John Clare and the Ghosts of Natures Past
Author(s): Alan Bewell
Source: *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (March 2011), pp. 548-578
Published by: University of California Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/ncl.2011.65.4.548
Accessed: 19-10-2017 14:11 UTC

John Clare and the Ghosts of Natures Past

ALAN BEWELL

In 1841 John Clare came to the stark realization that, although he had been a resident of England all his life, he was now living in a state of exile. Being a patient for almost four years at Dr. Matthew Allen's High Beach asylum in Epping Forest precipitated this recognition, but the feeling was not new. Deep down, Clare had always known that enclosure had turned his claim that he belonged to a place into a poetic fiction. He no more owned the fields in which he worked than mechanical operatives owned the manufactories in which they labored or the crowded streets they walked. Clare escaped from the asylum in July and returned to his cottage in Northborough, only to feel "homeless at home"; "my home is no home to me," he would declare in a letter written to his childhood love, Mary Joyce, who was dead at that time.[1] In December of that year he would be committed to the Northampton asylum, and thus his feelings of exile would be fully and permanently realized as he became the equivalent of "a memory lost."[2] In *Child Harold*, the ambitious

Nineteenth-Century Literature, Vol. 65, No. 4, pp. 548–578. ISSN: 0891–9356, online ISSN: 1067–8352.

[1] John Clare, letter to Mary Joyce, 27 July 1841, in *The Letters of John Clare*, ed. Mark Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 649.

[2] John Clare, "I Am," in *The Later Poems of John Clare, 1837–1864*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), I, 396–97, l. 2. Hereafter

unfinished poem written during this tumultuous year, Clare confronts what it means to lose one's place in the world and to discover that even nature, that most rooted of things, can make no claim to place.

If Clare had lived in the twentieth century, he would have been able to look to other poets to help understand this condition, writers such as the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, whose poetry engages with the Israeli occupation of Palestine, which forced him to flee to Lebanon. When Darwish returned to Palestine, his place was gone: his village, al-Barweh, had been leveled, and he could no longer claim citizenship. "I had been a refugee in Lebanon, and now I was a refugee in my own country," he says in a 1969 interview.[3] Darwish's experience of exile is different from Clare's, and one does not want to collapse historically different situations, yet both poets, in unique ways, speak about what it means to lose one's geographical place. Theirs is the exile that comes from discovering that the place that matters most to you has been taken away from you and permanently erased from the earth and that you now stand on alien ground. "*Is it true, good ladies and gentlemen, that the earth of Man is for all human beings / as you say?*" Darwish asks; "*In that case, where is my little cottage, and where am I?*"[4] These words might easily have been penned by Clare, who was reduced to being just an abstract "I am," not a *dasein* (a "being there"), and to seeing his life as "a dream that never wakes" (John Clare, *Child Harold*, in *Later Poems,* I, 49, l. 255). Life had become a road that got longer with every step: "Night finds me on this lengthening road alone"; "In this cold world without a home / Disconsolate I go" (*Child Harold*, ll. 256, 934–35). In 1841 Clare was suffering from delusions, so it has been easy for critics to treat his sense of alienation and displacement as symptoms of psychological

abbreviated *Later Poems*. For a chronological presentation of Clare's work during this year, see *John Clare: The Living Year, 1841*, ed. Tim Chilcott (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 1999).

[3] Mahmud Darwish and Samih al-Qasim Adonis, *Victims of a Map*, trans. Abdullah al-Udhari (London: Al Saqi Books, 1984), p. 10.

[4] Mahmoud Darwish, "I Talk Too Much" (1986), in Darwish, *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise: Selected Poems*, ed. Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2003), p. 13.

distress. Married in his mind to two women—to Patty Turner, with whom he had seven children, and to Mary Joyce—Clare was also seeing himself, at various times, as Shakespeare, Lord Nelson, and the boxer Jack Randall. In adopting the persona of Byron, by writing a supplementary canto to *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–18) and his own version of Byron's *Don Juan* (1819–24), however, Clare was not just engaging in mad mimicry. Instead, he was attempting to use the writings of the great English poet of exile in order to understand the unique form of exile that he was living, one in which neither the working class nor nature could claim permanent roots.

No Romantic poet wrote more passionately about the joy of experiencing nature in all its immediacy than John Clare, and no poet argued more strongly for its permanence and continuity across generations as part of the original design of Creation. Yet few poets have conveyed in more poignant terms what it means to lose one's nature for good. Clare grew up knowing only *one* nature: the mixture of arable land, woodland, limestone heath, meadows, and fen that made up his native rural parish of Helpston. By the age of fifteen, he writes: "I had never been above eight miles from home in my life."[5] In an age in which Britishness was increasingly associated with mobility, with a world of moving people and things, Clare's commitment to the stationary and to thinking about nature in traditional terms, as something that is local, immediately at-hand, and unchanging, sets him apart from most of his contemporaries. Gilbert White (1720–1793) also felt that he was living in a stable unchanging nature, but he died in the same year that Clare was born, so he was not forced, as Clare was, to deal with the massive changes in rural life introduced by agricultural improvement and enclosure. Margaret Grainger is certainly right to claim that Clare's "rootedness . . . is one of his greatest strengths."[6]

[5] John Clare, *The Autobiography, 1793–1824*, in *The Prose of John Clare*, ed. J. W. Tibble and Anne Tibble (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 20. Hereafter abbreviated as *Prose*.

[6] Margaret Grainger, "General Introduction," in John Clare, *The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare*, ed. Margaret Grainger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. l.

At the same time, it left him vulnerable to being permanently displaced by being unable to put down roots elsewhere.

For modern readers, then and now, it is difficult to understand Clare's inability to adapt to a world of circulation, migrancy, and exchange. In a famous passage from his autobiography Clare recounts how, as a young child, he journeyed across Emmonsales heath beyond the very limits of his knowing: "I got out of my knowledge when the very wild flowers seemd to forget me & I imagind they were the inhabitants of new countrys the very sun seemd to be a new one & shining in a different quarter of the sky. . . . I was finding new wonders every minute & was walking in a new world & expecting the world's end bye & bye but it never came" (*Autobiography*, in *Prose*, p. 13). This anecdote insists upon the intensely local aspects of Clare's nature and his own simultaneous recognition of its limits. "When I got back into my own fieldds," he writes, "I did not know them everything lookd so different" (*Autobiography*, p. 13). In this passage Clare admits that he lost a world, but significantly he did not replace it with another. Travel did not lead Clare, as it did so many of his contemporaries, to desire to know more about other places or to seek to compare his natural locality with others. Instead, it produced disorientation, estrangement, dislocation, and, ultimately, a homelessness that was of disabling intensity yet enabled him to grasp critically the dark side of modernity.

The landscape of Helpston may have "'made up' his 'being,'" as Clare declared, but his poetry responds to a very different situation: his discovery that his identity was rooted upon moving ground.[7] Growing up, he certainly believed that the nature that he knew as a child would never change, and throughout his poetry Clare identifies his childhood relationship with nature with permanence and joy. Yet the 1809 Act enclosing Helpston proved him wrong. For Clare nature was composed of a mixture of forest, "waste" lands, and commons that was sustained by traditional open-field agriculture. As an adult, he watched this nature slowly disappear into the past, as it was

[7] John Tibble and Anne Tibble, *John Clare: His Life and Poetry* (London: William Heinemann, 1956), p. 1.

enclosed, carved up, fenced in, and reduced to "little parcels little minds to please."[8] Clare's life as a writer was inextricably bound up with this loss, for his first poem, "Helpstone," was begun in the same year that the parish was enclosed. Clare is thus best understood as a rural laboring-class poet who consciously struggled to maintain the idea of the local nature he knew as a child in the face of the changes that were taking place around him. His poetry documents the social and ecological cost of modernity by addressing the dislocation caused by the destruction of an English rural nature that had been deeply bound up with the longstanding traditions of English rural life.

Clare found his voice in the poetry of social and ecological protest, in a struggle for lost ground, and his poetry displays his changing understanding of what that ground was. In the early poetry there is the glimmer of hope that his writing might win over others to value and love what he did. By the 1830s, however, Clare knew that he had lost this nature for good. Consequently, the voice that emerges in his best poetry does not so much struggle for lost ground as stand upon it. In this extraordinary period, Clare looked to his poetry to provide a nature that now appeared to him in ruins. He writes about what it means to live and to write poetry in the face of the loss of the traditional nature that had sustained English rural life. Clare's poetry provides a glimpse of the ecological and social impact that this change had upon the lives of English rural laborers, but we need not limit the context of our understanding of Clare to England. English rural laborers were not the only people who lost their traditional nature during this period. Read in light of what was happening elsewhere, Clare's poetry can also give us some idea of what it might have meant to other people in other parts of the world who were also grappling with the catastrophic loss of their own local natures.

John Barrell's seminal 1972 study *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730–1840* provided the first major theorization of the importance of "place" and "locality" in Clare's

[8] John Clare, "The Mores," in his *Poems of the Middle Period, 1822–1837*, ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell, and P.M.S. Dawson, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996–2003), II, 347–50, l. 49. Hereafter abbreviated as *Middle Poems*.

poetry. For Barrell, Clare's intensely local commitment to Helpston was not simply an expression of a personal attachment to his birthplace, but instead reflected a certain way of thinking about place that Barrell sees as characteristic of the English rural laboring class. At a time when knowledge gained from being inside a place was being replaced by newer forms of knowledge that worked at a distance by making comparisons across space, Clare's ways of knowing, based on the appreciation of the particularity of localities, set him apart from the landowning and professional classes, who were less interested in preserving traditional local knowledges, cultures, and vernaculars than in integrating places into larger networks of trade and communication. Barrell writes:

> mobility was an essential condition of the attitude we have been examining: it meant that the aristocracy and gentry were not, unlike the majority of the rural population, irrevocably involved, so to speak, bound up in, any particular locality which they had no time, no money, and no reason ever to leave. It meant also that they had experience of more landscapes than one, in more geographical regions than one; and even if they did not travel much, they were accustomed, by their culture, to the *notion* of mobility, and could easily imagine other landscapes.[9]

Where Clare wrote about and sought to preserve the one nature that he knew and valued, the gentry and professional classes knew many, and they were intent upon translating them and remaking them to suit their specific needs. Informed by ideas of improvement, wealthy landowners displayed their power and control over nature by refashioning their properties to conform to new ideas of landscape drawn from the paintings of Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain, or from travelers' accounts of the American wilderness or Chinese gardens, or from the categories of taste promulgated by writers on the picturesque. Meanwhile, a whole new class of farmers and professional agriculturalists, surveyors, and land-agents—people whose geographical experience was shaped by newspapers, books, and roads—began

[9] John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730–1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1972), p. 63.

to think of rural villages and towns no longer as isolated, self-contained entities, but instead in terms of their "relations with other places" (Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape,* p. 92).

Barrell's argument for the difference between Clare's stationary local knowledge and the more mobile and integrative ways of knowing places that developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been justifiably influential in Clare studies. Clare's commitment to a local understanding of nature should not be seen, however, as a straightforward expression of class, for Clare strongly differentiated himself from other laborers, who showed little appreciation of the natural world around them. Also, there can be little doubt that the British rural poor embraced, either willingly or by necessity, that world of movement and change that took many of them to the cities and the far reaches of the earth. Clare's commitment to place, and to an idea of English nature inseparably bound up with a traditional rural past, was not inherently a position thrust upon him by class, but instead one that he self-consciously took up as a poet from that class.[10] To cite Alan D. Vardy, Clare's defense of the "old occupations" and "of dialect, vernacular speech and orality in his poetry constituted a cultural intervention fully aware of its social and political implications."[11] Clare rejected the mobilization of nature and place not because he could not move or could not understand mobility, but because he understood all too well their social and ecological consequences.

As a writer engaged in the broader cultural project of putting nature into print, Clare was not denied access to other natures, and he was fully capable of providing his readers with exactly the kind of "knowledge at a distance" that was being developed in literary and scientific circles. In fact, between

[10] For a similar argument, see Johanne Clare, *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 120–31.

[11] Vardy, *John Clare, Politics and Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 1–2.

September 1824 and January 1826, as his publishing firm, Taylor & Hessey, was on the verge of collapse, Clare was planning to write a "'Natural History of Helpstone' in a series of letters to Hessey," modeled on Gilbert White's *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* (1789).[12] By March 1825 Clare had a title: "'Biographys of Birds & Flowers' with an appendix on Animals & Insects" (*Journal* entry, 11 March 1825, in *Prose*, p. 139). An avid gardener, Clare went on botanizing expeditions with Edmund Tyrell Artis and Joseph Henderson, he consulted natural history books at Milton House, and he collected ferns and orchids. By January 1826, with the delay in the publication of *The Shepherd's Calendar* and the collapse of Taylor & Hessey, Clare indicated to John Taylor that he had relinquished the idea of writing a prose natural history of Helpston.[13] Other factors had also come into play. With limited access to other natural histories, Clare's knowledge was largely limited to the plants and animals that he could observe. Also, he refused to adopt Linnaean nomenclature, which he saw as a "hard nicknaming system of unuterable words" that overloaded botany "in mystery till it makes it darkness visible" (*Journal* entry, 24 October 1824, in *Prose*, p. 117). But the decision not to write in the vein of contemporary natural history did not mean that Clare was any less committed to studying and writing about nature. Instead, it reflected his belief that poetry was the proper medium for its representation. The richness of the natural history poetry that followed is one of Clare's great legacies. As M. M. Mahood comments in his superb study of Clare and botany, the "370 plants that Clare actually names in his poetry and prose" is "an astonishing tally."[14]

The difference between how Clare and contemporary naturalists represented nature had little to do with questions of attention to detail, but instead with how this knowledge was to be

[12] John Clare, entry for 11 March 1825, *The Journal*, in *Prose*, p. 104. For a fuller discussion of the circumstances surrounding Clare's work on the "Natural History of Helpstone," see Vardy, *John Clare, Politics and Poetry*, pp. 135–66; and *Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare*.

[13] See John Clare, letter to John Taylor, 24 January 1826, in *Letters*, p. 356.

[14] Mahood, *The Poet as Botanist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 112.

used. Naturalists were not interested in observing the individuals of a species as individuals, nor were they interested in the literary, cultural, or social associations connecting a plant or animal to a place: a marsh marigold (*Caltha palustris*) in Kent was essentially the same as one in Northborough, and calling the latter a "horse blob" only confused matters. Clare, in contrast, was interested in seeing nature as an integral part of localized communities. Helpston, for Clare, was a neighborhood in the fullest sense of the word. As Douglas Chambers argues: "[Clare's] poetry demonstrates that 'just representations of general nature' make no sense apart from the particular names of individual trees and flowers: names authenticated by the oral tradition that has transmitted them."[15] Clare excels in the representation of nature as a habitation and in his close observance of the relationship among creatures in their environments and with the human beings who share the world with them.[16] For Clare natural history is a means of acknowledging and sharing one's place with other, non-human beings. That is why he often personifies plants, referring to botany as the means by which one can "know their names as of so many friends & acquaintance," and why he hoped that botany would become popular among "the future shepherds & ploughmen of [his] country," so that they might become "acquainted with the flowers of their own country that make gardens in summer of the spots where they live & labour."[17] Clare uses his natural knowledge to insert or to imbed himself and his readers in the particularity of the world he observed, and he was profoundly critical of the manner in which contemporary natural history forcibly ripped living beings from their socioecological communities. In "Shadows of Taste" he writes:

> . . . take these several beings from their homes
> Each beautious thing a withered thought becomes

[15] Chambers, "'A love for every simple weed': Clare, Botany and the Poetic Language of Lost Eden," in *John Clare in Context*, ed. Hugh Haughton, Adam Phillips, and Geoffrey Summerfield (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), p. 238.

[16] For an insightful account of Clare's environmentalism, see James C. McKusick, *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), pp. 77–94.

[17] John Clare, letter to James Augustus Hessey, 1–4 August 1823, in *Letters*, p. 284.

Association fades & like a dream
They are but shadows of the things they seem
Torn from their homes & happiness they stand
The poor dull captives of a foreign land.
("Shadows of Taste, in *Middle Poems*, III, 309, ll. 147–52)

Here Clare clearly recognizes the manner in which contemporary natural history mobilized natures by translating them into "shadows" of what they once were, a forced removal that he equates with slavery, tearing living beings from their "homes & happiness" and relocating them as the "captives of a foreign land," where, to add insult to injury, they lost there original names and were given new Latin ones by metropolitan scientists.

For Clare the rights and dignity of nature and rural folk were inseparably bound up with each other and with the local traditions of rural communities. In the poetry of the Helpston period, Clare depicts the concrete and enduring bond between rural laborers and the natural world. His goal is not to present an individual subjective experience of nature (as one finds in the poetry of William Wordsworth), but instead to recover, and thus to preserve, common traditions of experience that had developed over centuries. Tradition is not something that we inherit from the past; instead, it draws its vitality and strength from being constantly renewed or found again in the present. In these poems Clare presents a nature that is continuous with the present, a nature that does not change, even though, in the modern world, it struggles to endure. It is worth stressing that Clare cannot imagine one nature giving way to another, as often happens in colonial nature writing; he does not see nature in general as a historical phenomenon, though every plant and bird in an ecological community has its own history as an individual. Consequently, nature in his poetry is either present in all its immediacy, or it is absent, a loss that memory seeks to recover. Nature present does not change, nor do its joys.

In "The Eternity of Nature," Clare finds a powerful figure for this continuity of tradition in the image of a daisy that "lives & strikes its little root / Into the lap of time" ("The Eternity of Nature," in *Middle Poems*, III, 527, ll. 4–5). For Clare culture and tradition are the very soil in which nature roots itself. The

same joy that urges a present-day child—and that will urge a child "many thousands" years hence—to pluck a daisy was also felt by Eve, "when all was new" and she did "stoop adown & show / Her partner Adam in the silky grass / This little gem that smiled where pleasure was" ("The Eternity of Nature," ll. 12, 17, 20–22). Every living field is a version of the first garden, and the pleasures that spring from nature are free and available to anyone wherever a flower is found. The attendant joy is what links all human beings to the earth and gives them a sense of belonging. Where William Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793) emphasized the historically produced character of the flower ("To create a little flower is the labour of ages"),[18] Clare sees the plant and its joys as being continuous across time. Still, there is trouble in paradise: whereas the daisy once bloomed in Eden "under heavens breath," now, in its contemporary setting, it is "trampled under foot" and blooms in a context of "sorrow." And yet, despite its changed circumstances, it "lives smiling still" ("The Eternity of Nature," ll. 3, 24–25). "The Eternity of Nature" presents a radical faith in the permanence of nature despite the changes that Clare saw happening around him. Both the daisy and the pleasure it provides are indestructible because they are guaranteed by the original Creation: the daisy "smiles for ever" (l. 27) even though human beings abuse it. Time may destroy the works of man, but nature remains the same forever. "When kings & empires fade & die," cowslips, "as times partners," will still be "As fresh two thousand years to come as now" (ll. 29–31). "Endless youth / Lives in them all unchangeable as truth" (ll. 75–76), and this quality of immutability extends to their individual forms and behavior, which were also permanently fixed in that first moment of creation: "the cows lap peeps this very day / Five spots appear which time neer wears away" (ll. 79–80). The hum of the bee, the tune of the nightingale, the song of the Robin, all nature's songs are "a music that lives on & ever lives," "for time protects the song." (ll. 46, 40). And like the smiling flowers of

[18] William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake: Newly Revised Edition*, ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2008), p. 37; plate 9.

"Songs Eternity," a poem that Bridget Keegan calls Clare's "*ars poetica*,"[19] these songs, first "sung to adam & to eve," will remain "evergreen" until the end of time:

> Songs is heard & felt & seen
> Every where
> Songs like the grass are evergreen
> The giver
> Said live & be & they have been
> For ever.
>
> ("Songs Eternity," in *Middle Poems*, V, 4, l. 35; 5n)

Clare famously remarked that he did not compose his poems, but instead "found [them] in the fields, / And only wrote them down" ("Sighing for Retirement," in *Later Poems*, I, 19, ll. 15–16). No doubt he hoped that the time that protected nature's song would also protect his poems too.

And yet time and tradition failed both Clare and the nature that he sought to preserve. Though committed to the idea of the permanence of nature and its songs, Clare lived in a world that was changing rapidly. Where many of his contemporaries saw mobility as an opportunity, Clare approached it with dread, equating it with the loss of place, rights, identity, and community. This close connection between movement and loss can be seen in "Helpstone," the first of many poems to address the destructive impact of enclosure on his "native place."[20] Adopting a conventional eighteenth-century topographical model, in which the *genius loci*, the spirit of a place, inspires the genius of the poet who depicts it, "Helpstone" announces the appearance in literature of a previously "unletterd spot" and of a new poet who will sing its glories, promising to "advance [the] name" of a "mean Village . . . / Unknown to grandeur & unknown to fame" even as it brings to public attention the "dawning genius" of its first "minstrel" ("Helpstone," ll. 2–5). Yet, ironically, the poem is less about re-marking a place than about recognizing

[19] See Keegan, "'Camelion' Clare," *European Romantic Review*, 18 (2007), 450.

[20] John Clare, "Helpstone," in *The Early Poems of John Clare, 1804–1822*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), I, 159, l. 71. Hereafter abbreviated as *Early Poems*.

its erasure. Instead of describing Helpston as it *is*, Clare represents the parish as it *was*, for the place is associated with "past delights" that now exist only in memory: a "vanish'd green," an absent brook, "many a bush & many a tree" that were leveled, and the abundance of flowers—the "golden kingcups," "silver dazies," "silver grasses," "lilac," and "Cows laps"—now all part and parcel of a "long evanish'd scene" ("Helpstone," ll. 73–103). The "golden days" of pastoral are evoked, but they are seen as being "long vanish'd from the plain" (l. 55). Clare does not mince his words about the economic greed and violence that have produced this destruction; under the banner of "improvement," "A tree [is] beheaded," "a bush [is] destroy'd" (l. 88). What is striking is that he sees this destruction as a kind of forced removal—an eviction, but one that applies to plants rather than people. It "Griev'd [him] at heart," Clare writes, "to witness their removes" (l. 94).

John Barrell has noted the degree to which Clare's criticism of the destruction of the local nature of Helpston is confusing because it is overlaid with his simultaneous adoption of the eighteenth convention, basic to Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* (1770), of an older person returning to the scenes of his childhood only to find them forever changed.[21] The reader is thus left wondering whether the losses mourned by the poet are those that inevitably come with age, or are indications of real, material changes in the ecology of the place. Both Goldsmith and Clare are arguing the latter, but they clothe this new political and ecological message in the sentimentalist conventions of a poetry that nostalgically mourns the lost Eden of childhood.[22] Goldsmith's criticisms of enclosure and of the manner in which it was forcing rural laborers to emigrate to America seem to weigh less with the poet than his disappointment that the desertion of the village has spoiled his retirement plans, the long-held hope "to return—and die at home at last."[23] Clare

[21] See Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, pp. 110–20.

[22] For a valuable assessment of the political dimensions of *The Deserted Village*, see Alfred Lutz, "The Politics of Reception: The Case of Goldsmith's 'The Deserted Village,'" *Studies in Philology*, 95 (1998), 174–96.

[23] Oliver Goldsmith, *The Deserted Village*, in *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Arthur Friedman, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), IV, 291, l. 96.

echoes Goldsmith in the conclusion of "Helpstone" ("Find one hope true to die at home at last" [l. 178]), but the pain of loss is much greater because Clare is considering what enclosure means not for those who have left the village, but for those who have stayed behind.

Gary Harrison's argument that, instead of reading Clare as "the poet of place," we should see him as "the poet of between places" helps to clarify Clare's social and literary self-positioning, for whether he was attempting to occupy the contradictory social category of a "peasant poet" or seeking to recover a relationship to place that he felt was already in the past, Clare stood between worlds.[24] In describing his "Dear native spot" ("Helpstone," l. 51), Clare moves through a divided landscape, one in which he sees in the enclosed Helpston of the present the absent landscape of the Helpstone that once occupied its place. Clare's poetry is filled with these doubled landscapes, in which memory dwells upon—even dwells in—the spectral traces of what has been lost in what remains. "Now alas those scenes exist no more," he writes ("Helpstone," l. 115), so instead of being introduced to the Helpston in the present, the poem is about "Perishd spots" and "ruind scenes," the "well known pastures oft frequented greens / Tho now no more" (ll. 145–47). Helpston was once an Eden, he suggests, but now the "fates" have chosen to lay its "beauties bye / In a dark corner of obscurity" (ll. 119–20). Clare characteristically searches for these "dark corners," so that the poem is less about marking a place that has been overlooked than about retrieving a place from the obscurity of time in which it has been lost. Where touristic poems celebrate those authentic places that must be visited before the tourists come to destroy them, "Helpstone" is already a ruin whose glory is only visible to the eye of memory provided by Clare. The poet essentially wanders through an absent parish. This is why the poem is actually less about being at home than about homelessness, about being exiled from his native place.

[24] See Gary Harrison, "Hybridity, mimicry and John Clare's *Child Harold*," *Wordsworth Circle*, 34 (2003), 149. For the contradictions of the "peasant poet," see Elizabeth K. Helsinger, *Rural Scenes and National Representation: Britain, 1815–1850* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 141–61.

For Clare enclosure was an act of "removal," one that permanently uprooted the laborer and the natural world that was his neighbor from their traditional place. Clare likens himself at the end of the poem to an "uncertain" traveler wandering "On lost roads leading every where but home" ("Helpstone," l. 180). Speaking of Clare's later poetry, Tim Chilcott sees "a poetry of presence . . . evolving into a poetry of absence."[25] From the beginning Clare—the great poet of local nature—was already writing road poems dealing with exile, loss, and absence. The conclusion of "Helpstone" speaks not only of loss, but also of being lost on roads going nowhere: "So when the Traveller uncertain roams / On lost roads leading every where but home," he "Makes for the home which night denies to find" ("Helpstone," ll. 179–80, 184). For Clare mobility was not an expression of freedom, but rather was equivalent to exile.

A comment that Clare made in his journal on 29 September 1824 helps clarify why he understood mobility as a form of dispossession:

> Took a walk in the fields saw an old wood stile taken away from a favourite spot which it had occupied all my life the posts were overgrown with Ivy & it seemd so akin to nature & the spot where it stood as tho it had taken it on lease for an undisturbd existance it hurt me to see it was gone for my affections claims a friendship with such things but nothing is lasting in this world last year Langley Bush was destroyd an old whitethorn that had stood for more than a century full of fame the gipsies shepherds & Herdmen all had their tales of its history & it will be long ere its memory is forgotten. (*Prose*, pp. 109–10)

Clare's complaint about the removal of the stile is part of his ongoing criticism of enclosure, because he could not but recognize that it provided pedestrian access to land that was now being treated as private property. Here Clare fuses nature and tradition, claiming that the wooden stile, now "overgrown with Ivy," has become "akin to nature" through its long endurance in place. "Akin" suggests likeness, but also kinship, a belonging

[25] See Chilcott, *"A Real World & Doubting Mind": A Critical Study of the Poetry of John Clare* (Hull: Hull Univ. Press, 1985), p. 118.

that includes the poet who "claims" a "friendship" with it because it has been in "a favourite spot" for "all [his] life." In speaking of the stile's removal, Clare explicitly employs legal language, remarking that it had "occupied"—that is, that it had taken possession of—this spot "as tho it had taken it on lease for an undisturbd existance." Where traditionally tenants had been accorded specific rights through occupancy, under the new forms of ownership epitomized by enclosure, all natures, human or otherwise (even those which had occupied the land since the beginning of time), were subject to the goodwill or caprice of those who now claimed absolute ownership over their property.[26] That is why the circumstances of the "stile" were not substantially different from those of the "old whitethorn" called Langley Bush.

In eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century literature, it is not uncommon to see agricultural laborers and aboriginal peoples being identified with nature—as being wild, uncivilized, rooted in place, and incapable of change. Clare makes a similar association, but for very different purposes. Instead of emphasizing the non-historical dimensions of the rural laboring class and of nature, Clare sees both as being longstanding tenants of the earth who are now suffering the indignity of being uprooted and removed from their places. The creatures of nature, in Clare's view, claim their belonging to earth by virtue of their longstanding occupation of it. Ecology and social protest are brought together in Clare's belief that laborers and rural English nature were suffering under a new economic regime that made them landless by abrogating their traditional rights of tenancy: in claiming that "nothing is lasting in this world," Clare may sound like he is adopting the ancient language of mutability, but he is really making a political and ecological critique of his times. In "To Wordsworth," after singling out Simon Lee "grubbing up the root" and remarking that Wordsworth's poems are like fields in which one comes upon different flowers, Clare declares: "I love them all as tenants of the earth" ("To Wordsworth," in *Later Poems*, I, 25, ll. 7–8).

[26] For valuable comments on the ambiguity of ownership and tenantry in Clare's works, see Helsinger, *Rural Scenes and National Representation*, pp. 149–54.

Clare rejected the idea that nature has no property in itself and that plants and animals have no right to the land they occupy. Against the modern legal definition of land as a private freehold possession, he reasserted the moral economic claim that nature and country folk, by virtue of having lived in their places for centuries, could claim traditional tenants' rights, at the very least "for an undisturbd existance." Whereas traditionally land had been shared among different social groups, enclosure represented the triumph of a capitalist system in which property rights trumped customary entitlements and obligations. As Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon remark, "When land became a commodity, rural populations lost their age-old rights of tenancy and use."[27] Discussing the eighteenth-century struggle between traditional and capitalist conceptions of property in *Whigs and Hunters* (1975), E. P. Thompson observes: "What was often at issue was not property, supported by law, against no-property; it was alternative definitions of property-rights: for the landowner, enclosure—for the cottager, common rights; for the forest officialdom, 'preserved grounds' for the deer; for the foresters, the right to take turfs."[28] Clare recognized that the new conception of property rights embodied in the idea of enclosure had dispossessed not only the rural laboring class but also the non-human beings that had long inhabited the rural countryside. Having seen the landscape of Helpston stripped of the great elms and oaks that had once occupied a place of honor in its landscape, he recognized that the English nature around him was no more rooted in place than he was. Its hold on place had become tenuous. In "Remembrances," the destruction of Langley Bush is once again figured as a forced move: "by Langley bush I roam but the bush hath left its hill" ("Remembrances," in *Middle Poems*, IV, 133, l. 61). "Langley bush" has become a name only, serving as a ghostly stand-in for a nature that had "left *its* hill" (emphasis added). In the new economy signaled by enclosure, a part of nature that had once

[27] Fraser and Gordon, "Contract versus Charity: Why Is There No Social Citizenship in the United States?" *Socialist Review*, 22, no. 3 (1997), 57.

[28] Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), p. 261.

claimed a preeminent right of place on a hilltop was now just as liable to being made homeless as a rural laborer. In a journal entry for 26 November 1824, Clare recounts a visit to Lea Close to see if the old hazel nut tree, from which he had collected "a half peck of nuts" when he was a boy, was still standing. It was, but all of the other trees were gone: "the Inclosure has left it desolate its companion of oak & ash being gone" (*Prose*, pp. 125–26). For the professional classes of imperial Britain, the capacity to disembed plants and animals from their traditional localities made it possible to use nature in new ways, integrating natural beings into new forms of knowledge and transferring them to new locales. For Clare this mobilization of nature was a greed-driven act of dispossession.

In his poems on bird nests, Clare focuses on nature's claim to the rights of tenancy and seeks to provide an alternative to the destructive, appropriative relationships that normally characterize human beings' relations with the animal world. As Elizabeth Helsinger remarks, these are poems in which Clare searches for the "remnants of unowned land in an enclosed landscape," seeking the freedom that he associated with community (*Rural Scenes and National Representation*, p. 151).[29] In "The Robins Nest," Clare describes a part of the woods that has been untouched by human improvement, its wildness a sign of its status as an "old spot" ("Robins Nest," in *Middle Poems*, III, 533, l. 23), an "ancient place" (l. 26), where human beings can still cultivate a community with wild things,

> Where old neglect lives patron & befriends
> Their homes with safetys wildness—where nought lends
> A hand to injure—root up or disturb
> The things of this old place.
>
> ("Robins Nest," ll. 50–53)

Here "the very weeds as patriarchs appear," and their continuing presence in this place indicates that it has not yet been touched by the "war with nature" (ll. 63, 55). Come "ten years hence," Clare declares, and the same plants will greet your

[29] For an excellent discussion of these poems, see Johanne Clare, *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance*, pp. 164–88.

eyes, "like old tennants peaceful still" (ll. 66–67). Here too the wood robin displays little fear of human beings, and "With fluttering step each visitor recieves" (l. 69). Like his progenitors, the robin rarely leaves this spot, for all of his needs are satisfied here:

> In heart content on these dead teazle burs
> He sits [&] trembles oer his under notes
> So rich—joy almost choaks his little throat
> With extacy & from his own heart flows
> That joy himself & partner only knows
> . . . . . .
> And there these feathered heirs of solitude
> Remain the tennants of this quiet wood
> & live in melody & make their home
> & never seem to have a wish to roam.
>
> (ll. 70–75, 88–91)

For Clare mobility was a symptom of homelessness and dissatisfaction. Ancient natures, unlike their modern counterparts, seek to stay put. Appropriately, he ends the poem with a description of the robin's nest, which snugly shelters five brown-colored eggs from which will come "bye & bye a happy brood," "The tennants of this wood land privacy" (ll. 100–101).

The most powerful fusing of natural and human tenancy is to be found in "The Lament of Swordy Well," where an ancient stone quarry, "a piece of land" personified as a member of the parish poor, comes before the reader, not to beg, but to appeal for his customary rights, to "pray to keep [his] own" ("The Lament of Swordy Well," in *Middle Poems*, V, 105, ll. 21, 12). For the first time in literature, nature appears as a homeless person. Granted to the overseers of Helpston's roads by the 1809 Enclosure Act, Swordy Well complains that he has been stripped of all his belongings by a "grubbling geer" (l. 45) that "claim[s] [his] own as theirs" (l. 65). "Ive scarce a nook to call my own / For things that creep or flye," he complains (ll. 113–14).

Denied access to any legal court of appeal, and seeking, in Helsinger's words, to "own" and to "keep" what is his (in the sense of claiming and supporting what belongs to his

identity),[30] Swordy Well brings his case before the reader, hoping that, in the absence of social justice, poetry can provide him with a hearing:

> Though Im no man yet any wrong
> Some sort of right may seek
> & I am glad if een a song
> Gives me the room to speak.
> ("The Lament of Swordy Well," ll. 41–44)

The Swordy Well that appears in the poem is hardly recognizable, even to himself, and yet he has been lucky, for he says: "Of all the fields I am the last / That my own face can tell" (ll. 251–52). Once a rich ecological community, home to rare orchids ("flowers that blo[o]med no where beside" [l. 135]), to Great Crested newts, and to the rare (but now extinct) Large Copper butterfly (*Lycaena dispar dispar*), Swordy Well has been robbed of his streams and soil cover: "The butterflyes may wir & come / I cannot keep em now" (ll. 93–94). Just as his dyked springs can "Scarce own a bunch of rushes" (l. 58), so too

> The muck that clouts the ploughmans shoe
> The moss that hides the stone
> Now Im become the parish due
> Is more then I can own.
> (ll. 37–40)

The "Lament of Swordy Well" speaks of changes in the land that are permanent and enduring. His is the story of how a "waste" land has been transformed into a wasteland.[31] Swordy Well has learned, to his despair, that nature is not permanent and that it can be destroyed. Looking into a dark future, he sees a time when his "name will quickly be the whole / Thats left of swordy well" ("The Lament of Swordy Well," ll. 255–56). In the poem, Clare gives poetry the important role of documenting the true dimensions of an ecological catastrophe. Plants and animals do

[30] See Helsinger, *Rural Scenes and National Representation*, pp. 149–50.

[31] For a discussion of Clare's poetry and the literature of wetlands, see Bridget Keegan, *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry, 1730–1837* (Houndmills, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 148–71.

not easily communicate with us, so it is all too easy for human beings to ignore their well-being and to forget what they have done to nature. In "Obscurity," Clare writes:

> Old tree, oblivion doth thy life condemn
> Blank & recordless
> . . . . . .
> So seems thy history to a thinking mind
> . . . . . .
> Thou grew unnoticed up to flourish now
> & leave thy past as nothing all behind.
> ("Oblivion," in *Middle Poems*, IV, 256, ll. 1–9)

Clare's recognition that the nature that he valued would never return, that "The past is past—the present is distress" ("Here after," in *Middle Poems*, II, 200, l. 8), changes the manner in which he invokes tradition and communes with nature.

The intense alienation that Clare felt when he moved the three miles from his family cottage in Helpston to Northborough has been famously misinterpreted as a sign of his incapacity to advance beyond localized conceptions of identity. For Clare, however, the issue had nothing to do with distance, but with the move itself, which meant that he could no longer claim that he belonged to a specific place. Legally alienated from his native parish, he was now a stranger moving among strangers in an alien space. "Here every tree is strange to me / All foreign things where eer I go," he writes in "The Flitting," a poem in which he grappled with his uprootedness ("The Flitting," in *Middle Poems*, III, 483, ll. 97–98). In northern English and Scottish dialect, the word *flitting* refers not just to a kind of flickering movement, but to moving from one place of habitation to another. It also can refer to the removable goods and furniture, the "flitting," that one carries on such a move. "The Flitting" is a poem about nostalgia, the pain that comes with losing one's "own old home of homes" (l. 1), but Clare self-consciously uses his feelings of psychological dislocation in order to comprehend what it means to live in a world where nativity does not constitute a claim to place and where all human and non-human beings are subject to removal. In the poem Clare asks how one is to live in a world where everything is flitting,

and what is one's relationship to an environing nature when one "own[s] the spot no more," with his characteristic sense of "owning" as a form of belonging.

In a 1988 essay John Lucas argues persuasively: "'The Flitting' is about dispossession. It is a grieving, eloquent utterance of a sense of being denied ownership of, or relationship with, all that you feel most intensely to be yours, all that feels so intimately connected with you that it is integral to your sense of selfhood."[32] It is also a poem about exile, about being "Alone & in a stranger scene / Far far from spots my heart esteems" ("The Flitting," ll. 49–50). Struggling to explain his dependence on a nature now alienated from him in both legal and psychological terms, trying to imagine how to write a poetry about a nature from which he was legally alienated, Clare compares his thoughts to weeds: "& still my thoughts like weedlings wild / Grow up to blossom where they can" (ll. 59–60). Weeds are important symbols in the later poetry, for he believed that they constituted a living link to Adam's original open garden ("weeds remain / & wear an ancient passion that arrays / Ones feelings with the shadows of old days" ["The Robins Nest," ll. 55–57), and for this reason he rejected the accepted view that "disorder is an ugly weed" ("Shadows of Taste," l. 154), that a weed is, in Samuel Johnson's words, "an herb noxious or useless."[33] In the same poem in which Clare recounts how he came to see poetry as a vocation—"I'd a right to song / & sung"—he also insists that there "could not be / A weed in natures poesy" ("The Progress of Ryhme," in *Middle Poems*, III, 494–95, ll. 80–81, 91–92). Still, under the driving force of improvement, these ancient neighbors of humankind continued to be seen as enemies of progress, as "plants growing out of place." Behind Clare's use of the word "*weeds*" is another sense of weed that associates it

[32] John Lucas, "Places and Dwellings: Wordsworth, Clare and the anti-picturesque," in *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments*, ed. Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), p. 91.

[33] Samuel Johnson, *A dictionary of the English language: in which the words are deduced from their originals, and illustrated in their different significations by examples from the best writers. To which are prefixed, A history of the language, and An English grammar*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (London: W. Strahan, 1755).

with clothing and thus with ideas of protection and vulnerability. Alfred Tennyson, in *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850), declares: "In words, like weeds, I'll wrap me o'er, / Like coarsest clothes against the cold."[34]

In "The Flitting," Clare sees his poetry and thoughts as "weedlings wild," as displaced plants rooting themselves wherever they can. Being out of place thus forms the basis of a new conception of identity. Seeing a "shepherd's purse" at his feet allows him to link himself to another place and time:

> & why—this 'shepherds purse' that grows
> In this strange spot—In days gone bye
> Grew in the little garden rows
> Of my old home now left—And I
> Feel what I never felt before
> This weed an ancient neighbour here
> & though I own the spot no more
> Its every trifle makes it dear.
>
> ("The Flitting," ll. 193–200)

In this "ancient neighbour," whose name harkens back to the pastoral world, Clare "historicises and enculturates this weed as a text not only of himself but of a lost society" (Chambers, "'A love for every simple weed,'" p. 239). Conscious of the fragility of such weedy rootings (they are "trifle[s]"), Clare nevertheless will make in this poem his most radical claim for the continuity of nature and the enduring importance of a "verse that mild & bland / Breaths of green fields & open sky" ("The Flitting," ll. 161–62). Every weed and blossom claims an Edenic pedigree:

> All tennants of an ancient place
> & heirs of noble heritage
> Coeval they with adams race
> . . . . . .
> & still they bloom as in the day
> They first crowned wilderness & rock.
>
> (ll. 129–31, 145–46)

[34] Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam A.H.H.: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*, ed. Robert H. Ross (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1973), p. 6; Canto V, ll. 9–10.

This Edenic pedigree also allows Clare to posit that in the dying day of empires "Poor persecuted weeds [will] remain" (l. 212), as Adam's open field garden continues in the "waste" lands. Yet this hope was itself a tenacious weedling thought, seeking "to blossom where [it] can" (l. 60), for Clare knew very well that both poetry and the nature that mattered to him were disappearing from the earth. In "Decay A Ballad," he writes that "Nature herself seems on the flitting," and with it, his poetry:

> . . . spots where still a beauty clings
> Are sighing 'going all a going'
> O poesy is on the wane
> I hardly know her face again.
> ("Decay A Ballad," in *Middle Poems*, IV, 114–15, ll. 4, 7–10)

There were many good reasons for Clare to move to Northborough, so his feelings of extreme dislocation can be seen as symptoms of the psychological difficulties that would increasingly plague him. Nevertheless, we should be careful not to narrow the implications of his work to biographical considerations, no matter how poignant they might be, for Clare's experience of migration and exile were not unique, and he was not the only person during the nineteenth century who had to build his hopes on hopeless circumstances. The forced migration of slaves, convicts, and indentured laborers and the displacement of many aboriginal peoples from their native lands parallels the experience to which Clare gave intensified expression in his poetry. Also, British rural villagers were not the only people to find themselves displaced and their arable and nonarable lands transformed by self-serving legalistic definitions of property rights; fences, ploughs, and English property law left their mark in other places too. What makes Clare's later poetry so important is that he writes about what it means to irrevocably lose one's nature.

In *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (2006), Jonathan Lear explores the ethical question of how one should live in the face of the total collapse of one's culture. Lear focuses this question on the life of the last great Crow chief, Plenty Coups, whose people suffered the catastrophic loss of the northern plains buffalo. Plenty Coups "refused to speak of his

life after the passing of the buffalo. . . . After this nothing happened. There was little singing anywhere. 'Besides,' he added sorrowfully, 'you know that part of my life as well as I do. You saw what happened to us when the buffalo went away.'"[35] With no buffalo, time and history came to an end for Plenty Coups, and yet he found meaning for himself and his tribe in the radical hope conveyed by a dream he had as a young man. This dream told him how he might help his people to survive and to keep their land, as another Crow, Yellow Bear, interpreted it: "The tribes who have fought the white man have all been beaten, wiped out. By listening as the Chickadee listens we may escape this and keep our lands" (quoted in *Radical Hope*, p. 72). In his later years, sitting under the same tree that appeared to him in his dream many years earlier, Plenty Coups found satisfaction in the fact that he had guided his people through the terrible times that had destroyed other tribes: "And here I am, an old man, sitting under this tree just where that old man sat seventy years ago when this was a different world" (quoted in *Radical Hope*, p. 143). Plenty Coups's world came to an end with the loss of the buffalo, but he could still turn to other aspects of the land to reaffirm the continuity between his people and their past. Clare's turn to the "shepherd's purse" does something similar, but rather than speaking of the continuity of a place through time, Clare's poetry focuses upon natures lost. For Clare there was no Langley Bush left to ground his visions. In this regard, his experience comes closer, in many ways, to that of the Sioux chief Sitting Bull, or to those Native Americans of the many other tribes who lost their traditional lands to the white man and were forced to relocate elsewhere. Left without a local nature upon which to build his hopes, Clare was left only with his dreams.

Although Clare had once hoped that nature would safeguard his poetry from oblivion, he came to the realization, during the 1830s and 1840s, that the only place where the nature that he knew and loved would continue to exist was in his

[35] Quoted in Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2006), p. 2.

poetry. It gave a new urgency to his writing and made language the basis for his radical hopes. That is why his most powerful evocations of the enduring importance of a "harmless . . . song" or of "A language that is ever green" often emerge within contexts of loss and despair ("Pastoral Poesy," in *Middle Poems*, III, 584, 581, ll. 112, 13). While in the Northampton Lunatic Asylum, Clare recalled in vivid detail his childhood visits to Round Oak, "the Apple top't oak" above Round Oak Springs, which was cut down with the enclosure. The poem concludes with the poet's recognition:

> All that's left to me now I find in my dreams
> . . . . . .
> Sweet Apple top't oak that grew by the stream
> I loved thy shade once—now I love but thy name
> ("The Round Oak," in *Later Poems*, I, 451, ll. 1, 29–32)

James McKusick suggests that Clare's "decision to retain certain features of his own regional dialect was motivated in large part by his need to preserve a language that evoked with concrete immediacy the natural phenomena of his native place" (*Green Writing*, p. 89). Clare's poetry represents a significant advance in ecowriting, McKusick argues, because he created an "ecolect" that would capture the unique qualities of the nature of Helpston. Yet Clare rarely spoke of his poetry in terms of individual poetic creation, but instead he argued that the songs and words were already there; he was not attempting to represent a nature that existed outside of language, but instead one that was already embedded in it, in the everyday words spoken by the villagers of Helpston. This is why preserving the names by which this nature had been traditionally known, as well as the words through which it was experienced and understood, was just as important to him as preserving this nature itself. Here it is worth stressing again Douglas Chambers's view that Clare sought to ground his poetry "in natural speech and native vocabulary" ("'A Love for every simple weed,'" p. 238). Linnaeus famously argued that the task of natural history was to name the Creation. "If you do not know the names of things," he wrote in the *Philosophica Botanica* (1751), "the knowledge of

them is lost too."[36] Clare would have agreed, but rather than seeking to establish a universal language that would allow species to be compared across time and space, Clare wanted to preserve the knowledge and historical associations of a very local nature that was imbedded in the language of the people who lived in Helpston. "The vulgar," Clare remarks in his First Natural History Letter, "are always the best glossary" for plant names.[37] Ecolect is thus inseparably fused with idiolect in his poetry, and, in resisting John Taylor's efforts to rid his poetry of dialect and provincialisms, Clare was struggling for the continuance not just of a nature but also of the unique language in which that nature had long been experienced and understood. Clare recognized that language was not simply a means of communication, but that it also contained the history and the culture of the place and the people to whom one belonged. The same forces that were obliterating local natures were also destroying the languages through which they were known.

Much has been said about Clare as a memory poet, nostalgically dwelling on the joys of childhood and the past. More important is the manner in which he uses local history to encourage his readers to consider the claims that the natural world has upon us. Where his poems can be read, in Tim Chilcott's terms, as Proustian "litanies for the restoration of lost time" (*A Real World & Doubting Mind*, p. 108), they are more productively seen as poems that are less about nostalgia than about a critical remembrance of what took place in a small, out-of-the-way part of rural England early in the nineteenth century. They ask us to see, and thus to recognize, what has been lost and the injustices that changed the nature of this place. Clare's poem "Remembrances" exemplifies this critical strategy. As a poem about the disappearance of "summer pleasures," "Remembrances" can easily be read as a conventional elegy for the passing of youth: "I thought them all eternal when by Langley bush I lay / I thought them joys eternal when I used to shout & play" ("Remembrances," ll. 1, 6–7). What gives the poem its

[36] Charles Linnaeus, *Linnaeus' Philosophia Botanica*, trans. Stephen Freer (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), p. 169.

[37] John Clare, "Natural History Letter I," in *Natural History Prose Writings*, p. 16.

critical dimension is that in recalling a host of lost childhood pleasures, it also speaks of the places in the landscape, now gone, where those pleasures took place. Eric Robinson, David Powell, and P.M.S. Dawson remark in their commentary that the poem provides a "map of Clare's boyhood, bring[ing] together many of the favourite places that are mentioned elsewhere in his work, many of which can be located on enclosure and ordnance maps."[38] The metaphor of a map is appropriate, because "Remembrances" constitutes a counter-history of the Helpston countryside that seeks to map and protest the changes that took place in the land and to recognize the plants, traditional names, local associations, and experiences that had been erased from its landscape. Performing his own form of ordnance mapping, Clare seeks to preserve the names of the places in Helpston that are gone or will soon be gone: "Langley bush," "old east wells," "old lea close oak," "old cross berry way," "swordy well," "round oaks," "little field," and "cowper green." Yet here he recognizes that language is insufficient to compensate for what has been lost: "O words are poor receipts for what time hath stole away / The ancient pulpit trees & the play" ("Remembrances," ll. 29–30). He is appalled by the greed that even denies poor moles their small share of the earth:

> On cowper green I stray tis a desert strange & chill
> & spreading lea close oak ere decay had penned its will
> To the axe of the spoiler & self interest fell a prey
> & cross berry way & old round oaks narrow lane
> With its hollow trees like pulpits I shall never see again
> Inclosure like a Buonaparte let not a thing remain
> It levelled every bush & tree and levelled every hill
> & hung the moles for traitors—though the brook is running still
> It runs a naker brook cold & chill.
>
> (ll. 62–70)

The poem ends with an image drawn from the traditional rituals of the May, as Clare portrays himself as a jilted lover who would have used his "poesys all cropt in a sunny hour" (l. 77) to win her love so that she would stay. Yet the offer of poems

[38] See Robinson, Powell, and Dawson, editor's note, in *Middle Poems*, IV, 595n.

and flowers in the pun imbedded in "poesys" and in the structuring device of *The Midsummer Cushion* (1832), to which "Remembrances" belongs, are unable to convince her to stay: "love never heeded to treasure up the may / So it went the common road with decay" ("Remembrances," ll. 79–80).

"I love with my old hants to be," Clare wrote in the Pforzheimer manuscript version of "The Flitting" (l. 91), suggesting another dimension of dwelling that especially appears in the later poems. "O Poesy is on the wane / I cannot find her haunts again," he writes in "Decay A Ballad" (ll. 49–50). Here Clare's nature poetry verges on ghost-writing, for the present is seen as being haunted by the natures it has displaced, natures that have been violently uprooted yet refuse to leave. Dispossessed of their traditional locales, they still occupy them in a new way. Whether these ghosts of nature past were really there or not, Clare saw them. Walking through what was once Helpston Green, now "all desolate" because of the destruction of every tree, Clare saw another nature:

> When ere I muse along the plain
> And mark where once they grew
> Rememb'rance wakes her busy train
> And brings past scenes to view
> The well known brook the favorite tree
> In fancys eye appear
> And next that pleasant green I see
> That green for ever dear.
> ("Helpston Green," in *Early Poems*, II, 12, ll. 17–24)

Clare describes an ecology linked to rural labor, and both are now gone:

> Both milkmaids shouts and herdsmans call
> Have vanish'd with the green
> The kingcups yellow shades and all
> Shall never more be seen
> But the thick culterd tribes that grow
> Will so efface the scene
> That after times will hardly know
> It ever was a green.
> ("Helpston Green," ll. 41–48)

Ghosts make themselves visible for many reasons, but often it is because they are seeking justice for a crime committed against them. As Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock suggests, "the ghost is that which interrupts the presentness of the present, and its haunting indicates that, beneath the surface of received history, there lurks another narrative, an untold story that calls into question the veracity of the authorized version of events."[39] Clare's ghostly natures play this critical role. They seek to recover the ground from which they have been removed by unsettling the reader, but more importantly they want to be accorded a kind of justice, if only in our recognition that the present is deeply implicated in their unrest. For Clare the nature of the present was often silent and empty: "Silence sitteth now on the wild heath as her own / Like a ruin of the past all alone," he writes in "Remembrances": "I never dreamed . . . / . . . that pleasures like a flock of birds would ever take to wing / Leaving nothing but a little naked spring" ("Remembrances," ll. 9–10, 18–20).

In a May 1841 letter written to Mary Joyce announcing the composition of *Child Harold*, Clare remarks: "nature to me seems dead & her very pulse seems frozen to an icicle in the summer sun" (*Letters*, p. 646). In the silence and emptiness of a nature come to ruin, in a landscape where the language of rural labor and its close relationship to the land were no longer heard, Clare saw and heard the spectral presence of the past, and he used his language and his poetry to preserve these shadowy presences. Why these legions of natural ghosts had chosen to make themselves visible to Clare was probably not fully evident to him when he first began documenting in poem after poem the ruthless ecological destruction that was taking place in his neighborhood. By the 1830s, however, Clare must have sensed that his ability to communicate with these ghostly natures had something to do with the fact that he himself was one of the dispossessed. Clare communicated with ghosts and walked among shadows of the past because he shared in their flitting, living on long after the time that mattered most to him had come to an end.

[39] Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, "Introduction: The Spectral Turn," in *Spectral America: Phantoms and the National Imagination*, ed. Weinstock (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2004), p. 5.

Mahmoud Darwish would come to realize that "language and metaphor are not enough to restore place to place."[40] For Clare, these were all he had. An exile in his own country, Clare haunted Helpston as he continues to haunt his readers today. At High Beach asylum and later at Northampton asylum, Clare feared that he had become one of the forgotten, inhabiting "glooms & living death / A shade like night forgetting & forgot" (*Child Harold*, ll. 621–22). He worried that he would end up as "nothing but a living-dead man dwelling among shadows"; in relation to these identities, the poet would be a kind of Bell cryer "to own the dead alive or the lost found."[41] Perhaps seeing Clare as a ghost speaking for a lost nature, viewing him as a "Wordsworthian shadow" in a very different sense than Harold Bloom intended,[42] is the first step in coming to terms with what his poetry can teach us.

University of Toronto

ABSTRACT

Alan Bewell, "John Clare and the Ghosts of Natures Past" (pp. 548–578)

This essay seeks to read John Clare's poetry in terms of the poetry of exile. Clare directly confronted what it means to lose one's place in the world, to be exiled from a place not because you have left it, but because it has left you. No Romantic poet wrote more passionately than Clare about the joy of experiencing nature in all its immediacy, and no poet argued more strongly for its permanence and continuity across generations, and yet few poets have conveyed in more poignant terms what it means to lose one's nature for good. This paper considers Clare as a poet who writes about what it means to experience the end of nature and to live on long after the nature that one took to be basic to one's life was gone. Although for many people during the nineteenth century such an idea was unthinkable, for many others, especially in colonial contexts, it was a fact of life. Alongside the many new natures that were coming into being at this time, others were being destroyed or utterly changed. Clare's poetry gives us some insight into what it meant to at least one author to survive the death of one's nature.

Keywords: John Clare; exile; colonialism; the death of nature; nature poetry

[40] Mahmoud Darwish, *La Palestine comme métaphore: Entretirens* (Paris: Sindhad, Actes Sud, 1997), p. 25 (my translation).

[41] John Clare, "Self-Identity" (1841), in *Prose*, p. 239.

[42] See Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1962).