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Author(s): Sarah Houghton

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The “Community” of John Clare’s Helpston

SARAH HOUGHTON

John Clare’s isolation is often remarked upon, yet he moved within and around many different types of communities, both actual and conceptual. This article explores what I want to call Clare’s “communal sense” with respect to just one of those communities: the Helpston village environment in which he lived and which appears in his earlier poetry. I hope to demonstrate that two specific aspects of this community—the “social” and the “natural”—must be distinguished and intend to begin by exploring the characteristics of the latter through a comparison of the ways in which Clare and William Wordsworth depict the world. I will propose that, in its ideal state, the defining characteristic of the community Clare invokes is its extraordinary cohesion: all aspects of the world are both literally and syntactically represented as equally significant. Thus, whereas Wordsworth’s representations of the natural community privilege the poetic consciousness and, relatedly, depend upon the poet’s conception of an innate natural hierarchy, Clare’s representations insist on the world’s independence from the poet’s observing consciousness, even as the poet is contained within the world.

Turning to the social side of Clare’s Helpston community, and identifying in particular Clare’s ideal (which, it is clear, is far from idyllic), I will suggest that, as Clare portrays it, the transmission of collective knowledge of the ideal is symbiotically connected to its own existence. Such knowledge, Clare suggests, is passed on via traditional rural festivities and other customs (including the stories, which are oral histories, of its members), and these rituals are simultaneously constituent parts of the ideal itself. But the purpose of this article is not simply to outline some salient

Sarah Houghton is a Junior Research Fellow of St John’s College, Cambridge.

characteristics of one of Clare's communities, nor is it to determine whether or not such an ideal ever really existed. Rather, I am concerned with the Helpston community to which Clare's poems refer because it is so vibrant a feature of Clare's verse and because it repeatedly functions in the verse as a yardstick by which the contemporary world is measured and alongside which it is frequently found to be lacking.

THE NATURAL COMMUNITY

Wordsworth's "Home at Grasmere" describes the poet's joy consequent upon a return to the landscape of his boyhood. This is a pluperfect "paradise":

among the bowers
Of blissful Eden this was neither given,
Nor could be given.¹

Even the unpleasant is excused through simile and reconciled through poetry: "The frosty wind, as if to make amends / For its keen breath, was aiding to our steps" (lines 158–9). Wordsworth renders the landscape benevolent, and yet the "guardianship" and "shelter" offered by the hills is predicated upon the receptivity of the poet-dweller—"Embrace me then, ye Hills, and close me in" (lines 112, 113, 110). The poet must offer himself, or rather open himself, to this guardianship through the agency of the poetic imagination as it is excited by the scene:

No where (or is it fancy?) can be found
The one sensation that is here; 'tis here,
Here as it found its way into my heart
In childhood, here as it abides by day,
By night, here only; or in chosen minds
That take it with them hence, where'er they go.
(lines 136–41)

Even the rudeness of "untutored shepherds" is meliorated by "Their little boons of animating thought"; that is, their ability, like the poet, to be stirred, so that their "feelings" may "become / Associates in the joy of purest minds" (lines 446, 467, 449, 459–60). Wordsworth may therefore say "so be it" to "That Shepherd's voice" that "reached mine ear / Debased and under profanation"

because the poet “look[s] for Man, / The common Creature of the brotherhood” and therefore “came not dreaming of unruffled life, Untainted manners” (lines 346, 341–2, 352–3, 347–8).

Notwithstanding his noble claim, Wordsworth remains pre-occupied with the redemption of this “Man.” As Jonathan Bate remarks of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, “The Wordsworthian shepherd represents man ‘in his primaeval dower’ . . . He is a figure of terrific magnitude who looms a giant size in the fog . . . He is ‘man Ennobled.’”² Bate continues: “For Wordsworth, to demand ‘realism’ or ‘reportage’ from poetry is to misapprehend its function; the purpose of book eight of *The Prelude* is not so much to show shepherds as they are but rather to bring forward an image of human greatness, to express faith in the perfectibility of mankind.”³ Using Renato Poggioli’s work on the Romantic development of pastoral, Bate argues that Wordsworth “makes the shepherd into a symbol of his personal sublime,” and from hence, later, that “Humanity only survives *in nature*.”⁴ Bate’s analysis, however, is concerned with a macrocosmic model of “Humanity” and “Man,” and an inevitable tension exists between this model and the necessary microcosm of the individual men in which the depiction is rendered.

The natural world offers nourishment for the redemption of Wordsworth’s “Man”:

Stern was the face of Nature; we rejoiced
 In that stern countenance, for our Souls thence drew
 A feeling of their strength. The naked Trees,
 The icy brooks, as on we passed, appeared
 To question us.

(lines 163–7)

The provocative position of “appeared” within the line here half suggests that the poet’s presence in the scene has caused the very aspects of it to materialize; one must go back to dispel the sense that trees and brooks have deliberately emerged with the specific intention of provoking the thoughts of the poet. In the ensuing lines, nature communicates explicitly:

“Whence come ye? to what end?”
 They seemed to say; “What would ye,” said the shower,
 “Wild Wanderers, whither through my dark domain?”
 The sunbeam said, “be happy.”

(lines 167–70)

But it is the poet's imagination that renders the simile upon which "participation" is predicated; and the ever-present spectral obverse of the simile (the dissimilitude that makes it not the thing it is like) hovers.

In the course of his poem, Wordsworth defines his notion of an ideal community:

From crowded streets remote,
 Far from the living and dead wilderness
 Of the thronged World, Society is here
 A true Community, a genuine frame
 Of many into one incorporate.
That must be looked for here, paternal sway,
 One household, under God, for high and low,
 One family, and one mansion; to themselves
 Appropriate, and divided from the world
 As if it were a cave, a multitude
 Human and brute, possessors undisturbed
 Of this Recess, their legislative Hall,
 Their Temple, and their glorious Dwelling-place.
(lines 612-24)

Possessed of a distaste for the profound anonymity and mode of city life, Wordsworth's idea of "many into one incorporate" insists upon a comprehensive notion of community; but almost as he evokes the image of natural unity, his poem pulls away from it. Wordsworth is uncomfortable with his own suspicion regarding the mysterious absence of a pair of beautiful swans, "consecrated friends" with whom he identifies, from the lake (line 261). It is a disappearance that threatens the tranquillity of the natural order, and Wordsworth assumes the culpability of his fellow man in their vanishing. He wants to accommodate their absence within a natural pattern, blaming his own imagination for the destruction of the cohesive concord of the "favoured Vale" and finally reconciling himself to the thought that they might at least share "One death" (line 268).⁵ But this reconciliation is hollow now, tainted with the poet's own instinctive doubts surrounding the "deadly tube" of the Dalesmen's guns (line 266).⁶

Moreover, Wordsworth's greatest sympathy with the swans lies with their strangeness:

to us
 They were more dear than may be well believed,

Not only for their beauty . . .

.....

But that their state so much resembled ours,
 They having also chosen this abode;
 They strangers, and we strangers; they a pair,
 And we a solitary pair like them.

(lines 247–55)

That Wordsworth and his sister share this strangeness contributes to a wider sense that humankind is superimposed on the scenes the poet represents. Man, as a threat or as an intruder, remains distinct from the otherwise cohesive community Wordsworth invokes. The “Dame” of the “grey cot” is “withering in her loneliness” without her husband; her “first-born Child” (let alone any others implied by the epithet) is absent: if this community has survived, it has also fragmented (lines 389, 390, 423, 391).⁷ Wordsworth’s “Recess” floats suggestively between an idea of protective seclusion and one of legislative vacation (reinforced by the “legislative Hall” that has been entered) (line 623): the “vacant commerce” of the city that Wordsworth rejects thus troublingly shadows the lines; man seems to be hauling this association into the landscape with his own presence. Wordsworth’s problem, as Bate puts it, quoting from book eight of *The Excursion*, is that “Man ought to be ‘earth’s thoughtful lord’ (line 164), but he has abnegated his responsibilities in the name of material gain.”⁸ Even as Wordsworth’s poetry tries to offer an alternative, in the concord of the Vale, Man retains supremacy over the landscape (“happy Man! is Master of the field” [line 382]), and images of human creation (the hall, the temple, the dwelling place) supply the measure for grandeur. Human society remains separate from and dominant within the community of nature, and Wordsworth acknowledges that the “many into one incorporate” remains a product of the exercise of the poetic imagination. Wordsworth thus frames a hierarchy of community, which undoubtedly contains within it the brute multitude, and the protective, enchanting leaves and stars, but in which Man is both the pinnacle and the enabling condition of the structure.

Richard Cronin highlights Clare’s isolation thus: “It is not possible to understand Clare as an English poet amongst other English 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 . . . his true place . . . [is] an uncomfortable position in which familiarity and estrangement coincide."⁹ Similarly bleak (as well as occasionally affirmative) conclusions may be reached through consideration of those poems in which Clare deals with a thematic of solitude or unease. To concentrate for now on the second of Cronin's categories of community (Clare's "fellow villagers"), we can discern at least two general models against which Clare measures his "estrangement." The first is of a collective of "clowns," of those insensitive to the raptures that are inspired in Clare by the natural world or by poetry, and from whose society he seems to wish to escape. This is the community of which John Barrell writes when he suggests that "in his early poems Clare often presents himself as being driven into the landscape away from the society of the village, and it is thus that he often puts the landscape in the position of sympathising with him in his solitude."¹⁰ The desire for escape noted by Barrell lends a sense of presence to these people (that is to say, the fact that Clare wants to escape them suggests that they are probably there, now). The other model, conversely, is one that Clare describes with a corresponding sense of "presence" only rarely, and which occurs more frequently as a society Clare desires to join (or rejoin: it usually is a characteristic of retrospective scenes) and in which he wishes to lose himself. Thus, it is usually attached to a sense of absence. Clare seems to "know" it, and it is by no means an idyll: its habits can be harsh and cruel; this desirable society we might then posit as Clare's (relatively realistic) ideal within the village.

Just as important as these social structures, however, is the wider Helpston community in which Clare participates, and it is here that comparison with Wordsworth is most useful. Discussing Clare's communality, M. M. Mahood has described the "extension from man to beast of the social bond upon which survival depends. Clare's farm animals are . . . indispensable, like other members of the community," and her excellent account goes on to elucidate other "oblique indicator[s] of the underlying sense of communality" in Clare's work.¹¹ Mahood's recognition, however, is of social rather than natural bonds, excluding the land, the elements, and other aspects of the microclimate, and Clare's communal sense is far more complex than Mahood allows. His sense of "community" is intimately connected to the landscape that pleases him, a landscape that is dependent upon, created by, and yet in its turn creating a wider community. It includes all of those things that feature in his poetry of nature; it is one to

which all of his Helpston neighbors contribute, indeed, are vital parts of, but no more so than the “clock-a-clay” or crowflower. “Solitude,” for instance, paradoxically itemizes the manifold of natural features that Clare encounters on his solitary walk and with which he communicates in a particular way. In one sample of ten lines he remarks on farm beasts, a mole, a mouse, a lark, and weeds.¹² All are equally important to the scene, and Clare himself is only ever one more aspect of the natural world, never superior to it. The very elements combine with all other aspects of nature to constitute Clare’s community. All features, even when they are understood to be insentient, are parts of his world as important as his fellow men so that in these same ten lines Clare remarks on ploughed earth and earth dug by a mole (these, we understand, are very different); immediately afterwards we meet a snail and the stifling heat of the noon sun. To take a better-known example, the same inclusion is found in “To a Fallen Elm” as Clare exclaims:

& when dark tempests mimic thunder made
 While darkness came as it would strangle light
 With the black tempest of a winter night
 That rocked thee like a cradle to thy root
 How did I love to hear the winds upbraid
 Thy strength without¹³

The elements including the winds (themselves plural, adding to the complexity of the community), the darkness, the tree, and Clare are all involved in a special bond, empathetically communicating with one another. This community is instinctive, sympathetic, and natural, as opposed to “society,” by which we might understand men’s interaction with one another.

Elizabeth K. Helsinger’s useful discussion of Clare’s use of the word “keep” in “The Lament of Swordy Well” alludes to a similar communal sense as it is under threat. Helsinger claims that “land and laborers employ the term in the . . . sense of supporting . . . The claims to possession put forward by enclosure reject the responsibility of ‘keeping’ laborers, Gypsies, horses, cows, sheep, or the wild bees, which the stones and springs and rushes of Swordy Well once supported. The land’s protests are founded on a different concept of possession in which ownership is demonstrated through use as a power for (rather than over) life. To be stripped of one’s ‘own’ is to be deprived of the power to give and enjoy life.”¹⁴ Contrast Wordsworth: “see there,” we are

instructed, "The Heifer in yon little croft belongs / To one who holds it dear."¹⁵ The loving nature of Wordsworth's crofter does not alter the definite sense of the dominance of ownership. When Clare writes of his hopes for the future, he speaks of a desire to "commence a cottage farmer—the place I hear keeps two cows."¹⁶ The more cohesive sense of interaction identified by Helsinger and present in this desire is at the heart of Clare's model. So, in "May" of *The Shepherd's Calendar*, the "tender shoots" of the hedgerow do not spontaneously grow; they are the consequence of the nurturing of the "mossy stumps," and also of the effort of the pruning hedger (and thus they contain within them that human effort); but the sheep and cow "Will nip them to the root again": all of these elements of the scene are equally important to the landscape and equally communal.¹⁷

Wordsworth's benevolent countryside, although it may thrill with the awe of the sublime, admits none of the harsh realities of Clare's world picture. There is no place for Grasmere equivalents of Clare's glittering cesspools in Wordsworth's verse; this type of unpleasantness is sanitized or ignored. In Clare's description, it cannot be, simply because it is there. That is not to suggest that Clare claims for everyone the same ability to perceive: certainly there are "clowns" within the community who are unable to see as those with "taste" do, but that does not alter what is there, in front of the poet's eyes. Wordsworth's reluctance to make the same separation between his own poetic subjectivity and the objectivity of the world again provides a useful contrast. It might seem as if Clare, like Wordsworth, is claiming for an elite (whomsoever it is formed by) the perception of the glories of the world, but the sense that Clare wants his reader to believe that the glories subsist *regardless of* the tasteful watcher (or poet) predominates. This is the point of contrast I am trying to draw. Of course, in the dynamic between reader and text this elimination of the poetic consciousness cannot be wholly successful because the reader remains a reader, distanced from "the scene." In this sense, it might be said that Wordsworth is more honest about his ontological status as registering consciousness, but I do not believe that what Clare intends is any kind of "dishonesty." Rather, Clare's skill lies in allowing us to believe in his own sense of irrelevance; it is this sense he is trying to relate. That is not to say that Clare denies the importance of poetic artistry as "the scene" is recorded on the page, but the originary scene must be as truly represented as possible. It is therefore entirely consistent that Clare's parody of Wordsworth should mock the older poet's creating imagination

as it views the world because Clare claims to want more simply to re-present.¹⁸

Clare expresses this sense of the irrelevance of himself-as-observer (which is different from himself-as-poet) in a number of ways. A study of Clare's use of possessive adjectives, or, to take a more specific example, a preliminary attempt conclusively to follow the attribution of the adjectives in the forty-eight lines used to describe the shepherd's dog in "July" (first version) of *The Shepherd's Calendar* are good indicators of the way he portrays an absence of hierarchy.¹⁹ Or consider the sonnet "The Beans in Blossom": deprived of its title, this piece could be about a number of strikingly rendered features (the business of the bees, the blackbird's song, the excited cows, and so on). The beans are not introduced until the seventh line, and even then no greater attention is paid to their blossom than to the clover of the closing couplet.²⁰

Clare's depictions of a more inclusive model of community are supported by the syntactic habits remarked upon by Barrell in his discussion of Clare's "Emmonsails Heath in winter," "The Sky Lark," and "The Beans in Blossom": "Clare has suppressed as far as he can the sense that one clause is subordinate to another, one image more important than another . . . to reveal them all as parts not so much of a continuum of successive impressions as of one complex manifold of simultaneous impressions." Barrell continues: "In 'Emmonsails Heath in winter' . . . there is no sense of the images being disposed in any linear relationship one to another."²¹ So it is both literally and syntactically that Clare's writing repeatedly functions to lend a sense of cohesion within the whole community. All aspects of an independently alive universe are, in their ideal state, shown to be involved in a free and equal interchange, simultaneously completely free from and inextricably linked with all other aspects. For instance, in "March" of *The Shepherd's Calendar*, winter threads a minute's sunshine,

& oft the shepherd in his path will spye
The little daisy in the wet grass lye
That to the peeping sun enlivens gay
Like Labour smiling on an holiday²²

The shepherd merely observes the activity of the daisy, and this observation is the impetus for the next image we are given, which is in effect a dialogue between the daisy and the sun, the shepherd having become in one sense irrelevant. Clare-the-poet, of course, remains an intrusive presence, but his technique (paradoxically)

suggests the attempt to diminish this intrusion. The impression of an independently alive universe is furthered when, reading on, we find that "the stunt bank fronts the southern sky / By lanes or brooks were sunbeams love to lye": the sun has assumed the action of the daisy (both "lye"), just as the "growing sun" later "beguiles," having learnt the technique from the shepherd boy who "wi fancy thoughts his loneliness beguiles" in the "threads" of the same sun ("March," lines 23–4, 166, 102, and 101). It is not that the sun does what it does because the shepherd boy is present in the scene, but that all aspects of creation are perceived according to the complex frame in which they exist, and in which they are consequently described.

Watching the wheeling of a flock of birds, Wordsworth imagines that they move "as if one spirit swayed / Their indefatigable flight." But Wordsworth "cannot take possession of the sky, / Mount with a thoughtless impulse, and wheel there," and he remains excluded experientially from the scene he is watching, "Happier of happy though I be."²³ Clare has no need for such simile, or for such desire for "possession," even in the participatory sense that Wordsworth intends here. Wordsworth's poetry is of a different type from Clare's, but the way that Wordsworth's use of the birds as an image in which the "spirit" swaying their transport becomes inseparable from the poetic consciousness contrasts usefully with Clare's bird poems. The (interestingly plural) "solitudes" of Clare's snipe become a means of empathy and rapture (in Wordsworth's terms, the sky takes possession of Clare), involving his participation, and this in turn illuminates the extraordinary equality of the natural world, of which Clare is one more observing part:

Thy solitudes
The unbounded heaven esteems
& here my heart warms into higher moods
& dignifying dreams

I see the sky
Smile on the meanest spot
Giving to all that creep or walk or flye
A calm & cordial lot²⁴

Similarly, in "High overhead that silent throne," the "crank and reedy cry" of the crane echoes in the more-than-desolation of the heath, whose dull brownness we are prompted to notice that

Clare has been noticing (that it has been there, equally present and important to the scene) even as we have been looking up, at the “wild and cloud betravelled sky.”²⁵ Clare very definitely suggests throughout his verse that this sympathetic and absolutely cohesive mode is an ideal; its entrenchment for him in a specific natural scene thus renders it extremely vulnerable to disruption and destruction, as much of the later, bleaker poetry (for example, the sonnets of the Northborough period) attests.

THE SOCIAL COMMUNITY

Having insisted on the breadth of scope of Clare’s Helpston “community,” we might now return to the “society” within that community; that is, to Clare’s village neighbors. An ideal way of life within the communal structure of the village is something to which Clare repeatedly alludes, and, persistently, it is heavily marked by features described by John Morrill, Leah S. Marcus, and others as those of seventeenth-century “survivalism.”²⁶ Just as Clare advocates an interdependent model of natural community in which all nonhuman elements participate, so, in the more specific human society, cooperation and reciprocity are not only recommended but also necessary. In “The Harvest Morning,” the traces of such “survivalist” traditions coincide with Clare’s habitual humanitarianism:

A Motley group the Clearing field surrounds
 Sons of Humanity O neer deny
 The humble gleaner entrance in your grounds
 Winters sad cold & poverty is nigh
 O grudge not providence her scant suply
 You’ll never miss it from your ample store—
 Who gives denial harden’d hungry hound
 May never blessings crow’d his hated door
 But he shall never lack that giveth to the poor²⁷

Here is the perceived necessity and natural order of giving something back from the harvest, a give and take upon which “survivalism” depends. (Clare’s “providence” is significant: the term demonstrates the elemental but unobtrusive connection of religion, which is certainly Christian, yet which incorporates not a little of what Clare would call superstition, to the process.) I am not suggesting that we should necessarily identify Clare’s ideal with a survivalist structure (though I am sure the literary

models that historians of survivalism explore do contribute significantly to Clare's nostalgic depictions), but I want to propose that a model that shares features of the survivalist cycle is consistently celebrated and advocated by Clare, and to suggest that the concept of survivalism might provide a useful shorthand for discussing this model. However, because of the attention Clare pays to its festive aspects (and not forgetting that the concept of "festivity" has many and varied implications in Clare's life and work), it might be more appropriate to refer to Clare's ideal as a "festive" model.²⁸

Anne Barton, in "Clare's Animals: The Wild and the Tame," describes both a sense of victimization shared with, and a recognition of the relative freedom of, wild animals. She goes on to demonstrate that "in rural villages such as Northborough and Helpstone, only children could be said to participate (briefly) in the freedom—however wary—of the wild hares . . . All too soon, the demands of an adult world of toil and labour tended to limit most village indulgence in 'play,' even for children, to snatched moments in the fields, on the road home, or to strictly regulated 'festive' times of the year, moments of respite that were quickly over."²⁹ To understand this must be to recognize that the children (and for that matter all those who join in the release of the "festive" times of year) are most like the animals, closer to a "natural" state, in these moments. Snatched moments in the fields and on the roads home are those times when their situation most mimics that of the hare, or the fox, or the squirrel, whose joyful, playful liberty is intrinsic to their freedom. The inevitable extension of this is that Clare thus suggests that humans are most at one with nature, part of the cohesive whole that should constitute the community (in other words in their best state), and, paradoxically, most civilized when they are like this.³⁰

Festivities are described by Clare throughout his verse, and they share certain characteristics.³¹ They are leveling, bringing together as equals master and man as they celebrate seasonal acts and offer thanks to "providence." They contain a distinctly raucous element, appearing violent and even cruel to modern sensibilities. They feature games and songs rehearsed year after year, and offer an opportunity to tell the tales that act as a repository of communal memory. Contemporary festive theories have been preoccupied with the way in which festive time acts as a release valve for the accumulated pressures of everyday life.³² John Goodridge identifies the regulatory nature of the festive time described in Clare's "St Martins Eve," writing that "Story-telling,

as a vital part of the leisure activities, has an important function in the ritual, recording finite lives, passing on information and experience, stimulating catharsis and empathy." He describes the activities going on as "ways by which the hardship of the rural world, and the psychic desperation it creates, are dramatised and confronted," concluding that Clare "celebrates human resilience, describing the communal (and to modern sensibilities fairly brutal) way in which a rural society and class, seemingly cheated of all independent activity, may psychically survive and restore itself through ritual, narrative and festive celebration."³³ Goodridge here identifies a festive practice which is central to Clare's notion of "proper" village life.³⁴ As one reads more of Clare's verse it becomes clear that, in the way of life he advocates, festive acts are those by which village life is marked, defined, and recorded. (It is therefore significant, as Robert W. Malcolmson demonstrates, that "The decline of popular recreation, it is clear, was intimately associated with the gradual breakdown of what we now call 'traditional society.'"³⁵)

Clare records that only through participation in traditional festive acts can he feel a part of the society of the village.³⁶ But, importantly, festivity extends beyond human social interaction. The integration of Clare's comprehensive collective is vital: harvest revelry, for example, depends just as much upon the fertility of the land and the kindness of the elements. As Clare describes how "the year used to be crowned with its holidays as thick as the boughs on a harvest home," the use of the possessive adjective alerts us to the fact that the holidays belong absolutely and by right to the year; they are not simply the whim of men.³⁷ Accordingly, in *The Shepherd's Calendar*, Clare suggests that nature alone maintains the traditions, despite the mutability of "fashions haughty frown."³⁸ While it is by no means the only example of Clare's adoption of the theme, and while we must not forget that its contents were in part prompted by James Augustus Hessey's recommendations, this long poem repeatedly reinforces the impression that Clare's model for society and community enacts the traditions, rituals, and manners of the survivalist system. Importantly, though, it does this through constant lamentation of its absence.

Clare's present, he thus suggests, has moved away from this exemplary mode of living: "where we laughed in child hood . . . we only smile in man hood at the recollections of those enjoyments."³⁹ Hence one must identify it as an ideal. As I have already mentioned, this is by no means a perfect idyll; rather, it is based

upon a picture of a lost way of life that was itself harsh, which Clare understands to have been present relatively recently (enclosure is blamed as the main catalyst for its destruction), and which he seems to have assembled through a combination of half-memories and tales heard from other villagers (although as I have suggested, Clare's deep immersion in the literature of former ages must also have contributed to his template). Clare's explanation for the source of his character of "The Vicar" (a short poem later included in his biting satire, *The Parish*) illustrates this method of assembly: "the man whom I copy has been gone nearly a century . . . his character floats in the memory of the village—& from that my resources are gleaned."⁴⁰ The vocabulary Clare uses—floating and gleaning—suggests a bricolage of memory, and the habits he describes are part of a communal tradition of tale telling. The repositories of communal "memory," Clare's "traditional Registers of the Village . . . (Gossips and Granneys),"⁴¹ legitimate the images, making them real to Clare. (Elements of the landscape similarly function as just such repositories; thus when they are destroyed, or when Clare strays "out of his knowledge," he is unable to read the signs in quite the same way.)⁴²

Such ideas must be considered in a framework of laboring-class memory and history. It is in great part because Clare's representations of the society of the village depend for their formation upon a model of memory and recording irrelevant to Wordsworth's experience that, unlike in discussion of the natural community, comparison between the two poets' representations of village society is not useful here. In part, this is an issue of class and insider knowledge: when Clare mocks Wordsworth's "affectations of simplicity," it is because his own intimate and complex knowledge of characters "like" those in Wordsworth's "Nursery rhymes" cannot support Wordsworth's claims.⁴³ But it is also the result of class in another way: integral to the representation of this society is the source of the poet's ideas, the pool of memories that contribute to the images, and Clare's "memory" is precisely a re-membering, a re-putting together of a body of history made up from a canon of tales, which forms and is formed by the social body, the body politic. While wondering how else such communities as Clare's might record their history, it is important to recognize that what socially constructed histories such as Clare's have in common is an indefinite chronology integral to their nature and characteristic of the historical perspective that oral history must share. That which makes the past a foreign country (and thus "the past," and not simply the backward continuation of the present) is precisely

that they did things differently there. Clare assembles his story, which is also history, because village histories are known through stories like these, through snatches of comment that indicate his difference from the past. Old people of various approximation to “real” figures, such as John Cue of Ufford, or Clare’s Mole Catcher, or the “Granneys” who are (significantly) distinguished from the other “traditional Registers of the village,” “Gossips,” are thus venerated for the knowledge they possess and share. (Clare’s work also demonstrates that the availability of printed text impacts in interesting ways upon the village faith in this oral history.)

Because of the legitimization conferred by an accepted mode of historical record, whether Clare writes as if this ideal reality were still present, or (and more usually) laments its passing, it remains actual to much of his verse.⁴⁴ The identification of a perceived decline from a “golden” state continues to prompt fruitful discussion on several themes in Clare’s work: on the importance of childhood, of Eden, of Enclosure, of a “Fall,” all as perceptual and actual models, and is clearly a part of this discussion of Clare’s sense of village community. It is this specific aspect I want to highlight here. The notion of the decline of a “Golden Age” is, rightly, historically controversial, and recent scholarship has addressed the problem (and its implications) of assessing the accuracy of retrospective accounts of rural life, asking if the oft-remarked tendency to look back on a “golden world” is inevitable.⁴⁵ In *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–1783*, Paul Langford suggests that commentators such as E. P. Thompson have underestimated the advantages conferred by the way of life contingent upon the enclosure of land in order to emphasize (overemphasize, as Langford sees it) the harmonious communal spirit and self-reliance of pre-enclosure parishes.⁴⁶ Langford’s research is perhaps useful in a more general sense, but if he is correct, Thompson is clearly complicit with writers such as Clare whose work suggests entirely the reverse. My aim, however, is not to enter discussions surrounding the “truth” of Clare’s ideal (although acknowledgement of those discussions is necessary) but rather to stop on the threshold and highlight important distinguishing features of the society of the “golden” model. In *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture*, Ian Dyck considers (with specific reference to “Eden”) recent scholarship and contemporary accounts in order to suggest that “Cobbett’s histories be analysed in the context of his attempt to recover popular history from the control of the dominant culture; and that they be approached according to his own claims that they constituted accurate representations of the

past and of the historical consciousness of English villagers."⁴⁷ I think it is equally important that for some purposes we turn a blind critical eye to general economic history and similarly consider Clare's accounts as "real" because real according to him, or at least according to his poetry, and look at the "ideal," rather than attempting to construct the "real."⁴⁸

Interestingly, Clare himself replaces the traditional repositories I have described with the written word: whenever Clare's Lubin (or Clare) records, he is inevitably in some sense crossing the divide that Thompson describes as "a profound alienation between the culture of patricians and plebs": "folklore at its very origin carried this sense of patronising distance, of subordination."⁴⁹ What we might be witnessing in Clare's work is what Renato Rosaldo has described as "a particular kind of nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed":⁵⁰ in the very act of picking up a pencil, this suggests, Clare is ensuring that his description must be of an ideal, and cannot be of a true state of affairs. What Rosaldo's comments thus beg is the role of self-consciousness in the perception and description of one's place in a community.

Earlier, I invoked Clare's oft-recorded sense of the absence of a true community of fellow villagers. Even in poems such as "St Martins Eve" (*MP*, III, pp. 269–78), where Clare records being part of the fun, his very recording also implicitly distances him from absolute participation.⁵¹ Clare's record defies the Bakhtinian claim that "there are no guests, no spectators, only participants" in festival, understanding that true participation would be unselfconscious, and certainly would not involve a notebook and pencil; Clare claims, however, to be unable to participate in that way any more.⁵² The same criticism that has explored the persistence through literature of a nostalgic tendency to look back at a "Golden World" has also suggested that the "self-consciousness" of participants in declining ways of life that is said to destroy the very essence of those modes is similarly an omnipresent feature. There never was, such accounts suggest, an unselfconscious participation, only a persistent desire for a (mythical) state of ignorant bliss.⁵³ Again, though, the important issue for this analysis is Clare's perception of the increasing self-consciousness of festival and the extent to which he felt it: I am interested, as I have said, in Clare's perceptual model. From his own point of view, or at least from the point of view he wants to represent, Clare's increasing self-consciousness (which cannot

be separated, according to his own perception, from his adulthood) is part of the lamented decline of the traditional mode of life: "The spring of our life—our youth—is the midsummer of our happiness—our pleasures are then real and heart stiring—they are but associations afterwards."⁵⁴ He can no longer lose himself in the moment of communal festive acts: "now years come and go like messengers without errands and are not noticed for the tales which they tell are not worth stopping them to hear."⁵⁵ This self-consciousness is implicated in his increasing sense of the "cruelty in all," a sense which intensifies subsequent to the move to Northborough, and has important ramifications for the themes of childhood, Eden, and the Fall which I mentioned earlier.⁵⁶ It is also this self-conscious sense that, Clare claims, makes him feel further distanced from his neighbors' way of life by his own humanitarian sensibility: the poet suggests that as he advances through life he increasingly sees festive pastimes as cruel and barbarous. This perception means that he can no longer join in without guilt, and thus that he could no longer rejoin, even if it were possible to re-create it, a society in which such activities are necessary and to which they are integral.⁵⁷

Thompson's invocation of "paternalistic actuality" prompts consideration of another aspect of the model that I am referring to as Clare's "ideal." The festive model that I have likened to survivalism and which Clare celebrates is (like survivalism) above all a paternalistic structure. I do not have space here to enter the debate surrounding Clare's political stance; suffice it to say that I am in accord with Johanne Clare when she suggests that moderation is key.⁵⁸ However, a comment in Clare's correspondence corroborates his declared affection for such paternalism: "for to have such men for Landlords is a satisfactory happiness—for so long as the Miltons & the Exeters have been a name in the neighbourhood—there is not one instance that I know of where they have treated willing industry with unkindness in either insulting dependants with oppression or treating poverty with cruelty—not one—& this is a proof to me that nobility is the chief support to industry & that their power is its strongest protection."⁵⁹ It is, as ever, vital that we constantly question the identity of the reader over Clare's shoulder, but Clare here appears to be comfortable with traditional patterns of rule. Indeed, an overview of his verse suggests that his anger is provoked when the social and inclusive paternalistic pattern begins to be destroyed, and the mastery of undeserving, unjustified, undemocratic modes of government instituted in its stead (and it is "upstart" tenant farmers, rather

than the landed gentry, who provide the targets for Clare's scorn). After all, Clare is here claiming only that the old model is satisfactory; no more, no less. And, in one sense, regardless of his contemporary political belief, it is possible for Clare to make such comments as this without compromising his integrity precisely because it is under this system of rule that Clare's ideal has flourished (that is to say, retrospection perhaps plays a role in Clare's comment here).

It is notable, however, that unlike his many depictions of the cohesive natural community, a full, extended picture of this ideal community in action, so to speak, is illusive. Clare tends rather to offer snatched glances, like the old men who "Recall[] full many a thing by bards unsung / & pride forgot" in "June" of *The Shepherd's Calendar*, or glimpses from childhood memory; and these glances are often of tales being told—those tales that form integral parts of ways of life and belief, yet that further remove the images from action.⁶⁰ Perhaps, in offering only these snatches, Clare to some extent admits that his picture might not ever have been real and that the self-conscious motif is as much a literary trope as a social condition. We might ask—does it matter? If Clare is writing in these modes, shouldn't we, for certain purposes at least, take his work as such? Might one argue that assessing the accuracy of the image is like trying to discern if the biblical paraphrases of the asylum period are quasi-prophetic outpourings or simply poetic exercises? I think that it *does* matter, but for these purposes what is important is the model to which the referent "Clare's community" is attached, both in the sense of the ideal which I have tried to outline, and insofar as that ideal is the standard by which Clare's reality is judged and thereby defined. Clare's poetry, as has often been remarked, is a poetry of cycles both in form and content. The seasons and rhythms of nature are the concern of some of his very best poetry. But *The Shepherd's Calendar*, with other works, documents the waning of a cyclical village calendar, thus illustrating a notion of society from which Clare is becoming ever more isolated. At the same time, by depicting perceptual "Falls," of enclosure, of removal, and of adulthood, and by demonstrating a new sense of nature "as it is everywhere,"⁶¹ other poems descriptive of the natural world increasingly illustrate Clare's intense sense of the decline of a wider and more inclusive "community." It is perhaps the lament for an ideal society that precipitates the perception of this decline, but while inseparable, community and society remain distinct. Clare's sadness is therefore doubly cruel, and his nostalgia for

a community, be it one actually known in the past or an ideal, doubly painful.

NOTES

I am grateful to Professor Anne Barton for valuable advice during my research.

¹William Wordsworth, "Home at Grasmere," Part First, Book First, of "The Recluse," Appendix A, in vol. 5 of *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940–49, 1949), pp. 313–39, lines 104–6. Subsequent references to "Home at Grasmere" will be to this edition and will be cited in the text by line number.

²Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 25.

³Bate, p. 29.

⁴Bate, pp. 30, 34.

⁵For "favoured Vale," see de Selincourt and Darbishire, eds., "Home at Grasmere," p. 323n269–73.

⁶Wordsworth, "The Recluse," in *The Poetical Works*, lines 236–68. Subsequent references to "The Recluse" will be to this edition and will be cited as "The Recluse" followed by line number.

⁷Wordsworth, "The Recluse," lines 389–423.

⁸Bate, p. 40.

⁹Richard Cronin, "In Place and Out of Place: Clare in *The Midsummer Cushion*," in *John Clare: New Approaches*, ed. John Goodridge and Simon Kövesi (Peterborough: John Clare Society, 2000), pp. 133–48, 145–6.

¹⁰John 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. 116.

¹¹M. M. Mahood, "John Clare: The Poet as Raptor," *EIC* 48, 3 (July 1998): 201–23, 219, 220. See also Bill Phillips: "Clare realised that no species lives in isolation; each depends upon other forms of life for its survival, and may, in turn, contribute to the survival of other species" ("When Ploughs Destroy'd the Green," *JCSJ* 21 [2002]: 53–62, 59), or Bate on Clare: "The rights of the land, the ass and the gypsy are interlinked" ("The Rights of Nature," *JCSJ* 14 [1995]: 7–16, 14).

¹²Clare, "Solitude," in vol. 2 of *The Early Poems of John Clare, 1804–1822*, ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell, and Margaret Grainger (Oxford and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 338–52, lines 29–38. Subsequent references to *The Early Poems* will be cited as *EP*.

¹³Clare, "The Fallen Elm," in vol. 3 of *John Clare: Poems of the Middle Period, 1822–1837*, ed. Robinson, Powell, and P. M. S. Dawson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 440–3, lines 5–10. Subsequent references to *Poems of the Middle Period* will be cited as *MP*. *SEL*'s conventional practice of inserting final punctuation at the conclusion of block quotations has not been followed in this essay so that Clare's unique pointing of his verse may be appreciated.

¹⁴ Elizabeth K. Helsinger, *Rural Scenes and National Representation: Britain, 1815–1850* (Princeton and Chichester UK: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 149–50.

¹⁵ Wordsworth, "The Recluse," lines 524–5.

¹⁶ Clare to John Taylor, January 1832, in *The Letters of John Clare*, ed. Mark Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 560–3, 561. Subsequent references to John Clare's letters will be to this edition and will be cited as *Letters*.

¹⁷ Clare, "May," in *The Shepherd's Calendar*, in vol. 1 of *MP* (1996), pp. 58–74, lines 105, 106, 108. Subsequent references to *The Shepherd's Calendar* will be cited as *SC*, followed by page and line number(s).

¹⁸ Clare, "Sonnet after the Manner of XXXXX," in vol. 2 of *MP* (1996), p. 7.

¹⁹ Clare, "July 1," *SC*, pp. 84–102, lines 239–86.

²⁰ Clare, "The Beans in Blossom," in *The Midsummer Cushion*, vol. 4 of *MP* (1998), pp. 191–2.

²¹ Barrell, pp. 157 and 162.

²² Clare, "March," *SC*, pp. 36–49, lines 19–22. Subsequent references to "March" will be to this edition and will be cited in the text by line number(s).

²³ Wordsworth, "The Recluse," lines 215–6, 199–200, 198.

²⁴ Clare, "To the Snipe," in vol. 4 of *MP* (1998), pp. 574–7, lines 77–84.

²⁵ In *John Clare*, ed. Robinson and Powell, Oxford Authors (Oxford and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), p. 241, lines 4 and 2.

²⁶ Leah S. Marcus, *The Politics of Mirth: Jonson, Herrick, Milton, Marvell, and the Defense of Old Holiday Pastimes* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), esp. pp. 146–7. See also Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Hogarth Press, 1985), esp. pp. 33–4; John Morrill, "The Church in England 1642–9," in *Reactions to the English Civil War 1642–1649*, ed. Morrill (New York: St. Martin's, 1983), pp. 89–114; Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year, 1400–1700* (Oxford and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994); and Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1964), esp. chap. 7, "The Poor and the Parish," pp. 259–97; chap. 12, "The Secularization of the Parish," pp. 420–42; and chap. 14, "Individuals and Communities," pp. 482–500.

²⁷ Clare, "The Harvest Morning," in vol. 1 of *EP*, pp. 434–6, lines 38–46.

²⁸ It is worth noting that Clare's beloved gypsies are most like "village" society in their wedding celebrations. See *John Clare by Himself: Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Robinson and Powell (Northumberland UK: Mid Northumberland Arts Group; Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1996), p. 176. Subsequent references to this text will be cited as *BH*. These are ceremonies bonding community more tightly together, although Clare's intermarriage comments suggest both a wider cohesion and a dilution. On Clare and festive traditions, see my "'Some Little Thing of Other Days / Saved from the Wreck of Time': John Clare and Festivity," *JCSJ* 23 (2004): 21–43.

²⁹ Anne Barton, "Clare's Animals: The Wild and the Tame," *JCSJ* 18 (1999): 5–21, 13–4.

³⁰ Samuel Bamford similarly describes the abandon of festivity as a marker of “Civilisation.” See his *Passages in the Life of a Radical and Early Days*, ed. Henry Dunckley, 2 vols. (London: Fisher Unwin, 1893), 1:119.

³¹ See for example Clare’s letter to William Hone, April 1825, Appendix II to *John Clare: Cottage Tales*, ed. Robinson, Powell, and Dawson (Northumberland UK: Mid Northumberland Arts Group; Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1993), pp. 138–43. See also Northampton Public Library MSS 32.

³² See for example Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974); and Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984).

³³ Goodridge, “Out There in the Night: Rituals of Nurture and Exclusion in Clare’s *St Martins Eve*,” *Romanticism* 4, 2 (1998): 202–11, 210.

³⁴ Notably, Goodridge does this in precisely the same terms that are used to describe the factors integral to the survivalist pattern.

³⁵ Robert W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973), p. 170.

³⁶ See Clare, *BH*, p. 88.

³⁷ Clare, *BH*, p. 35. Here, as elsewhere, Clare’s frequent misspellings and idiosyncrasies of language have been retained from the original.

³⁸ Clare, “June,” line 101.

³⁹ Clare, *BH*, p. 36. He does, however, still participate in the grueling labor, which is the other half of the contract, as a letter from Eliza Emmerson, in its usual naivety, highlights: “You tell me, you have left off wooing the Muses, for a time—and have returned to the labours of the field: I approve very much of your determination—for, in the active scenes of Harvest how will your Eye be delighted, your mind relieved from Study, and roused to new exertion, and your Soul o’erflown with feelings of gratitude, at the bounties of a kind Providence!” (Emmerson to Clare, 7 August 1820, British Library Egerton MSS 2245, fol.196v, and compare Emmerson to Clare, 13 August 1820, Egerton MSS 2245, fol.201r, and, for example, *EP*, I, p. 352).

⁴⁰ Clare, *A Champion for the Poor: Political Verse and Prose*, ed. Dawson, Robinson, and Powell (Northumberland UK: Mid Northumberland Arts Group; Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2000), p. 312.

⁴¹ Clare, *BH*, p. 9.

⁴² See Clare, *BH*, p. 40, and Barrell, pp. 120–2.

⁴³ For “affectations of simplicity,” see Clare to Taylor, 21 February 1822, in *Letters*, pp. 231–3, 231; for “Nursery Rhymes,” see Clare to Taylor, 6 December 1821, in *Letters*, pp. 219–22, 221.

⁴⁴ The features Clare attributes to a retrospective “golden model” and the tendencies I am identifying here are not Clare’s alone (nor, of course, are the controversies surrounding their accuracy). Ebenezer Elliott’s *The Splendid Village* (selections of which are reprinted in *A Book of English Pastoral Verse*, ed. Barrell and John Bull [Oxford and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975], pp. 418–24) similarly indicts the altered face of the England of Clare’s own moment for having changed the nature of the community and its relation to itself. Elliott’s “grandsire,” another communal repository of history and, because of this, an assurance of futurity, is also confined to the past (p. 422).

⁴⁵ See, for example, Helsingier and Williams; see also the essays in *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia*, ed. Christopher Shaw and Malcolm

Chase (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1989); Max F. Schulz, *Paradise Preserved: Recreations of Eden in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985); Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1993); Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: Free Press; London: Collier Macmillan, 1979); and David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985).

⁴⁶ See Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), esp. pp. 435–42. Langford's conclusions are considered by Judith Rowbotham in "An Exercise in Nostalgia? John Clare and Enclosure," in *The Independent Spirit: John Clare and the Self-Taught Tradition*, ed. Goodridge (Helpston UK: John Clare Society and Margaret Grainger Memorial Trust, 1994), pp. 164–77, 165.

⁴⁷ Ian Dyck, *William Cobbett and Rural Popular Culture* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), p. 125.

⁴⁸ Consider also Dyck: "There was little abstract or ill-defined about the primary golden age of Cobbett and the rural workers: it dated from 1720 to 1785. The latter half of these good times was remembered by Cobbett directly, while he learned of the former half from his day-labouring grandparents" (p. 135).

⁴⁹ E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991), pp. 1 and 2. See Bate: "For Clare, the march of 'progress,' which he calls decay, is conceived as writing . . . and all that is possible in response is writing of his own" (p. 107).

⁵⁰ Rosaldo, p. 69.

⁵¹ See also Clare to Taylor, 1 December 1820, in *Letters*, pp. 136–7.

⁵² Bakhtin, p. 249.

⁵³ See, for example, Thompson, p. 24.

⁵⁴ Clare, *BH*, p. 36.

⁵⁵ Clare, *BH*, p. 34.

⁵⁶ Clare, "There Is a Cruelty in All," in vol. 5 of *MP* (1996), p. 62, line 1.

⁵⁷ See Clare to James Augustus Hessey, 18 July 1822, in *Letters*, p. 244, and Clare to Taylor, after 3 April 1824, in *Letters*, pp. 291–3, 292, for examples of Clare's belief in the necessity of "knowledge" for culpability.

⁵⁸ Johanne Clare, *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1987): "Clare . . . was distrustful of and almost entirely disengaged from most forms of political dissent" (p. 18); "He was frightened by any form of political activity which seemed to feed, and feed upon, the extreme polarizing drift of English political life. He believed that reform was needed, and well understood that there were extremists on both sides. But he blamed certain reformist initiatives for the worst polarizing tendencies of the early 1830s" (p. 20).

⁵⁹ Clare to ?Elizabeth Gilchrist, Spring 1832, in *Letters*, pp. 576–7. See also Clare to Taylor, January 1832, in *Letters*, pp. 567–8.

⁶⁰ Clare, "June," lines 73–4.

⁶¹ Cf. Barrell, p. 176.