Village**

In the first part of 'The Hue & Cry', set in a village, Clare primarily satirizes the forces of authority, revealing his sympathy with the radical cause. A 'hue and cry' was the system for apprehending suspected criminals; the yeomanry cavalry, many of whom had been disbanded since the Napoleonic Wars, were commonly deployed for this task.[127] Clare shows these forces falling from 'their war horses backs' and ironically calls them 'gallant' (ll. 26–28), thus demonstrating a very different perception of the military from his glorifying poetry of war. The poem also mocks the local elected officials:

[126] Gellner, too, emphasizes the necessity that different people can 'conceive and express their resentments and discontents in intelligible terms', *Nations and Nationalism*, pp. 60–61.
[127] Ekirch, p. 115; Hobsbawm and Rudé, p. 253.

> Fair speakers got up of real goodness to teach
> They had said – & done nothing before
> & danger like steam might force good in the speech
> Which might fall when the danger was oer
> (ll. 69–72)

Adapting their rhetoric to the paranoid atmosphere, the speakers let off 'steam', or indeed, hot air. The chiastic repetition of 'danger' lends a sense of wearied routine to their broken promises, and their deceit is matched later in the poem by the masters who give their workers better wages, 'tho nine out of ten / Only gave it till danger was oer' (ll. 413–14).

The Church also forms a target of the poem's ire, as Clare mentions the 'general fast', which 'twas hinted in prayer / To persuade the poor flocks to get thinner' (ll. 81–82). Always imposed at a time of national distress, public fast days were administered by the Church, when all the people had to set aside work to attend a special service. They were particularly frequent during the Napoleonic wars, and it was not unusual for clergymen to use the service to preach politically charged sermons, attacking the French.[128] Such a policy may be regarded as a peculiarly oppressive form of enforced nationalism. Clare's poem suggests that it provokes unity in the opposition it creates, subverting the common justification for general fasts as a providential defence against pestilence: '"fasts & thanksgivings" [...] were dreaded as plagues by the nation' (ll. 85–86).[129]

The poem's satire of the village authorities' attempts to placate the workers illustrates the conservative tendency to place blame for the riots upon outsiders. An alderman makes 'a rout / About mobs & their evil intentions' (ll. 141–42), but is

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[128] See Roland Bartel, 'The Story of Public Fast Days in England', *Anglican Theological Review*, 37 (1955), 190–200; Alasdair Raffe, 'Nature's Scourges: The Natural World and Special Prayers, Fasts and Thanksgivings, 1541–1866', in *God's Bounty? The Churches and the Natural World*, ed. by Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), pp. 237–47.

[129] Clare uses the same imagery in a prose fragment, claiming that the 'lower orders' dreaded the fasts 'as they would the anouncement of a pestilence', Pet. MS A46, p. 90, repr. in *CFTP*, p. 287.

challenged by the very appearance of the 'mob', which constitutes the local workers themselves:

> & the mob fell a laughing & hissing at last
> & their jokes they grew bitter & many
> For they knew that to make a poor alderman fast
> Was the cruelest torture of any
> & a warrior sore vext that his soldiers were beat
> Not daring to make the mob sinners
> Threatened Orator Hunt in his quiet retreat
> In revenge for the loss of their dinners
> (ll. 149–56)

There is a sense of social hierarchy being inverted, as the mob turn their 'fasting' on the alderman. The leader of the soldiers, hoping to reconcile the mob to peace, levels blame at the radical Henry 'Orator' Hunt.[130] Elsewhere in 'The Hue & Cry', the uncertainty of the old man's appearance feeds into conservative scaremongering about other external figures: Buoneparte, Cobbett, Paine, Voltaire, and the Irish political leader Daniel O'Connell are all mentioned in quick succession as possible identities (ll. 113–27), similar to the frantic blame-making in *A Dialogue on Rick-Burning*.

While these satirical portraits of the authorities imply Clare's solidarity with the rebel cause, his poem also hints, in its early stages, at the difficulty of achieving solidarity among the villagers. When the people see lights in the sky, their interpretations are notably varied:

> Old rumour was up – other stories were out
> & all the world leaving his bed
> Had witches by majic set fire to the sky
> More wonders could not have been read
> Some body at first had the end of the string
> & it might be the man in the moon
> Tho hed never been heard of to do such a thing
> Yet northern lights tokened it soon
> (ll. 35–42)

[130] The word 'mob' was often used in this period to mean a crowd 'liable to be presented as the "passive" instrument of outside agents', see George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730–1848* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1964), p. 8.

These lights may refer to the aurora borealis, which had been reported as being visible in Bristol at this time, or to the actual fires from rick-burning.[131] As Peter Swaab observes, the word 'wonder' contains a close relation 'between bafflement and illumination' – in these lines, it carries the ambiguity of whether the rural observers will all be illuminated to the same symbolic reading of the lights.[132] 'The man in the moon' suggests a radical message, echoing the satire of the same name by Hone and Cruikshank which was written in response to the Six Acts legislation; but there is also a sense that the labourers are instead drawn to superstitious interpretation – Cobbett warned that such beliefs could distract the labouring poor from political engagement.[133] Clare's scepticism regarding the potential of unity among the poor – only hinted at here – is more explicitly articulated in the second part of 'The Hue & Cry', to which my discussion now turns.

**'The Hue & Cry': Disturbances Beyond the Village**

In the next part of 'The Hue & Cry', Clare's satire no longer focuses on the visible figures of authority within the village, but on the wider condition of the nation. The old man becomes capable of moving 'all oer the world in an hour' (l. 158); the words 'England' and 'Britain' are absent, though there is no suggestion that this 'world' is anywhere other than England. The old man acquires active powers on behalf of the radical cause, making the wealth of the 'great speculators' (l. 159) disappear. This is the

[131] *The Bee* (24 December 1830) printed a report from the *Bristol Mirror* that the aurora borealis had been visible in the city: 'The watchmen, in several parts of the city, sprung their rattles, mistaking, we believe, the light for the reflection of a fire!'
[132] Peter Swaab, '"Wonder" as a Complex Word', *Romanticism*, 18 (2012), 270–80 (p. 276).
[133] William Hone and George Cruikshank, *The Man in the Moon* (London: W. Hone, 1820)**.** Cobbett singled out *Moore's Almanac* (which, as has been mentioned, was read in Clare's village) for complaint: 'To keep a people in a state of profound ignorance; to make them superstitious and slavish, there needs little more than the general reading of this single book.' *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 11 December 1813, p. 751.

sort of levelling fantasy that might appeal to a writer like Cobbett, who complained that financial speculation was creating a state 'in which there are but two classes of men, *masters* and *abject dependents*' (though Liberal Tories such as Peel were also suspicious of the new wealth created by such instruments).[134] Like the protagonist of 'The Summons', the old man subsequently confronts and frightens various powerful individuals, including a lawyer who 'quaked like the conscience of Bonner' and a 'gentleman worth a whole county in wealth' (ll. 302–07).[135]

Alongside these subversive attacks on authority, the poem also demonstrates the oppressive, war-like mood of the nation. As the old man frees 'slaves', Clare returns to the image of a storm at sea:

> Like cobwebs chains fell from the hands of the slave
> & truths fetters broke in the jail
> Tho mischief raged loud like a tempest at sea
> Of war to the hilt & the haft
>
> (ll. 199–202)

The rage of the tempest is now linked to the militaristic fury of the authorities' response to rebellion, as the people undergo 'wars tyranny' (l. 204). In a time of peace, there is no external enemy to bind the nation together; Clare's narrator sees that the 'sword fell to rust in the sheath' (l. 206) – an image of internal decay arising from the absence of overseas conflict. The noises of battle are now a cacophonous contrast to the triumphant victory sounds of 'Guns and Cannons' (l. 28) celebrated in 'Waterloo'.

If the sympathy of Clare's satire matches Cobbett's radicalism, the style is quite different. Cobbett's accounts never launch into such flights of the imagination; as *The Athenaeum* wrote of him: 'He scarcely ever takes us away from those wretched and

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[134] *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 15 March 1806, p. 362; Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795–1865* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), p. 126.

[135] Cobbett's *State Trials* may even have provoked the reference to Edmund Bonner, the sixteenth-century Bishop of London. Describing the proceedings against him for opposing the Reformation, the account pictures Bonner repenting, 'whether for fear, or for conscience', William Cobbett and David Jardine, *Cobbett's Complete Collection of State Trials* (London: R. Bagshaw, 1809), p. 633.

trivial tumults of the hour'.[136] In Clare's account, in contrast, the old man becomes an increasingly fantastical, messianic figure, who 'like majic' vanishes away after freeing the slaves: 'The people all marvelled & smiled at the sight / Feeling rapture they couldnt tell how' (ll. 213–14). His elevation potentially distances him from those 'wretched tumults' – the actual problems faced by the labouring poor.

As varying visions of the old man emerge, it becomes more difficult to establish him as a unifying figure for any cause. Dawson concludes from the imprecise appearance of the old man that Clare is amused by 'the inability of the upholders of law and order to even identify their quarry let alone catch him', but it may be added that the radicals are equally unsure of his identity.[137] The restless shifting of his status indicates frenetic confusion: he is 'one day a preacher – a critic the next' (l. 341); a 'prophet disclosing events' but then a 'death hunted rebel' (ll. 343–44); a 'pleader upsetting bad laws' or one 'of the excise' (ll. 353–54). Clare shows the ease with which he can be appropriated, when the old man targets a literary reviewer who has taken bribes (ll. 325–32) and a plagiarist writer who 'plundered all volumes that fell in his way' (l. 335).[138] The whims of the literary market, based in a metropolitan milieu, are some distance away from the concerns of poor labourers, and this self-interested interlude undermines the poem's larger satirical assault on figures of authority and oppression.[139]

'The Hue & Cry' also reveals the divisions among those campaigning for 'reform' – a term upheld as unifying by Hone and Cruikshank in *The Political House That Jack Built*, but one which is treated with ambivalence in much of Clare's poetry.

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[136] *The Athenaeum. Literary and Critical Journal*, 12 February 1828, p. 97.
[137] Dawson, 'John Clare – Radical?', p. 24.
[138] Robinson notes that Clare's attack here resembles his complaint about a poem that plagiarised a work by Felicia Hemans, see *CFTP*, pp. 260n–61n.
[139] A similar scene is evident in Byron's 'The Devil's Drive', first published in 1830, when Satan encounters scribbling reviewers, *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980–1993), III (1981), 95–104. During its composition, Clare appears to refer to 'The Hue & Cry' as the 'Devils Drive' in a letter to Frank Simpson (late December 1830), *Letters*, p. 523.

Clare becomes more comfortable with the idea of 'reform' over the course of the 1820s. In his 'Sketches in the Life of John Clare', written in 1821, he associates reform with the Terror of the French Revolution:

> the words 'revolution and reform' so much in fashion with sneering arch infidels thrills me with terror when ever I see them – there was a Robspiere, or somthing like that name, a most indefatigable butcher in the cause of the french levellers, and if the account of him be true, hell has never reeked juster revenge on a villian since it was first opened for their torture[140]

Almost a decade later – while admitting he may be called a 'Radical' but that the meaning of this term is indefinite – Clare claims to take a 'common sense' view on politics, desiring a 'universal reduction of tythes – clerical livings – placemens pensions – & taxes'. Still, he notes in the same letter, 'self interests & individual prosperitys are the universal spirits that stir up these assemblages of reformers'.[141] By 1832 he is supportive of reform, if tentatively, in a letter to Marsh: 'I am no politician but I think a reform is wanted – not the reform of mobs where the bettering of the many is only an apology for injuring the few – nor the reform of partys where the benefits of one is the destruction of the other but a reform that would do good & hurt none'.[142]

Clare's increasingly open support for reform may owe, as Dawson argues, to the increased respectability associated with such a political position by the end of the 1820s.[143] One must, however, bear in mind Clare's creative capacity for contradiction – which is, in itself, an expression of ambivalence. In 'The Parish', written over the course of the 1820s, Clare condemns the cry for reform during the attack on the empty rhetoric of the greedy local Whig, Farmer Bragg:

> & why is all this hubbub for reforms
> This anxious looking for expected storms
> That turns each fireside into parliments
> In strong debates of taxes tithes & rents
> (ll. 933–36)

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[140] *By Himself*, p. 30.
[141] Clare to Taylor (1 February 1830), *Letters*, pp. 498–99.
[142] Clare to Marianne Marsh (early January 1832), *Letters*, p. 560.
[143] Dawson, 'John Clare – Radical?', p. 20.

However, the same image of firesides is described with a positive tone in 'The Reformers Hymn' (*EP*, II, 593–96), written in 1822 or potentially later, as an expression of strength: 'firesides shall be parliments our cottages be towers / Ere wrong shall cheat us of the rights our king declares as ours' (ll. 29–30).

These two views can be reconciled if 'The Reformers Hymn' is considered to be a satirical imitation that is, in fact, an attack the cause of reform; but the poem's stated argument is more cautiously expressed than this interpretation suggests. 'The Reformers Hymn' admits that some supporters are motivated by self-interest, and are not to be trusted: 'The sun itself doth blush at deeds that some reformers do' (l. 6). Instead, as the lines above suggest, those trustworthy reformers are the ones whose faith is centred in the king. These are two poems in two entirely different voices – the collectivist rabble-rouser in 'The Reformers Hymn', and the individualist Popean satirist in 'The Parish' – and Clare's contradictory use of this fireside image produces meaning in itself, reflecting his qualified support.

As these examples suggest, Clare's uncertainty about backing the cause of reform derives from the potential of the word 'reform' to be a corrupted category, and this concern is repeated in 'The Hue & Cry'. It is the rich who can control its 'meaning':

> So the rich who knew well what their meaning was at
> & the poor who knew nothing at all
> Bawled aloud for reform & the crooked old man
> Seemed to mix himself up in the call
> (ll. 363–66)

This is the point where the old man – rather than being the agent of rebellion – occupies a more marginal position: he is 'crooked' by the rich, and his uncertain, passive association is evoked in the phrase, 'Seemed to mix himself up'. Clare exposes further deceit in the cause, as those who write the petitions for reform only propose changes out

of self-interest: 'The taxes they marked as oppressive & bad / Where the taxes themselves had to pay' (ll. 369–70).[144]

The exposure of 'reform' gives way, briefly, to the fullest expression of national solidarity in 'The Hue & Cry', as honest reformers turn on other, self-serving reformers. The old man is no longer the chased, but joins the other chasers 'in the cry' (l. 374):

> Twas honesty now that was put to the rout
> & the full weight & measure of men
> For the crooked old man came at once at the fact
> & hue & cry started agen
>
> (ll. 375–78)

The poem demonstrates the resetting of the exploitative economy to an honest network of relations which deals in truthful 'weights and measures'. A panorama of professionals who have cheated their customers are forced to change: the draper, grocer, housewife, publican, miller, lawyer, debtor, creditor, baker, butcher and tailor. As Stedman Jones emphasizes, radicals could fall across classes; but the division that Clare draws here between the largely merchant-class exploiters and the exploited poor gestures towards the emergence of a more definitively working-class consciousness.

However, Clare shows that this class-consciousness does not last. The old man disappears and the exploiters return to their old ways of deception, all recorded in the poem with bathetic brevity:

> & thus they were all frightened out of their wits
> Till wits came again as it where
> & they found that their conscience was all that was bit
> As the old man had never been near
>
> (ll. 459–62)

'Conscience', far from making men quake, is now only a mild concern.

'The Hue & Cry' shows a glimpse of how a labourer might come to understand his situation within a wider collective of other workers whom he has never met; but this solidarity, along with any other ideas of 'national' collectivity, proves to be only

[144] The new uncertainty attached to 'reform' bears similarities to Clare's suspicion of the ulterior motives of men who proclaim 'freedom', expressed in 'The Fallen Elm'.

temporary. Helsinger argues that 'it is the clash of different imaginations of community, competing claims both by and for alternative collectivities (including regions and classes), that produces national consciousness at any given moment'.[145] It may be that 'The Hue & Cry', in its inability to reconcile competing imaginative claims that are made towards the people of England, dramatizes a sense of a dynamic national consciousness in a time of great political ferment. However, this interpretation is compromised by Clare's narrowed focus at the close of the poem, when he focuses on the condition of the writer.

Before the old man's disappearance, he is last seen in a tomb, which (now being empty) has the word 'Time' 'rudely scrawled' (l. 494) on it. The ambiguity of this message prompts various writers to retell his story:

> & one wrote to prove how he got in the tomb
> & one to prove how he got out
> & one wrote to show that hed never been in
> & so his name travelled about
>
> (ll. 503–06)

The paratactic arrangement recalls the various rumours that sprouted about the old man earlier in the poem. The writers do not merely appropriate the old man's image, they prolong his life as he disappears for their own, self-serving ends.

These variant accounts further the poem's sense of bewilderment about where 'truth' lies. Robinson claims that, at the end of 'The Hue & Cry', 'Clare saw the King as the ultimate source of justice', quoting the lines: 'But the king on his throne was a true honest man / So the world it went on very well' (ll. 531–32).[146] But there is a satirical tone of complacency in the narrator's declaration here, which must be also considered in the context of the poem's repeated examples of hierarchical authority being questioned or overturned. In particular, the biblical comparison of the old man's scrawling of 'Time' to 'the writing Belshazzar beheld on the wall' (l. 517) – which foretold the

[145] Helsinger, p. 11.
[146] *CFTP*, p. xxix.

Babylonian King's downfall – indicates a less reassuring fate for any ruler.[147] Even if the king is 'honest', he rules a nation which has reverted to a network of dishonesty.

The instability of this image does not imply that Clare is willing the king's downfall; rather, it demonstrates how 'The Hue & Cry' resists finality. The claim that none of the writers ever 'cleared up the truth of the crooked old man' (l. 535) is a self-reflexive criticism: 'The Hue & Cry', after all, is another self-serving account prompted by the 'Swing' riots. Dawson argues that Clare's decision to write political poetry for newspapers in this period reflected 'his own growing confidence in himself both as a writer and as someone with a valid point of view on social issues'.[148] It is difficult, however, to imagine that a poet who had experienced both falling sales and a breakdown in the relationship with his publisher was endowed with strong self-belief; the likelihood is that, like any writer, Clare wanted to find a new means of displaying his work. He himself openly acknowledged the commercial value of 'The Hue & Cry': 'I fancied if the trifle could procure me a trifle it would be of service'.[149]

In 'The Hue & Cry', the tension between national and local perspectives feeds back onto where Clare began his career, as a local poet. The poem reveals that the representation of the isolated village existence – which Clare so often offers – can no longer be supported. The rural community has been punctured by the same disturbances that have impacted across the rest of rural England; since it can no longer be contained in any harmonious, conventional image, it becomes potentially 'unknowable' to him.

Clare's poem shows that vertically organized images of the nation are no longer reassuring. In addition, the fissure in 'The Hue & Cry' between its local setting, where resistance can be gathered against visible targets, and the national setting, where

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[147] Daniel 5. 1–31.
[148] Dawson, 'John Clare – Radical?', p. 20.
[149] Clare to Samuel Wilson (c.4 January 1831), *Letters*, p. 529. Just over a year prior to this, much of Clare's correspondence in late 1829 concerns his anxiety about receiving royalties for his publications, see *Letters*, p. 470–87.

solidarity collapses under the weight of self-interest, dramatizes his difficulty in subscribing to a horizontally organized collectivity of workers. At the end of the poem, these concepts of the nation are finally left behind, without resolution, as Clare's narrative concern centres upon the self-consciousness of the individual writer.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has offered a new approach to a strand of Clare's poetry, by focusing on his difficulty in raising his gaze to national ideas of order; in the process, I have examined several works – particularly his 'Coin' poems – which deserve further critical attention. The Clare that emerges from this survey of 'national' poems is perennially sceptical, too concerned by the potential of self-interest to support any idea of collective identity, be it vertically or horizontally organized. His increasingly open scepticism may indicate his changing conception of his audience, and of his role as a poet. However, it remains difficult to argue the Clare ever becomes a 'champion for the poor' when his poetry is so reluctant to make these unifying claims.

Intriguingly, the most recent development in the popular conception of Clare in the twenty-first century is to idealize him as the definitively 'English' poet. As has been mentioned, in 2012 an article in *The Guardian* called for a 'John Clare Day' to be established, as an English celebration.[150] Conservative and radical elements blend in this conception – Clare as the champion of the rural poor and of an older way of life, before modernization infringed. This appropriation has been prompted by Clare's own tendency to frame his experience as a narrative of violent displacement. His arch consciousness of how patterns of working life have come to be disrupted makes him nostalgic for an idyllic, 'English' pre-enclosure past – a perspective which may have

[150] George Monbiot, 'John Clare, the Poet of the Environmental Crisis – 200 Years Ago'.

appealed to his readers, as a version of the pastoral. Giddens would argue that this image of the embedded community is a 'phantasmagoric' one.[151] Clare often seems to deny any links with the nation in his nostalgic vision of Helpston; through this denial, conversely, he appears most 'English' when he is most 'local'.

However, to maintain this fragile image of the 'local' Clare is to ignore a number of his poems – as discussed throughout this chapter – that show that Helpston was never an isolated, immemorial village in his time. Clare inhabited a community that was continually traversed with news and other external influences – labourers discussed events such as the Napoleonic wars and the beginnings of the 'Swing' riots, and used centrally controlled money. My discussion has shown that Clare's political consciousness can never be construed as purely 'local', because Helpston was inescapably part of the wider network of politics and commerce.

Clare's sense of belonging to a nation was never entirely absent. In later years, during his period in the asylum, his interest in Lord Nelson and Shakespeare (to the point of self-identification) exemplifies his intensifying fascination with English figureheads.[152] Conversely, his sudden enthusiasm for producing Scottish songs points to a sense of belonging to a different collective which simultaneously registers his feelings of alienation and exile. In each of these cases, national identity appears to offer a means of stabilizing one's self-identity.

The works discussed in this chapter demonstrate that while Clare cannot successfully conceive of a national social order, he also cannot bring himself to abandon the poetic attempt. The fact that he pursues poems of military celebration while also expressing discontent on behalf of the labourer in his 'Coin' poems and 'The Hue & Cry' should not lead us to consign one 'false' Clare, appeasing his patrons, and one 'true', radical Clare, appeasing readers today. Rather, such poetic activity exemplifies

[151] Giddens, p. 140.
[152] Bate, *John Clare*, pp. 475–76.

his tendency to inhabit various perspectives – in these cases, perspectives on the nation – as a way of displaying and enacting his own complex attitudes.

# Conclusion

> [Poetry] begins in delight and ends in self-consciousness
>
> Seamus Heaney[1]

The tensions between different perspectives in Clare's poetry are never resolved. His later poetry – in the 1830s and, subsequently, while housed in the asylum – is increasingly fraught in its search for a correct perspective with which to view the rural community. His work conveys the sense of the most familiar things becoming strange, because of their own familiarity. Clare would indicate as much in what has proved to be his most famous poem, 'I Am' (1846, *LP*, I, 396–97), written in Northampton asylum: 'Even the dearest, that I love the best / Are strange – nay, rather stranger than the rest' (ll. 11–12).

Clare indicates his sense of alienation generated by his move to Northborough in 1832 in 'The Flitting' (*MP*, III, 479–89), written shortly afterwards, and 'We went a journey far away' (*MP*, V, 386), written between 1832 and 1837. The appreciation of this rupture, however, should not obscure the more prolonged sense of self-consciousness that is evident in Clare's poetry during the 1830s, when the positioning of human beings becomes less certain. Clare continues to present the cultural life of the village – if less frequently – in works such as 'The Ravens Nest'; elsewhere, he adopts more idealizing perspectives of hazily figured men at work in poems like in the 1832 poems 'The Wheat Ripening' (*MP*, IV, 271) and 'The Shepherd' (*MP*, IV, 138) – the latter speaks of the shepherd's 'glad toil' (l. 4), recalling Bloomfield's phrase 'chearful servitude' in *The Farmer's Boy*.

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[1] Michael Huey, 'Interview: Seamus Heaney', *Christian Science Monitor*, 9 January 1989 <http://www.csmonitor.com/1989/0109/ucseam.html> [accessed 10 March 2014].

Frequently in this period, however, Clare describes scenes of private withdrawal. The place of retreat is sometimes figured as a means of self-defence against the metropolitan, literary world: the 1832 poem 'Universal Goodness' (*MP*, IV, 326) states the pleasures of not having a critic's eyes when looking on nature; 'O fortune keep me in the country air' (*MP*, V, 31) and 'O quiet living solitude' (*MP*, V, 52–54), both written between 1832 and 1835, contrast protective rural and harsh urban realms. In other cases, Clare seeks withdrawal from all human figures. The narrator in the 1830 poem 'Summer Images' (*MP*, III, 147–62), resembling Lubin at his most solitary, declares: 'Me not the noise of brawling pleasures cheer / In nightly revels or in city streets' (ll. 22–23).

Clare's continued production of 'bird's nest' poems, which he had begun writing in the late 1820s, also allowed him to dramatize the need for private communion with nature, away from man. In 'The Robins Nest' (*MP*, III, 532–36), written in 1832, the speaker is pleased to be 'Far from the ruder worlds inglor[i]ous din' (l. 6). The retreat into 'this old ancient solitude' (l. 65) offers a restoration of identity, where Clare finds he can 'be my self in memory once again' (l. 41). The human who does ultimately intrude is an acceptable, idealized figure – a charitable woodman who offers crumbs to the bird. The voice of the 1832 poem 'The Nightingale's Nest' (*MP*, III, 456–61) is addressed to a companion, but the pair are nonetheless privileged observers hidden away from the social world, finding the bird's habitat to be an environment 'Unseen save when a wanderer passes near / That loves such pleasant places' (ll. 86–87).

These poems show the attempt to avoid humans by deliberately venturing into 'unseen' locations. The static concentration paid to a natural habitat, exemplified in his mid-1830s poem 'Bumbarrels Nest' (*MP*, V, 219), wilfully focuses the narrator away from any human distractions. It is fitting that when humans do intrude most violently into Clare's work in the 1830s, in 'The Badger', the initial setting of the poem is one

apparently hidden from human eyes, where the animal makes its trail. The tumultuous crowd, unbearably familiar to the narrator, shows a rural body of people from which Clare could not escape – until, unhappily, he was removed to Epping Forest.

**The Asylum: Land without People, and People without Land**

In 'I Am', Clare's narrator declares: 'I long for scenes, where man hath never trod' (l. 13). Perhaps his greatest work of the asylum period, 'Child Harold' (*LP*, I, 40–88), written in 1841, shows a method of avoiding social observation that is different from solitary withdrawal: the imaginative depopulation of the rural scene. While Byron's *Childe Harold* narrates a journey through various European countries, the movement in Clare's version, when it is represented in geographical space, is back to and through the village and its surroundings.[2] This focus places it as a work of locality, unlike his other 1841 Byronic imitation, 'Don Juan A Poem' (*LP*, I, 89–101), which inhabits the realm of urban satire. The rural landscapes of 'Child Harold' are curiously unpopulated:

> Dull must that being live who sees unmoved
> The scenes & objects that his childhood knew
> The school yard & the maid he early loved
> The sunny wall where long the old Elms grew
> The grass that e'en till noon retains the dew

[2] Several comparative studies of Clare and Byron have been made, see Anne Barton, 'John Clare Reads Lord Byron', *Romanticism*, 2 (1996), 127–48; William D. Brewer, 'John Clare and Lord Byron', *JCSJ*, 11 (1992), 43–56; Philip Martin, 'Authorial Identity and the Critical Act: John Clare and Lord Byron', in *Questioning Romanticism*, ed. by John Beer (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 71–91; Simon Kövesi, 'Masculinity, Misogyny and the Marketplace: Clare's "Don Juan A Poem"', in *John Clare: New Approaches*, ed. by Goodridge and Kövesi, pp. 187–201; Jason N. Goldsmith, 'The Promiscuity of Print: John Clare's "Don Juan" and the Culture of Romantic Celebrity', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 46 (2006), 803–32. On 'Child Harold' specifically, see Lynne Pearce, 'John Clare and Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogic Principle: Readings from John Clare's Manuscripts, 1832–1845' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Birmingham, 1987); Cathy Taylor, 'Byron, Tasso, and John Clare's *Child Harold*', in *John Clare: New Approaches*, ed. by Goodridge and Kövesi, pp. 161–86; Salman Al-Wasiti, 'A Reconstruction of Clare's *Child Harold*', *JCSJ*, 20 (2001), 55–65; Gary Harrison, 'Hybridity, Mimicry and John Clare's *Child Harold*'.

> Beneath the wallnut shade I see them still
> Though not such fancys do I now pursue
> Yet still the picture turns my bosom chill
> & leaves a void – nor love nor hope may fill
> (ll. 603–11)

The only human listed in the landscape of Clare's youth is the 'maid', a figure for Mary – emblematic in herself – while the recollection of 'scenes' can only hint at other figures who pass unmentioned.[3] These images move from being actual occurrences once experienced by the communal third person, to a shift into the first person – 'I see them still' – which throws them into the present tense. The ambiguity hovers as to whether 'seeing' is visual or visionary, before the clarification that such images are 'fancys' that the narrator will not pursue. The poem is a restructuring of place, a village without the problematic presence of villagers.

The only people who offer any form of community in the poem, appearing in its final lines, are gypsies:

> The Thrush & Nightingale & timid dove
> Breathe music round me where the gipseys dwell –
> Pierced hearts left burning in the doubts of love
> Are desolate where crowds & citys dwell –
> The splendid palace seems the gates of hell
> (ll. 1296–300)

Here, gypsies are clarified as presenting a community away from 'crowds & citys', and even from the grand domesticity of the 'palace' – the gypsy camp, then, represents a community of solitude, at one with the natural world through their blended music. It may be that, in Clare's extreme isolation, only the most marginal, isolated social group provides the strongest sense of community.

Gypsies are a preoccupation of Clare's asylum verse: erotically charged songs about gypsy girls recur, such as 'The Bonny Gipsey' (*LP*, II, 866–67) and 'My own sweet Gipsey girl' (*LP*, II, 1096–97), while 'The Gipsey Camp' (*LP*, I, 29) presents the

[3] The ambiguity of whether Clare specifically means Mary Joyce when he says 'Mary' – throughout his love poetry – is indicated by his use of it as a collective term, when recalling his first, developing love for her: 'but other Marys etc excited my admiration', *By Himself*, p. 29.

point of view of the observer watching a 'quiet, pilfering, unprotected race' (l. 14). Clare exhibits fascination while not imagining himself as part of this community – although he would wear a gypsy hat for his escape from the Epping Forest asylum, a disguise which places him as a rambling outsider (a gypsy woman warns him, 'you'll be noticed') who might pass through various communities, enabling him finally to return home as an insider.[4]

In contrast, Clare repeatedly locates himself as part of the Scottish community in his asylum verse. His songs in Scots dialect invoke an affinity to a country that he had never visited. Yet the appeal of Scotland to Clare's position hinges on the idea of the community of exiles. The very nature of a Scot is to be dispossessed: in 'Song' ('Farewell! auld Scotland, hills, and moors', *LP*, I, 290) Clare writes, 'I'm like a Scott; turned out o' doors, / In other lands to dwell' (ll. 3–4), which may refer to the Highland clearances from 1750 onwards, when the crofters were turned out by landowners and emigrated to North America. This discourse allows Clare to figure himself as an exile, far from his home, as when he states in the 1844 poem 'Scotland' (*LP*, I, 280), 'I left her in freedom, and wish her free still' (l. 18).[5]

Gypsies or Scots merely offer a partial sense of community. In the asylum, Clare can only envision land without people, or people without land. The dynamics of Helpston-specific social observation that animated his earlier poetry have collapsed into self-consciousness; these new communities are chimerical substitutes.

[4] *By Himself*, p. 262.
[5] Also see 'Song' (1845), *LP*, I, 232–33; 'Song' (1850), *LP*, I, 243–44; 'Will ye gang wi' me to Scotland dear' (undated), *LP*, I, 589–90.

**The Lack of Secure Judgement**

Clearly, Clare's removal to the asylum, and the mental illness under which he laboured, would constrain any of his attempts at 'social observation'; it is not the purpose of this study to illuminate the nature of these difficulties. I do not intend to downplay or denigrate the traumatic changes that institutionalization brought, however, when I identify a continuity between Clare's pre-asylum and asylum poetry, in its growing, self-conscious avoidance of social observation – and posit this trend as a development of his full and varied participation in various value systems. The plural perspectives that he adopts in his poetry do not only mediate 'dirty reality'; they also, collectively, alter it. Clare's habits as an intellectually curious seeker, combined with his resting wariness of change, will always position him ambivalently. But the exposure to different discourses ultimately and inevitably makes it more difficult for Clare, by his later years, to produce any kind of secure judgement on human behaviour. The connection to his local origins becomes even more difficult to evaluate, as does his sense of self-identity.

To reiterate a point made in my introduction, it is Clare's consciousness of different value systems that makes him unique: he bears an idea of what is at stake in various methods of rural representation. Different perspectives are enabling but provisional; they allow him to mediate different facets of rural life, but their execution is coupled with the poet's awareness of their limitations.

Clare's amoral, 'natural' perspectives allow him not only to present customary rural violence with detail, but also to reframe it as a form of behaviour bearing 'universal' human qualities. He thus offers a uniquely informed representation of rural behaviour, endowing a 'natural stability' to a customary culture that was in flux. However, he pushes these perspectives to an extreme, where his narrative voice becomes haunted by the need to conceal the violence or to express moral disapproval.

His use of 'refined' perspectives shows that a portrayal of individuated consciousness, in the case of Lubin, need not obscure the wider social structure of life in the village. Clare negotiates a distance between protagonist and community to offer a full portrayal of rural life that is at once optimistic and pessimistic, and signals the potential for a new kind of village solidarity. However, the uncertain lengthening and shortening of this distance also indicates the instability of the narrative technique; Lubin's alienated consciousness often threatens to obliterate his sympathetic connection to the village.

Clare's 'female' perspectives allow him to frame rural sexuality and courtship in a palatable and attractive fashion, appealing to reader's curiosity in the exoticism of rural life but also drawing attention to the shared experiences of women of different classes. The parallels with his own experience enable him to conceive of his own experience in comparison with the requirements and difficulties of 'refinement' that occupied many of his readers. However, the portrayal of 'dirty reality' in these tales, as well as the consideration of female subjectivity, is sometimes overwhelmed by the need to idealize or moralize over rural life – a result of catering for the tastes of the audience.

His 'national' perspectives offer images of the nation in which a labouring-class individual might participate, while at the same time undermining these gestures with increasing scepticism. This undermining offers the notion that the labouring classes are exploited victims, yet Clare's scepticism complicates structures of solidarity built upon class-consciousness. He demonstrates clear sympathy to the cause of reform, but also an awareness that structuring this sympathy into a uniform political position that might incorporate his own individual needs (including his more conservative affinities) is at best unsatisfactory, and at worst deceptive. Clare's scepticism turns back in on itself, as he implicates himself in the accusations of self-interest, unsettling his position as a social observer.

In these various discussions, the need to offer a moral or idealized view comes to interrupt and qualify all of Clare's novel perspectives. However, his presentation of such a view should not be construed as him passively replicating an alien, 'conventional' stance. Morality was itself a contested field, and the old women who tell stories are the most obvious representatives of a system of moral values that was rooted in Clare's own community – made manifest in his poetry, for example, in the need for oral storytellers to offer moralizing conclusions, and the presence of the woman removing her children from the fray in 'The Badger'. In addition, Clare understands that the nostalgic, idealized view of the village, approximating a traditional, 'embedded' community, serves its own function as a figurative defence against the disruptions that modernization has inflicted upon a familiar way of life. In each of the chapters' discussions, Clare represents the conflicting attitude of a man of his social station. The complexity that is borne from the tensions between perspectives presents us with a uniquely full conception of individual, labouring-class subjectivity in this period.

According to a narrative of 'disembeddedness', participation in a national, standardized culture ought to pull the individual away from his local affinity to place. Giddens's theory of disembeddedness admits that feelings of close attachment to places still exist in the modern era: 'But these are themselves disembedded: they do not just express locally based practices and involvements but are shot through with much more distant influences.'[6] In the case of Clare, the process is complex one. His appeal to readers today is rooted in the idea of a local, embedded community on behalf of which he speaks. However mythic this construction, it is also true that Clare never completely loses his sense of attachment to his locality; rather, as he reflexively analyses this attachment, it becomes more problematic for him. This qualifies our sense of what it means to feel 'disembedded': Clare's reflexivity bears, beneath it, a sense of the local

[6] Giddens, p. 108.

that none of his various perspectives – 'shot through with much more distant influences' – are quite capable of expressing. It is not only Clare who changes; Helpston itself is a place in flux. The depopulated landscape of 'Child Harold' may, in itself, be the ultimate expression of the writer's depleted but undying affinity to place. It is an imaginative attempt to find the realm where the mythological and the real overlap, and which readers can inhabit through a community of sympathy.

Clare's lonely reflexivity, and his drawing away from social observation, do not render him wholly solitary. His use of different perspectives helps to forge sympathetic links with various communities – fellow villagers; marginalized rural groups, such as shepherds and gypsies; beyond the village, female readers, and workers across the nation; and, of course, the intellectual and literary communities who gravitated to Clare's work. The instability of these arrangements – for example, the scepticism regarding class-consciousness – indicates that Clare's poetic project is never to homogenize experience, but to be awkward and unsettling.

In one of his final poems, 'To John Clare' (*LP*, II, 1102–03), written in the asylum in 1860, rural life is let back in.

> Well honest John how fare you now at home
> The spring is come & birds are building nests
> The old cock robin to the stye is come
> With olive feathers & its ruddy breast
> & the old cock with wattles & red comb
> Struts with the hens & seems to like some best
> Then crows & looks about for little crumbs
> Swept out bye little folks an hour ago
> The pigs sleep in the sty the bookman comes
> The little boys lets home close nesting go
> & pockets tops & tawes where daiseys bloom
> To look at the new number just laid down
> With lots of pictures & good stories too
> & Jack the jiant killers high renown

The recipient of this poem's address is uncertain; it may be Clare's own son, born in 1826, or even his great-grandfather, who had died in 1781.[7] The most persuasive reading is that Clare addresses himself, but this ambiguity furthers a sense of displacement – looking at oneself in the third person – as well as forging a sense of an inter-generational bond. The natural observation is finely balanced: the repetition of 'the old cock' and the 'sty' carries the sense of a perspective settling upon a specific place; potentially cacophonic sounds are harmonized by the alliterative 'crows' and 'crumbs'; even the bird's-nesting sits gently in counter-balance to the earlier nest building.

Leaving bird's-nesting and his spinning tops behind, the boy looks to his new book delivered by the pedlar – an item from print culture, immersed in the superstitions associated with oral culture. This scene presents what really is 'dirty reality' – that Clare's world was one traversed by a plurality of influences. The bookman is not a disruptive intruder; he turns up as easily as the pig sleeps. The poem is teasingly directed both to an imagined present and, through the unidentified boy(s), to a recreation of Clare's own past. Any retrospective nostalgia is quietly burdened with the awareness of his present institutionalization; yet the poem defiantly ends on a note of optimism, when the narrator's perspective merges with the boy's to appreciate 'high renown', recalling the 'common fame' which Clare sought for his own work – not to mention the heroic inspiration he might have drawn from 'Jack the jiant killer'. In this sonnet, finally, Clare restores some connection to the rural life which he had lost, and finds a place of safety.

[7] Bate, *John Clare*, pp. 11, 287.

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