

John Clare: Nature, criticism and history [ISBN: 9780230277878] /
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CHAPTER 1

John Clare and place

Introduction: planting Clare in place

John Clare has always been a poet known for his commitment to a particular place. The following words of Ronald Blythe are characteristic of celebratory appreciations of the qualities of Clare's uniquely placed work:

No other rural poet possesses his authenticity. None was more insulted in his lifetime for displaying it [...] And what a glory of place and native words has been shown to us [...] He is of all our poets the most intensely indigenous, a few fields and woods and wastes providing everything he needed for his exact response to their message.¹

Underpinning a great deal of modern critical discourse about Clare, serving as a prop to many creative works responding to the poet, and framing his overall position in contemporary and popular culture – is the widely accepted idea that he is *the* 'poet of place', *sui generis*. Justifiably, Clare's commitment to specific locales is praised as evidence of his acute 'sense of place' – whether it be to cottage, village, natural feature, field or region. In truth there are many poets regarded similarly, some of them far more prominent than Clare (William Wordsworth and Henry David Thoreau probably chief among them²). Yet place has been peculiarly prevalent in readings of Clare because he is, like so many labouring-class poets, a writer whose situatedness – whose geographical place and socio-economic positioning – is the mainstay of the frame through which he is regarded from the outset of his public career. This was how he was presented, and it is the predominant manner in which he is still read. Clare follows hundreds of poets marketed in a similar fashion: Ann Yearsley – 'Lactilla' – the 'Bristol milkwoman'; Robert Bloomfield, the Suffolk 'farmer's

¹ Ronald Blythe, 'A Message from the President', *JCSJ*, 1 (1982), 5 (5).

² There are numerous studies of place in relation to these writers. Exemplary responses can be found in: Fiona Stafford, 'Wordsworth's Poetry of Place', in Richard Gravil and Daniel Robinson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of William Wordsworth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 309-24; Sally Bushell's short film *Wordsworth's Sense of Place: Home at Grasmere* (Lancaster: Lancaster University, Wordsworth Centre for the Study of Poetry, n.d.); and Lawrence Buell and Richard J. Schneider (eds), *Thoreau's Sense of Place: Essays in American Environmental Writing* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), which contains a comparative essay by Greg Garrard, 'Wordsworth and Thoreau: Two Versions of Pastoral', pp. 194-206.

boy' and shoemaker; Allan Cunningham the Nithsdale stonemason; James Hogg, the Ettrick shepherd. These are just a few of the better-known impoverished poets of the period that Clare certainly read,³ though Cunningham he met through the *London Magazine*, and Bloomfield he corresponded with. The list of poor poets situated in the literary market in this manner across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is far longer.⁴ For such poets, 'place' is both topographically located, and socio-economically determined. I will argue that these are not discrete or separable facets or meanings of 'place': they are always both present in the critical and cultural 'placing' of the poet and the poetry. Clare was to be the peasant poet of Helpston; and more widely (but not too much) the Northamptonshire poet. Village, county, and the odd town such as Stamford are mentioned in early prefatory commentary, so that a national audience might get its bearings to read a poet who was to be decidedly local. These were the circumscribed bounds of Clare's emplacement for his readership, as Elizabeth Helsinger writes:

Clare—like Burns or Bloomfield before him—was identified with the social as well as the geographical place that was his subject. For readers both then and now, he is the "Northamptonshire peasant," whose mobility, social or geographical, would deny the stability his rural scenes are understood to recall.⁵

In the first public pronouncement about Clare's poetry in 1818, the Market Deeping-based publisher J. B. Henson sought excuse for the poems that were to follow in the 'humble situation which distinguishes their author'. At the same time Clare himself thought he might be 'building

³ In the most textually-detailed account of the ways in which Clare drew on these and many more such poets, Paul Chirico says Clare forges 'sociable texts'. See *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007) and for example, Chirico's account of Clare's engagement with Yearsley, pp. 24 and 33-4.

⁴ For an ever-growing annotated bibliography of labouring-class poets before and beyond Clare's time, see John Goodridge *et al* (eds), *Database of British and Irish Labouring-Class Poets and Poetry, 1700-1900* <<https://lcpoets.wordpress.com>> [accessed 31 July 2016]. For selections from, and discussions of, a wide variety of labouring-class poets writing immediately before and contemporary with Clare, see Tim Burke (ed.), *Eighteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets*, vol. III: 1780-1800 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003) and Scott McEathron (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets*, vol. I: 1800-1830 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006).

⁵ Elizabeth Helsinger, 'Clare and the Place of the Peasant Poet', *Critical Inquiry*, 13.3 (Spring, 1987), 509-31 (509).

“Castles in the Air”⁶ in aspiring to being a published poet, while in his 1820 *London Magazine* piece on Clare, Octavius Gilchrist tentatively suggested that ‘Clare’s genius is not framed for sustained or lofty flights’. Gilchrist set out the grounded co-ordinates of Clare’s poetry, in the month the latter’s first collection was to be published: ‘minute observation of nature, delicacy of feeling, and fidelity of description’.⁷ Nature, feeling, fidelity: Clare’s poetic tripod, centred on Helpston, somewhere near Stamford, stood simply on the soil, taking pictures from the ground – unsuited for ‘lofty flights’ or ‘Castles in the Air’.

While criticism of Clare’s work has of course become more sensitised to the ideological pressures of class, I will argue that the foundational reference points for assessments of his work have not changed much at all in two hundred years: nature, feeling, fidelity persist as limitations on readings of Clare, because of the often unsung and sometimes mythicized peculiarities of class and labour in his particular case. This is a general characteristic that continues even when (or especially when) critics consider Clare ‘both the poet of place and displacement’ – as Tom Paulin influentially put it in 1994, following Elizabeth Helsinger who said much the same in 1987.⁸ This is now the orthodox critical interpretation of Clare’s edgy relationship with place. If it is forms of ‘displacement’ that more obviously are the critical focus of a lot of work on Clare, ‘place’ itself remains largely unconsidered – hidden in plain sight, as it were; or ignored, because Clare’s supposed dislocation and alienation from place is the dominant concern. This is a problem because, if not assessed, the ‘placing’ of Clare effects a restraint on what critics allow for his poetic ambition, especially if it is assumed there can be no ‘placing’ of the poet precisely because processes of ‘displacement’ are the ostensible focus.

This chapter reflects upon the problems inherent in valuing Clare for being ‘down to earth’, considers what that might mean for his critical ‘placing’ and offers a critique of the ways

⁶ ‘Prospectus’ (Market Deeping: J. B. Henson, 1818), *Critical Heritage*, p. 30. The quotation from Clare is in a letter written to Henson in 1818, *Critical Heritage*, p. 31.

⁷ Octavius Gilchrist, ‘Some Account of John Clare, an Agricultural Labourer and Poet’, *London Magazine*, January 1820, *Critical Heritage*, pp. 35-42 (40).

⁸ Tom Paulin, ‘John Clare: A Bicentennial Celebration’, in Richard Foulkes (ed.), *John Clare: A Bicentennial Celebration* (Northampton: University of Leicester, Department of Adult Education, 1994), pp. 69-78 (p. 74), and Elizabeth Helsinger, ‘Clare and the Place of the Peasant Poet’, *Critical Inquiry*, 13.3 (Spring, 1987), 509-31. For a recent consideration of Clare’s ‘displacement’ see Sara Guyer, *Reading With John Clare: Biopoetics, Sovereignty, Romanticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), pp. 78-100. For an extended account of loss (of place and other things) in Clare’s later poems, see Stephanie Kuduk Weiner, *Clare’s Lyric: John Clare and Three Modern Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 86-121.

ecocriticism uses Clare to its own contemporary ends; ecocriticism, I argue, necessitates a further deracination of Clare and his class, even as it ostensibly seeks to renew a valuation of the localism in writers like Clare. This chapter then considers how Clare himself forged a displaced (and purposefully *de*-placed) idea of supreme poetic success, through the supranational and exoticizing model of Byron. Next, returning to the origins of his birth-place, the discussion considers Clare back in his cottage, now a museum, and reads him as a mapped, contemporary, placed place name. Finally, in order to liberate Clare's poetry from over-determining critical topophilia, the argument tracks the displacing, detaching journey of Clare's most successful nineteenth-century poem which, severed from his name and his place, took flight like no other.

From the start of Clare's career, readers have had to cope with the manner in which Clare's patrons sought to keep him rooted in social place, even while seeking to celebrate Clare's close and unique observations of that same locality, and that same social strata. Lord Milton, Wentworth Fitzwilliam, offers a key case in point in February 1820. On being presented with a copy of the first edition of *Poems Descriptive*, he wrote to John Taylor:

His talents are very extraordinary, his productions being consider'd, as they must be, the effusions of an uneducated Genius: but to make the most of the powers Nature has bestow'd on him, books must be furnish'd, not so much to enrich his mind as to give him the first rudiments of education, Grammer, & classical language—this must be done by degrees—in the meanwhile the proposal made by you, & the liberality with which you push it by example, I shall have the pleasure in seconding & in contributing £100 towards an annuity for him—bred up in habit of labor, I do not think that it would be usefull to him, to withdraw him altogether & at once from those habits—should he go on successfully & no doubt he will, in the exercise of his Genius, he will by degrees rise above his present rank in life & become a member of a much more elevated Society but for his own sake, in every point of consideration, this change had better not be brought about too rapidly⁹

⁹ The letter in Nor. 44 is transcribed by Margaret A. Powell, in 'Clare and his Patrons in 1820: Some Unpublished Papers', *JCSJ*, 6 (1987) 4-9 (4).

Clare might well change as a result of literary fame, he suggests, but this must be controlled, and in tandem his education must be polished. This is the kind of early delimitation and ossifying *placing* of Clare's talents – and the emphasis on management of linguistic and (by implication) moral wildness – are prejudicial assertions with which criticism and editing of Clare has always felt it has to contend and wrestle. Yet in a strange case of negating self-assertion, Clare criticism has itself formed in a situated reaction against this breed of social placing, by focusing too much – for many – on a combative and positivistic revaluation of the social contexts in which Clare's poems were produced.¹⁰

Mina Gorji's response to criticism's social 'placing' of Clare is to emphasise his literary sophistication: 'too much attention has been focussed on his social circumstances in ways that risk occluding his literary achievements' she writes. The locality of his poetry is still significant for Gorji however, as '[q]uestions of place animate Clare's imagination'.¹¹ Richard Cronin identifies the critical place of Clare as being awkwardly suspended between the twin-poles of his village and of a literary world he aspired to, and he ends up being estranged by both and comfortable in neither.¹² Cronin's modelling of estrangement is reproduced even in those areas where Clare is seemingly 'placed' comfortably – especially, that is, in his relation to – and relating of – the natural world. As Nicholas Birns points out, even when criticism is valuing Clare highly for his representations of the natural world, there is an ever-present implication that is not so flattering:

John Clare has long been seen as a poet of nature. The implicit suggestion in this view is that he was a poet of nature rather than of something else. That something else is usually a Wordsworthian or otherwise Romantic notion of the imagination. 'Nature' with respect to

¹⁰ A an example of this trait in Clare criticism, as symptomatic in its own way as Lord Milton's letter to Taylor, can be found in Eric Robinson's article, 'John Clare's Learning', *JCSJ*, 7 (1988), 10-25: 'The stereotype of John Clare today, even in academic circles, or perhaps I ought to say, more particularly in some academic circles, is that of a *naif*, a peasant poet, a natural genius with all the limitations that the world "natural" implies. Just like the reviewers of 1820, many readers of today cannot get over their surprise that Clare's poems should have been written by an agricultural labourer.' (10). Robinson was writing at a time when Clare's critical acceptance and profile was limited.

¹¹ Mina Gorji, *John Clare and the Place of Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), pp. 7 and 122.

¹² Richard Cronin's essay centres on Clare's bookish and literary stylizations of situation, and on the according critical 'placing' of his work. See 'In Place and Out of Place: Clare in *The Midsummer Cushion*', in John Goodridge and Simon Kövesi (eds), *John Clare: New Approaches* (Helpston: John Clare Society, 2000), pp. 133-48.

Clare's poetry has a sort of down-to-earth connotation. It suggests an empirical terrain whose brute factuality limits any metaphorical or philosophical dimension.¹³

Birns identifies as 'down to earth' the undermining limitation of Clare being presented as a 'nature poet' relative to his Romantic peers. The idiom Birns uses carries the weight of a common phrase with which the middle classes cope with, categorise and sometimes praise, the seeming bluntness, or lack of learned politesse, of something or someone working class. Such an unsophisticated, 'direct' person, or cultural formation thereof, might be explained to others as being 'down to earth'. The *OED* does not provide the full range of meanings as I would understand them, for 'down to earth'. It defines the phrase only as 'back to reality... interested in everyday affairs; not affectedly superior; realistic; ordinary'. However, 'earthy' is in part defined as 'grossly material; coarse, unrefined... down-to-earth, unpretentious'. So the phrase is slippery, malleable and its meaning inflected by context. But still, regardless of the explicit intention, location and delivery of its use, 'down to earth' must always carry with it an implicit assertion of naturalised, downwardly-pointing, class difference. The idiom appears enough to form a sort of symptomatic if hitherto latent trail, a trail we will now follow through some modern critical commentary on Clare.

In her introduction to the *Natural History Prose Writings*, Margaret Grainger writes that '[I]ike Cobbett, Clare's writing is down-to-earth', while she maintains that 'Elizabeth Kent's style of writing, a combination of down-to-earth common sense and sensibility, was in tune with [Clare's] own'.¹⁴ In their introduction to the first volume of the *Early Poems* – and cross as ever with perceived snobbery and what they see as John Taylor's 'censorship' of Clare – David Powell and Eric Robinson write:

Contemporary taste, especially Taylor's, suggested that poems in dialect, especially poems dealing with marriage and courtship in a down-to-earth way, were not acceptable to the middling class but should be confined to the halfpenny sheets of itinerant ballad-vendors.¹⁵

¹³ Nicholas Birns, "'The riddle nature could not prove": hidden landscapes in Clare's poetry', in *John Clare in Context*, pp. 189-220 (p. 189).

¹⁴ *Natural History*, pp. xlix and 11.

¹⁵ *EPI*, pp. x-xi.

Here, 'down-to-earth' is used to characterise sexually direct, blunt, unsophisticated traits of Clare's tales that they claim Taylor could not stomach, yet it reinforces stereotypes about working-class life even as it seeks to defend it from editorial prejudice. Johanne Clare, interpreting Clare's statements on the essential role of poetry, uses the phrase idealistically as a positive interpretation of what Clare wants for poetry in resisting class-led predeterminations, while necessarily overlooking any class dimensions of the idiom:

If poetry was to transcend the rule of historical change, it must reflect the truth of nature since only nature was constant, was capable of perennially renewing itself. Poetry must be brought down to earth, pared down to its universals, freed from the stigma of class.¹⁶

Her last sentence, it seems to me, is not 'freed from the stigma of class' precisely because she uses 'down to earth' which is an expression founded on, and redolent with, class distinctions: she redelivers the 'stigma of class' in her language even as she attempts to reject it. Theresa M. Kelley reveals some parenthetical nervousness in using the phrase when she describes the prose of Clare's 1841 'Journey out of Essex' as being couched 'in a voice and diction that are local, phonetically spelled, barely punctuated, down-to-earth (as they say)' – but uses it anyway, and blames others for its appearance.¹⁷ Revealing that the phrase can be expressly about class position, landscape historian Ian D. Whyte claims that Clare's 'anti-enclosure sentiments... indicate an opposition between elite views of landscape and more down-to-earth peasant viewpoints.'¹⁸ For Michael O'Neill, the sonnet form's 'age-old, often courtly pentameter [is] given new energy by the down-to-earth dialect of "proged"' – a word in Clare's 'The Mouse's Nest': while he seeks to praise Clare's innovation, the dialect use is characterised as a low-born intrusion of a high-brow space.¹⁹ And finally, Clare's greatest biographer Jonathan Bate, deploys the phrase with explicit intent when he wants to categorise the kind of social fun Clare experiences with local friends: 'Clare's health did

¹⁶ Clare, Johanne, *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), p. 144.

¹⁷ Theresa M. Kelley, 'Postmodernism, Romanticism, and John Clare', in Thomas Pfau and Robert F. Gleckner (eds), *Lessons of Romanticism: A Critical Companion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 157-70 (p. 161).

¹⁸ Ian D. Whyte, *Landscape and History Since 1500* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), p. 8.

¹⁹ Michael O'Neill, 'The Romantic Sonnet', in A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 185-203.

indeed improve when he began spending time in the down-to-earth company of his fellow-villagers'²⁰. When accounting for Clare's seeming obsession with writing about Mary, Bate writes: 'Because Mary was always elusive, she served as a screen for more down-to-earth memories that would have been painful to articulate directly.'²¹ And when contrasting Clare's 'Don Juan' with the biblical paraphrases he was writing simultaneously in 1841, Bate resorts to the phrase again: 'During the very same weeks that he was writing in this spiritual vein, Clare was also composing his most down-to-earth, angry, cynical, sexually charged poem: "Don Juan".'²² Bate has written extensively and influentially about the fact that poetry can write, like no other cultural form, 'of the earth'. For Bate, poetry is therefore a necessity for human consciousness in sustaining the natural world and fostering its proper treatment.²³ But his uses of the phrase 'down to earth' in his biography do not carry that same sensitivity to the politics of language, or to the classism of deploying dead, naturalising metaphors that situate working-class forms at the 'base' socially and culturally, and – in the case of implied sexual behaviours – morally.

Tracking the fortunes of just one phrase in criticism of Clare might seem to be a narrow evidence base. I would argue that though thin, the breadcrumb trail of this phrase does yet offer a sense of wider if still unacknowledged problems in the study of Clare that emerge because of class, and place. With its easy admixture of the 'naturalist' and the hierarchically classist, this phrase 'down to earth' reveals that critically, often as not, Clare's art is only permitted to be 'down to earth' even in his most ardent of advocates. The idiom takes on the comedic, cartoonish weight of a heavy pair of working boots, keeping Clare grounded, earthy, homely, his walks circumscribed by the weight of a freighted class track. Or it would be clownishly comedic, were the effects not so deleterious. The environmentalist's valuation of the 'earth' can be a critical straightjacket if we do not pay attention to the placing, determining prejudices of class-inflected 'earthiness'. The 'placedness' that drives so much critical work pre-determines ideologically that Clare's art can only be as stolidly and doggedly 'honest' and materialist because he should only be 'down to earth'.

²⁰ Bate, *Biography*, p. 208.

²¹ Bate, *Biography*, p. 331.

²² Bate, *Biography*, p. 445.

²³ See for example Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) and his *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000), both of which contain pioneering environmental discussions of Clare and other Romantics.

In 1873 the well-meaning if limited J. L. Cherry wrote of some specific lines in Clare's poem 'Address to Plenty' that they 'have always been admired for their Doric strength and simplicity, and the vivid realism of the scene which they depict'.²⁴ Cherry's terminology here follows in a direct line from Gilchrist's earlier tripod (as I call it above) of 'nature, feeling, fidelity', in Clare's work, yet Cherry offers a more masculinised and Victorian inflection: 'strength', 'simplicity', 'realism'. As it was for Cherry, so it continues in some critical responses today. Angus Fletcher offers a version of this prevalent version of Clare's art in 2004:

He wrote his sonnets, especially, in the form of poetic notes, often sitting on the ground to write his thoughts down—and his later *Northborough Sonnets* are an almost mesmerizing exercise in camera work. He registers sounds and sights as the modern lens catches the dispersed flux of city minutiae.²⁵

Clare is frequently regarded as if he were a documentary photographer, pointing his eyes at a green thing, clicking his lids, imprinting a precise yet unthought and unmanaged scene, and then watching as poetic text pours out in faithful record of the place: perfect mimesis means there can be no 'lofty flights'. The Romantic myth of the passive artist playing sounds in a natural breeze²⁶ is conflated in Clare's case with rootedness, with an implied lack of artistry, with a lack of educationally-derived sophistication, with an autodidactic 'honesty', and with a parochial naivety – all still assumed by some critics across all literary periods to be mainstays of the way working-class life makes art of itself. And the way we make critical sense of this now, is not through the Aeolian harp, but through the clicking of the camera. And so the staple version of Clare's aesthetics is redelivered: rooted,

²⁴ Cherry, J. L., *The Life and Remains of John Clare* (London: F. Warne, 1873), p. 28.

²⁵ Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 55. See also Mark Storey, criticizing Edmund Gosse for seeing Clare 'as little more than a camera', in 'Clare and the Critics', *John Clare in Context*, pp. 28-50 (p. 47).

²⁶ Though there are many 'naturalising' models of Romantic creation – which sometimes tend towards a degree of organicising passivity in the subject-position of the poet. Specifically here I am thinking the model of the Aeolian lyre or wind harp – *pace* M. H. Abrams: '[t]he Aeolian lyre is the poet, and the poem is the chord of music which results from the reciprocation of external and internal elements, of both the changing wind and the constitution and tension of the strings', *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 48-53 (p. 51). For an excellent account of the poetry and the science of the harp, see Shelley Trower, 'Nerves, Vibration and the Aeolian Harp', *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, 54 (2009), <<http://www.erudit.org/revue/ravon/2009/v/n54/038761ar.html>> [accessed 4 December 2016].

artless; more natural heart than learned mind; an etiolated version even of Friedrich Schiller's 'naïve poet'.²⁷ He is a lens, or else a 'retraction / into pure eye' as the poet Wendy Mulford couches it.²⁸

As we will see, Clare is himself responsible for the promulgation of an artistic process founded on the denial of his own agency in the making of his work, and on the denial of the work's artfulness too. As Paul Chirico has explored in depth, following initial composition 'in great haste' Clare expresses a lack of ability to rewrite or self-edit.²⁹ Some of Clare's models of artistic composition set out to erase any personal or identifiable responsibility for the work he produces. In fact it is not to be 'work' or 'art' at all – but 'nature' instead, as defence, and as primary allegiance. Of course that tendency to deny control, to disavow identification through an abnegation of purposeful responsibility, is as much a trait of Clare's social position as much as it was a version of fashionable Romantic myth-making organicism. In Clare's case the naturalising model was adopted by way of a cap-doffing apologia for the poetry that follows: it was tactically installed in a variety of guises to secure acceptance in an audience that might not otherwise understand how an 'uneducated' man could 'do' poetry, other than to regard it as yet another mysterious process of fecund, organic nature; the work of God, not the thought of a man.³⁰ Nature poet writes poems about nature, naturally. The answer to the question 'how did he do it?' (and the question 'how *dare* he do it' which lurks interrogatively beneath), was occasionally provided by Clare in the least unsettling manner possible – at least in class terms: it wasn't him, it just happened, he found the poetry in the fields, or he kicked it out of the clods, and popped it on the brim of his hat. He knew his locality well, so he found the poems in that place; or else, even more organically, he was rooted in the soil so the poems grew within and were exhaled into words.

²⁷ See Juliet Schryava's insightful application of Schiller to unpick Clare's critical reception, in *Schiller to Derrida: Idealism in Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 80-110, esp. pp. 82-3.

²⁸ Wendy Mulford, 'John Clare's Mountain', in Denise Riley (ed.), *Poets on Writing: Britain, 1970-1991* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 114-20 (p. 115).

²⁹ See Chirico, *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader*, especially chapter 6, 'Imagination and Artifice', pp. 138-66; and *By Himself*, p. 101.

³⁰ I am drawing here (and throughout this book) on two leading essays analysing the 'problem' of natural (and naturalised) genius: Bridget Keegan, 'Boys, Marvellous Boys: John Clare's "Natural Genius"', in John Goodridge and Simon Kövesi (eds), *John Clare: New Approaches* (Helpston: John Clare Society, 2000), pp. 65-76; and Simon J. White, 'Otaheite, Natural Genius and Robert Bloomfield's *The Farmer's Boy*', *Romanticism*, 17.2 (July 2011), 160-74.

These remain dominant ways of appreciating Clare's 'placed' creativity. Poet Kim Taplin typifies how this modelling of creativity is redelivered in popular ecocritical language when she writes:

...the vigour of his poetry and the power of his testimony is drawn very expressly and directly from actual, local trees... What did concern him was the sharing of his deepest feelings and paying the tribute of exact praise to the sights and sounds and manifold events of the natural world that aroused them... Clare was above all intent upon showing his feelings, because that seemed to him the proper human response to nature and to man's insensitivity to it. He participated in it: he was a denizen of nature. When it was damaged or destroyed, he suffered damage and destruction in his own psyche.³¹

To be fair, in Taplin's popularising critical anthology of tree-writing the task is to offer a special place for Clare in relation to the trees he writes about, and she fully achieves that. But there is hazard in her romanticisation of intimacy between tree and poet in that it removes any space for artistic thought: between the snapping of a branch and the dissolution of Clare's temperament there is nought but green feeling. It might be attractive to think that 'Clare feels like a tree'. But even the most inspired and unscientific ecocritic would have to admit that trees do not 'feel' in a manner we can understand. In Taplin's sentimental account, proximity to a natural body in a place is lauded, while mind is erased.

This book sets out to present a Clare who changed his mind and his models of creative conception, who theorised the writing of poetry and the forging of writerly identities, and who conceptualised formal issues in practice and on purpose. This book commits to the idea that Clare did this with a poet's intellectual deliberation, as he wrote socialised, class-informed, and artfully poetic accounts of human and natural worlds in rich conjunction, in a variety of forms, from a variety of positions and in a diverse array of moods. A singular 'placing' of Clare often works against a critical emphasis on variation and experimentation, just as the naturalisation of him into a 'denizen of nature' might deny him an intellectual volition or a social situation. In its attempt to theorise Clare's green politics, this book will invest itself throughout in problems emanating from

³¹ Kim Taplin, *Tongues in Trees: Studies in Literature and Ecology* (Bideford: Green Books, 1989), pp. 49-50.

his manuscripts, and will consider how editing has constructed versions of his textual life, and how it might do so in the future. In its analysis of how Clare represents women – in love and lust poems, in lists and letters – this book will consider poems and attitudes that are not ostensibly ecocentric at all, partly to test out theorisations of Clare’s ecocentric aesthetics. Finally, this book will consider the central problem of history when we try to consider Clare through contemporary creative responses to his life and work. In many ways, this book is as much about critical and theoretical practice as it is about Clare, and so the argument attempts to make clear why such a focus is necessary in the peculiar case of this unique poet.

Clare in space

The watershed moment in Clare criticism of John Barrell’s ground-breaking reading in 1972 is the starting point of the predominance of ‘place’ in the study of the poet.³² Barrell’s work has been reconfirmed recently by Franco Moretti’s 2007 reconfiguration of the manner and mode of literary understanding in his *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History*.³³ Following Barrell and others, Moretti advocates a data-informed and illustratively mapped sense of the coordinates of a text, to develop fresh ways of interpretative historical reading. For Moretti and to some extent for Barrell’s book, place becomes precise, material, empirical. Yet today in Clare studies, Barrell’s finely mapped and historically aestheticized ‘sense of place’ has, I think, become something unquestioned, something passively accepted by all readers and teachers of Clare’s poetry and prose. Because Barrell is assumed to be foundationally right (and I think he is too, I should add), his book’s ideas have become detached from their original intentions. Clare just is a poet of a place; and a fraught poet of a place made fraught and changed by other agents – be it through enclosure, ‘improvements’, Clare’s being moved to another home, or Clare’s being sent to an asylum. His poetry ‘documents’ particularities of place; and his ‘best’ poetry works iteratively over real tracks and across spaces that we might touristically locate today – even if only to bemoan

³² John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

³³ Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), especially pp. 35-64. Excited though he is about Barrell’s mapping of Helpston, Moretti does not mention Clare once, skipping from Barrell straight to Mary Mitford.

modernity and its tarmac, housing developments, power lines and pylons.³⁴ As we are about to see, the historicised and aesthetic sensitivity of Barrell to place is lost, in the rush to deploy Clare's place to certain contemporary ends.

The extension of critical inquiry – and theory – into 'space' was already in train before Barrell's book appeared. Following Gaston Bachelard's lead, in 1967 Michel Foucault famously suggested that the 'present age may be the age of space... an age when space is presented to us in the form of relations of emplacement'.³⁵ This was answered in rich fashion by Henri Lefebvre's influential *The Production of Space* in 1974, which claimed that space was a social product, determined by history, property and production.³⁶ Human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan assessed the co-dependency of space and place in an influential study of 1977: space is the more freely abstract term and is defined by movement, while place was more static and stable.³⁷ In 1980's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau makes a similar and – at the time increasingly typical – distinction:

A place... implies an indication of stability... space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it... in relation to place, space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of actualization... In contradistinction to the place, it has none of the univocity or stability of a "proper".³⁸

³⁴ A moving and self-reflective account of tracing Clare's footsteps in this manner can be found in James Canton, *Out of Essex: Re-imagining a Literary Landscape* (Oxford: Signal Books, 2013), pp. 18-45. For a parallel project if on a larger psychogeographic scale, see Iain Sinclair, *Edge of the Orison: in the Traces of John Clare's 'Journey out of Essex'* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), discussed below in the final chapter.

³⁵ Michel Foucault, 'Different Spaces', in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubon, trans. Robert Hurley et al (New York: New Press, 1998), pp. 175-85 (p. 175 and 177), first delivered as a lecture in 1967. Foucault doesn't cite it explicitly, but the Bachelard text he draws on in general would be *The Poetics of Space* (1958).

³⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). First published in French in 1974. For an incisive account of Foucault, Bachelard and Lefebvre – and every other major contributor to theorisations of space for that matter – see Robert T. Tally Jr., *Spatiality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

³⁷ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977).

³⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), p. 117. First published in French in 1980.

In 1991 Frederic Jameson charts in postmodernism a 'spatial turn', a "“great transformation” —the displacement of time, the spatialization of the temporal — [which] often registers its novelties by way of a sense of loss.'³⁹ Charting the dominance of place by the philosophy of space, in 1997 Edward S. Casey pointed to more recent correctives from thinkers who have followed Heidegger, and have made place dynamic, processual, socio-political, and an event in itself rather than a container for events, and a phenomenon that is not necessarily locatable or stable; Casey concludes that 'place is beginning to escape from its entombment in the cultural and philosophical underworld of the modern West.'⁴⁰ Even with these broad tendencies for a reevaluation of space and rich considerations of place, philosopher J. E. Malpas is unconvinced in his 1999 study: work on 'place' as a concept, has been neglected, 'in a tendency for place to be viewed as secondary and derivative of spatiality and temporality'.⁴¹ While it may be true that Malpas's assessment of the relative paucity of theorisations of place relative to space has been answered in part by the wide array of ecologically-informed work published since on site, situation and bio-region, in Clare studies I would contend that the sidelining of place continues, in even the most recent decent criticism (and luckily there has been a lot of that since the 1990s⁴²). Place remains something Clare criticism needs to address and problematize more, if only because it is so dominant, so hegemonic and, oddly enough, so unspoken.

Alongside broad philosophical developments in the consideration of place, an emerging 'green' presence in critical thinking has also necessitated assessments of the concept of place. There has been a return to localism through developments in environmental criticism, in part as a resistance to the forces and injustices of global capitalism – and possibly as a counterweight to postmodernity's supposed rootless mobility too – attention to Clare as an exemplar of someone with an acute 'sense of place' has grown since the 1990s. A widespread reevaluation of the local has made Clare even more attractive as an object of study in recent years. Surveying twentieth-century

³⁹ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), pp. 154-80 (pp. 154 and 156).

⁴⁰ Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 331-9 (p. 339).

⁴¹ J. E. Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 27.

⁴² For a recent summary of developments in Clare criticism since the 1990s, see *New Essays on John Clare*, pp. 7-9. For an overview of how Clare studies has developed in the *John Clare Society Journal* see Greg Crossan, 'Thirty Years of the *John Clare Society Journal*: A Retrospective Survey', *JCSJ*, 31 (2012), 5-22.

American environmentalism, Ursula K. Heise has mapped a set of tensions in environmental criticism between the global and the national, the travelling migrant and the localised inhabitant. Her conclusions leave her concerned about localism:

...the environmentalist emphasis on restoring individuals' sense of place, while it might function as one useful tool among others for environmentally oriented arguments, becomes a visionary dead end if it is understood as a founding ideological principle or a principal didactic means of guiding individuals and communities back to nature.⁴³

As Heise demonstrates, modern ecocriticism has always thought 'place' should be central to its concerns and its ethics, but has struggled to make localism have a global rather than a parochial reach. The strategical problem here is that if green politics are too localist, or seen to be parochial, they might be dismissible in national and international arenas, and so will not lead to any sort of organised change in habits of consumption, industry and governmental policy. This is a problem of scale: what is the dimension of the local? What is the size of a 'place'? For Yi-Fu Tuan, place 'exists at different scales. At one extreme a favorite armchair is a place, at the other extreme the whole earth.'⁴⁴ A green agenda leads us further to ask through what taxonomies of space (room, garden, city, region, nation, bioregion, continent, planet) do people feel *responsibility* to their habitat? This is also a problem of natural science – in that global-scale environmental processes are constituted by countless tiny, localisable, shifts, changes, accidents and human decisions.⁴⁵ Clare's localised environmental concerns – often though not always at the smaller end of the scalability of human interaction with the natural world – are treated with mobility in terms of their presentation of an ethical pronouncement on the sanctity of a natural place, and its 'abuses' by man, and are deployed to support an agenda. Certainly this a prop to educational inclusions of Clare in school curricula: that children might learn how better to treat 'the natural world' by reading Clare. And by a

⁴³ Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: the Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 21.

⁴⁴ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), p. 149.

⁴⁵ For a salient discussion of the problematic relationship (and relatability) of local and global frames for environmentalist criticism (and action), see the 'Introduction' to Tom Lynch, Cheryl Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster (eds), *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012), pp. 1-29.

stretching process of scalable analogy, Clare can be ‘made relevant’ to any locality – large or small – where a feature or process of natural origin, comes into close touch with humanity, and loses out.

Sometimes, critics ‘deploy’ Clare as a sort of proto-ecological weapon in a manner which *displaces* him both in terms of space and in terms of history. Kate Rigby offers a prime example. In *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism*, she moves from Clare to here and now, into a panicked future, and back again, at a dizzying pace. She is worth quoting at length, not least because her travels take her to infinity and beyond. Starting with John Barrell Rigby writes:

...one senses that Barrell’s interest in Clare is not merely historical. Certainly, from a contemporary ecocritical perspective, it is Clare’s untimeliness, his resistance to the forces of dislocation that were reshaping his world, which guarantees the significance of his work today, above all for those not reconciled to the condition of global tourist and who identify with others actively resisting the loss or despoliation of their own places of belonging. The present movement to reclaim a sense of place, as evidenced within the literature, philosophy, and practice of bioregionalism, as well as in the struggles of colonized people to regain their traditional lands, has nonetheless emerged at a point when the process of dislocation, or ‘deplacialization,’ to use Casey’s term, has assumed a new order of magnitude. The forces of capitalist modernization that in Clare’s day necessitated the creation of straight new roads linking the newly enclosed fields of Helpston with the expanding market town of Peterborough are now generating vast communication networks in cyberspace in the context of an increasingly integrated global economy. Meanwhile, the planned redesign of Northamptonshire and elsewhere through parliamentary enclosure might today be seen to find a hypertrophic counterpart in the ambition to terraform Mars. Where once, with the dissolution of feudalism, peasants were emancipated to find work in another parish, and later, with the expansion of empire, the poor were encouraged to seek their fortune in the colonies, now we are told that technology will free us from planet Earth, ravaged as it is by industrialization and threatened on all sides by meteors and black holes.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Kate Rigby, *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2004), pp. 60-1. The Edward S. Casey text referred to is *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, cited above.

Rigby is at the extreme end of a general pattern in Clare studies of a kind of environmentally-self-interested and deracinating rewriting of Clare's own accounts of enclosure and other forms of environmental harm (as he saw them). Rigby's written criticism here is a victim of her perfectly laudable attempt to re-inspirit places through a mixture of eco-science and poetic disquisition, and rightly her method takes her all over the place(s). She models in chiaroscuro form a well-trodden path, a semi-holy rite of passage, that a conservationally-minded Clare enthusiast takes on the hunt of the faint tracks laid down in Clare's poems. Rigby's agenda overrides history, actual landscape and any detail of Clare's supposed proto-environmentalism, and in its portentous, breathless insensitivity it becomes eco-pompous. The irony for a book putatively about 'sacred' places is that the places mentioned are treated on occasion with such telescopic tactlessness from a position of postmodern privilege. What Rigby risks in the urgency to make Clare relevant to a contemporary polemic, is an over-simplification of the ways in which identification with and understanding of place is informed and delimited by issues of class.⁴⁷

If Rigby ignores class, she ignores Barrell's conclusions too, overlooking his correction of a critical myth circulating in 1972 that persists to this day.⁴⁸ Through a careful mapping of land-tax assessments, population, and the enclosure-award, Barrell investigates two main critical assumptions about enclosure: that Helpston smallholders and the poor were destroyed by enclosure, and that Clare persistently built a causal link between enclosure and economic hardship. For Barrell there is little evidence for either; nor for the general story, in Helpston's particular case, that as a force of rampant capitalism (as it is widely regarded by ecocritics), enclosure ripped land away from small farmers and loaded it onto the large landowners; nor is he fully convinced that enclosure offered a panacea – or that the poorest were not affected by it. Barrell concludes that in

⁴⁷ An insightful account of the erasure of class politics in ecocritical accounts of Wordsworth, is offered by Scott Hess, *William Wordsworth and the Ecology of Authorship: The Roots of Environmentalism in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2012), especially pp. 147-55. For Hess, 'an explicit environmental focus' appears to denigrate a critic's sensitivity to class politics: summarising his account of critical responses to Wordsworth and the Lake District railway protest, Hess writes that 'critics who come to the railway protest without an explicit environmental focus tend to be much more sensitive to these class politics, likely because they are not predisposed by their own affinity for a Wordsworthian version of nature' (p. 149).

⁴⁸ This passage summarises the findings of the Appendix to Barrell's book, 'John Clare and the enclosure of Helpston', in Barrell, pp. 189-215.

trackable socio-economic terms, Helpston seems not to have been damaged or re-ordered much at all by enclosure – at least in terms of size of holding and tax paid (he spends a good deal of the book considering the aesthetic and relational impacts on Clare and his *milieu* of the loss of open field farming of course). The greatest immediate benefit of enclosure, Barrell finds, would have been to the wage-labourer who could work in the enclosure gangs. Barrell's conclusion is rarely considered by ecocritics today, because it is inconvenient to an ecocritically anti-capitalist positioning of Clare:

...had it not been for the enclosure, the demand for labour would have diminished considerably, and the problem of poverty would have been that much more severe. The enclosure... though conceived at a time of great agricultural prosperity, was carried into execution during an agricultural depression. But the actual work of enclosing – the making of new roads, the planting of hedges – could not be put off until better days; and in this way the enclosure must to some extent have protected the labourer of Helpston from the effects of the depression, in that it enabled him to tap his employer's capital for his wages, instead of waiting for them to come out of his employer's falling profits.⁴⁹

Barrell admits the effects upon the poorest and the landless cannot be captured by the data to hand, and so 'we still cannot measure the effect of the loss suffered by the agricultural labourers of traditional ways of supplementing their wages'. It is in his critiques of the loss of 'common rights', that Clare is keenly and acerbically consistent in his verse. However, Barrell surmises that even there, for Clare 'the measurable effects of enclosure were far less important to Clare than those which the tradition of rural protest told him to expect and recognise'.⁵⁰ Rigby is not alone in ignoring these findings when discussing Barrell, Clare and enclosure.

Rigby inherits an ecocriticism that is in part an offspring of the positioning of Clare as a proto-ecologist. Ecocriticism starts, as Jonathan Bate and Edward Goldsmith point out, in 1964, with Robert Waller, editor of *Mother Earth*, and author of what is widely regarded as the first ever

⁴⁹ Barrell, pp. 214-15.

⁵⁰ Barrell, pp. 201-2.

ecological literary criticism – about enclosure, and Clare.⁵¹ And so Rigby is not alone; her work is part of the systemic urgency in the humanities generally that green thinking has to make itself explicitly relevant to contemporary problems; that it feels it has to try and be scientifically engaged in a present, material environment, the way natural sciences might more directly be. Clare as green protest poet, and ecocriticism itself, were formations born at the same time, seemingly conjoined, if ‘untimely’. Clare as eco-warrior is part of the founding mythos of the ecocritical adventure. To address this complex of issues, I will turn first to Clare himself, and then to Michel de Certeau.

‘wild and irregular’: enclosure and tactics

Perhaps the most common feature of ecocritical statements about Clare and enclosure, is the elision of Clare’s labour. It seems that when we focus on Clare as a poet, we sometimes have to forget his life as a labourer. The two were awkward bedfellows for Clare too:

My fondness for study began to decline and on mixing more into company [of] young chaps of loose habits that began by force and growing into a custom it was continued by choice till [I] became wild and irregular and poetry was for a season thrown bye these habits were gotten when the fields were inclosed mixing among a motly set of labourers that always follow after the News of such employments I usd to work at setting down fencing and planting quick lines with partners whose whole study was continual cont[r]ivances to get beer...⁵²

This account does not sit at all well with Clare as proto-ecologist – or as a happy labourer of the fields – or as someone who could combine real work and writing poetry. Clare’s ‘untimeliness’ is the inconvenience Rigby names, and she is happy to name it but to ignore the jarring problems of Clare in an actual time and an actual place, of which his autobiography provides a version. Other than setting him up in play as a native eco-warrior fighting the anonymous forces of global capital,

⁵¹ See Bate, *Biography*, p. 50 and note, who cites E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 180-1, and Robert Waller, ‘Enclosures: The Ecological Significance of a Poem by John Clare’, *Mother Earth: The Journal of the Soil Association*, 13 (1964), 231-7. See also Edward Goldsmith, ‘Robert Waller’, <<http://www.edwardgoldsmith.org/914/robert-waller/>>, 15 November 2005 [accessed 30 July 2016].

⁵² *By Himself*, p. 90. A couple of these lines are quoted in Barrell, p. 212.

Rigby also ignores Clare's class: that's 'untimely' too, presumably. Clare's prose account is unashamed testament to the fact that he was himself an 'encloser': he was poor and the money for fencing and planting hedges was pretty good – good enough to buy drink at any rate. Enclosure here is condemned by Clare, but not for 'reshaping his world', or for 'loss or despoliation of... places of belonging', or for loss of 'traditional lands', nor for 'deplacialization', 'capitalist modernization' or the 'planned redesign of Northamptonshire', or 'industrialization' – all Rigby's terms. In this pass at enclosure – one of many – the only thing Clare worries about, while he recalls digging the fences and lines of hedges into the straightening circumstances of a landscape that he himself was helping to transform, is the social pressure from other labouring men to drink. Enclosure labour loosens morals – but this is a social impact of being with new male companions and of having a little money – neither of which can be classed as 'environmental' concerns. The effect of enclosure Clare worries about at this specific moment of recollection is determined by class, alcohol and the pressures of socialising masculinity: his concerns are local, social, and moral. Here he cannot be constructed as the ecological fantasy of a sin-free green messiah, but – by his own account – is instead a messy, complex, paradoxical, anxious, changeable and context-dependent person. This means that Clare can be one of those tools of enclosure in his labouring life, as much as he can give *in poetry* a voice to protest about the effects of enclosure: an enclosure in which he had a labouring hand; an enclosure which opened him up to new friends, experiences and social influences; an enclosure about which he would protest, once he had seen its effects on an entirely different scale, and from a different vantage point in his life. There is no ethical paradox here, if we consider class, money and context. Clare's concern is only about the 'wild and irregular' habits that working in an enclosure gang allows, for the adoption of which Clare blames his fellow itinerant male labourers (a pattern of blaming others for leading his behaviours astray that we can track across his autobiographical prose). The poet who is almost always characterised as someone who favours the 'wild and irregular' forms of unenclosed common lands and uncultivated meadows, heaths and woods, is here seen to decry human behaviour which he himself characterises as such. Enclosure prevents reading and writing because it is hard work, and because hard work leads to even harder drinking: the culture of enclosure work is – jarringly enough – 'wild and irregular'. In the process of enclosing his parish, which Clare has a literal hand in, the social dimensions of labour and poetry are at odds. This was not a fleeting job across a couple of days: John Barrell implies that Clare worked on the enclosure of Helpston, in his early twenties, for four years from 1813-17 (which

might be true, but as he worked in other places during that period, it could only have been for sporadic stints).⁵³

On a similar front, while Clare and many commentators mention his work at lime-kilns in the villages of Bridge Casterton, Pickworth and Ryhall in the late 1810s, they do not mention the main reason lime was in such demand at the time. In 1841 Clare was to write that ‘Bricklayers want lime as I want ryhme’.⁵⁴ But as the poet would surely have known, a huge demand for this multi-purpose material came from agriculture. As historians attest, the explosion of lime-kilns across England in the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, was informed by emerging understanding of the benefits of lime, and was driven by enclosure. For improvement of soils, lime was used liberally as a fertiliser, as a regulator of soil acidity and to improve drainage.⁵⁵ Clare’s work at lime-kilns coincided with his first efforts to make his writing public, the money enabling him to drag himself out of debt and save towards the printing of proposals for a collection of his verse. At a time when his family persistently faced penury, the money was crucial to his prospects as a writer, at least as far he interpreted his circumstances and prospects at the time. When Clare writes of his life as a lime-burner, he never mentions the use of lime for improving newly-enclosed land. He does mention, however, that the social stigma of yet another lowly job meant that Martha Turner’s family were sniffy about her association with him.⁵⁶

How might we account for Clare’s responses to his various emplaced situations, when they appear paradoxical or inconsistent? Michel de Certeau delineates two categories of responses to – or ‘ways of operating’ within⁵⁷ – orders of power, which he also situates in relation to orders of space: strategy is for the powerful; tactics are the recourse of the weak. Those who can be

⁵³ Barrell, pp. 212-13. Jonathan Bate mentions that Clare worked on enclosure, but the length of this period of work remains indefinite, the dating of events in Clare’s teen years being so difficult. Some dates are available: his work as a gardener in the nursery at Burghley Park from 1816-17, for example. See Bate, *Biography*, pp. 75, 80, 94, 106 and, for Burghley Park dates, p. 81.

⁵⁴ ‘Don Juan’, LPI, p. 95, l. 151.

⁵⁵ See H. W. Gardner and H. V. Garner, *The Use of Lime in British Agriculture* (London: Farmer & Stock-Breeder Publications Ltd., 1953), pp. 14-22; Michael Havinden, ‘Lime as a means of agricultural improvement: the Devon example’, in *Rural Change and Urban Growth 1500–1800*, ed. C. W. Chalklin and M. A. Havinden (London and New York: Longman, 1974), pp. 104-34; Richard Williams, *Limekilns and Limeburning* (Princes Risborough, Bucks.: Shire, 2004), pp. 3 and 7-8. My particular thanks go to John Goodridge and Robert Heyes here.

⁵⁶ See Bate, *Biography*, pp. 83-7. For Clare’s own accounts of the lime-kiln work and its social impact, see *By Himself*, pp. 21-22, 86, 92, 105 and 112.

⁵⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 30.

strategic, do so in their mobility across, and definitions of, space, and in their confident delineations of their 'proper' place; those who can only be tactical in the face of power do so in part because they struggle to find places of their own. De Certeau writes that 'strategies are able to produce, tabulate, and impose these spaces, when those operations take place, whereas tactics can only use, manipulate, and divert these spaces'.⁵⁸ Discussing a specific and localised case of 'a North African living in Paris', de Certeau describes what we might call a minoritarian position (following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari⁵⁹) that seems to me to describe the position of Clare in relation both to his place, and to literary culture:

He... creates for himself a space in which he can find *ways of using* the constraining order of the place of the language. Without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of *plurality* and creativity. By an art of being in between, he draws unexpected results from his situation.⁶⁰

De Certeau has organisations in mind at this stage, though his modelling is clearly meant to be descriptive of the individual too. If the powerful, mobile subject is able to delineate ownership of place, and demarcate spaces with the security of a long, strategic view, being confident in assertions over time and seeing 'far into the distance',⁶¹ the weak have recourse to tactics and tricks, trespassing and theft:

...a *tactic* is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power... It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantages of "opportunities" and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position, and plan raids... It must vigilantly

⁵⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 30.

⁵⁹ The minoritarian position and the definition of a 'minor literature' – which they develop through their analysis of Franz Kafka, first appears in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). Original French publication 1975.

⁶⁰ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 30. De Certeau's italicised emphases.

⁶¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 36.

make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprise in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse... Lacking its own place, lacking a view of the whole... a tactic is determined by the *absence of power* just as a strategy is organized by the postulation of power. [The tactical exhibits] an intellectual creativity as persistent as it is subtle, tireless, ready for every opportunity, scattered over the terrain of the dominant order and foreign to the rules laid down and imposed by a rationality founded on established rights and property.⁶²

John Goodridge and Kelsey Thornton's influential modelling of Clare as a 'trespasser' – as someone who enters the field of literature furtively, 'stealing' away from a working-day to do so, taking a leap over the wall into the gentrified estate of literature to read and to write⁶³ – makes relevant de Certeau's account of the tactical adaptability and creative fertility of the disenfranchised and the dispossessed. De Certeau also helps us understand Clare's awkward relationship to places the ownership and control of which he was not socio-economically placed to understand, let alone aspire to – and these include his cottage and all the environs of his village described in his verse. Clare's work at enclosure – and the sort-of-threat of after-work drinking (itself a kind of rebellion against social and hierarchised strictures of 'sober' responsibility) – is a tactic of the disempowered. There was no economic space for Clare to consider *not* doing the paid work of enclosing his village, or of lime-burning; choice is a product of socioeconomic power, and he had none. There was no front for resistance because poverty denied space for that activity, just as it denied him any say in the Westminster-driven national processes that were demarcating new territories and driving the need for lime. Clare's opportunity to make an intervention into the process of enclosure at this stage was as a labouring hand: his 'tactic' was to earn money from a new source. Poetic and polemic tactics Clare played with a long time afterwards, in both the prose above and – from an entirely different and distanced point of view – the 'enclosure elegies'. With both de Certeau and Clare's own account of his part in the enclosure process in mind, and with ambivalent impacts of

⁶² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, pp. 36, 37 and 38. De Certeau's emphases.

⁶³ John Goodridge and Kelsey Thornton, 'John Clare: the trespasser', in *John Clare in Context*, pp. 87-129. This essay has been substantially revised and published as a standalone book: John Goodridge and R. K. R. Thornton, *John Clare, The Trespasser* (Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 2016).

enclosure as Barrell finds it, these ‘enclosure elegies’ might be better characterised as the ‘enclosure polemics’. They are adopted stances, poetic performances, tactical displays of a rebellious stance, rather than ‘documentary’ evidence – though they are often taken as such – as if they were witness statements to the great crime of enclosure. Taking his own determined line through this set of issues, Robert Heyes questions the prevalent idea of these poems even being based on a specifically Helpston experience of enclosure:

Consider, for example, the group of poems which are usually referred to, somewhat pretentiously, as ‘Clare’s enclosure elegies’... These poems are always treated as Clare’s response to the enclosure of his home village of Helpston. However, by the time Clare was writing there was a long tradition of anti-enclosure verse, something Clare would have been well aware of from his extensive reading. Being someone who was always prepared to experiment with any verse form or genre which he came across, it is entirely possible that these are poems in this tradition, with local place names merely thrown in to give an appearance of verisimilitude. My point is that no one has ever shown that these poems are, in any meaningful sense, about the enclosure of Helpston; indeed no one has ever made the attempt. It is simply assumed that it must be so, and the argument proceeds on the basis of guesswork and wishful thinking.⁶⁴

Under Heyes’ interrogation, even enclosure poems appear shaky in terms of their grip on, commitment to – and even knowledge of – the particularities and histories of place. Heyes is right to question the ‘authenticity’ of the poems in relation to enclosure, if for no other reason than that they are poems, and so they will follow (or move away from but still be influenced by) literary traditions and pre-existing cultural forms. Clare’s anti-enclosure polemics offer a mode of *exhibiting* resistance to state power, through a local paradigm: this is not the same as saying that the enclosure poems offer secure documentary evidence of the ravages of the process. That Clare has other responses to this process of state power too – including exploiting it for hard cash – shows

⁶⁴ Robert Heyes, review of Simon J. White, *Romanticism and the Rural Community*, *Romanticism*, 21.3 (2015), 319-21 (321).

just how dynamic, even momentary, could be Clare's representation of and relationship to enclosure.

By way of an extension of the considerations of tactics of the powerless in relation to place, we turn now to two early and quite distinct poems as case studies. The first places its protagonists in a context of such helplessness, that even the opportunities of de Certeau's tactics seem unavailable; the second is about Clare's own house and is ostensibly about domestic, familial security. The first is a poem that denies any possibility of domestic security – and one in which work for pure survival in an exposed world is the only sense of 'environment' offered. In 'The Workhouse Orphan, A Tale' of 1821,⁶⁵ Clare has the story of Mary Lee delivered by '[o]ld shepherd robin' (l. 5) who, for the first twenty-five lines of the poem before he begins her story, seems as content in his exposed occupation – with his audience of enraptured children – as Wordsworth's 'Old Man Travelling' does. But just as in Wordsworth's poem, this seeming comfort lasts only until the poem allows him to speak, and then his tragedy unfolds.⁶⁶ If in Wordsworth's succinct poem there is a problem of understanding in that the speaker 'over-pastoralises' the old man before the latter speaks, in Clare's poem absolute trust is established between the speaker and his staged audience of children – because they have bonded through the levelling discourse of play. To the children, Robin the shepherd tells his tale yet again as he's told it '[t]imes out of number' (l. 38) like a benevolent Ancient Mariner, but with a far more willing audience, and in some ways, with a far more horrific story. The horrors of Robin's story have such grounded and local proximity to the context in which the children live as to be remote from the fantastical, the sensationalist or the gothic. What the shepherd unravels to his audience of children, is a tale of social horror: homelessness, rejection, displacement, isolation, alienation, betrayal, madness and death.

What Clare's concrete knowledge of workhouse life for children might have been is hard to discern, though the likelihood of his family ending up in one was present at times throughout his early years.⁶⁷ The threat of the workhouse was held up to a young poet by those villagers who sought to ridicule his habits:

⁶⁵ EPII, pp. 660-5.

⁶⁶ *Lyrical Ballads*, (Bristol: Longman, 1798), p. 189-90.

⁶⁷ Bate, *Biography*, pp. 81: 'When John was "discovered" as a poet late in 1818, the family owed two years' arrears and were going to have to leave the cottage the following year—Parker, Ann and grandmother Alice to the poor-house, John and Sophy into service.'

...I began to wean off from my companions and sholl about the woods and fields on Sundays alone conjectures filled the village about my future destinations on the stage of life, some fanc[y]ing it symtoms of lunacy and that my mothers prophecys woud be verified to her sorrow and that my reading of books (they woud jeeringly say) was for no other improvement then quallyfiing an idiot for a workhouse, for at this time my taste and pasion for reading began to be furious and I never sholld out on a Sabbath day but some scrap or other was pocketed for my amusment

Alongside madness, the workhouse is the stock threat dished out to the person who is not conforming, not following commitments to ostensibly industrious and utile labour, or the social conventions of the church-going Sabbath. The workhouse is a bogey man for the labouring poor. Clare offers an extended account of the 'shattered workhouse of the parish poor'⁶⁸ in the long satirical poem of village life, *The Parish*, which is much more materially thorough about the design of the workhouse itself than is presented in this poem – suggesting there was one in Helpston, or close by at least, that Clare knew well. And the poem known as 'The Lament of Swordy Well' sees the land reach out to anthropomorphise itself as an immiserated 'workhouse for the fields' – a weird reversal of analogy only prosopopoeia could offer.⁶⁹ As with the enclosure poems, to treat 'The Workhouse Orphan' as documentary evidence of historical fact – plain and simple – would be to ignore the sheer artistry on show here; this is not to deny Clare's artistic or historical integrity at all – just to remind this present reading that the text in hand is a narrative poem, a story told by a story-teller who himself might well be a fiction. Robin is certainly set up as a reliable narrator, however.

As a structural effort, the poem is finely wrought, staggering its delivery of narrative layers with a novelist's precision, and a dramatist's sense of building urgency. The proximity of Robin to his audience of children is secured by a scene of rich and dynamic summer play, followed by the setting for the tale of a 'moaning autumn in her oldest hours' (l. 21). Having 'sought a tree & sat us by his side' (l. 26), and thus settling the children to an attentive hush, Robin begins by asking them to think of their summer just gone, by way of a stepping stone of melancholia towards the tale to

⁶⁸ *The Parish*, EP11, pp. 698-779; workhouse section pp. 764-6; quotation is l. 1790.

⁶⁹ MPV, pp. 105-14 (p. 107, l. 79).

come. The tale has further bystander-style proximity in that Robin himself was born a bastard child, 'despised' (l. 56) by his mother and cast into charity care, alongside the central subject of the poem, Mary Lee:⁷⁰

'With Mary Lee the parish was my lot
'& its cold bounty all the friends I got
'Drag from our childhoods pleasures & its plays
'We pind in workhouse sorrows many days
'Were many wants recievd their scant supply
'Save what laws force tyrant overseers
'Whose bitter gifts was purchasd with our tears
'There ragd & starvd & workd beyond our powers
'We toild those hours you spend in gathering flowers
'Nor mothers smiles had we our toils to cheer
'But tyrants frowns & threatnings ever near
'Who beat enfeebl'd weakness many times (ll. 57-69)

In a few short lines the poem moves from the 'childish glee' (l. 7) of the shepherd playing with the children, through to its absolute denial in the life of the young shepherd and his orphan friend Mary Lee. The denial of anything akin to secure, loving or family life is repeatedly attested to; even other children despise these two because of their utter poverty. The 'place' of Robin and Mary Lee – the setting they occupy, the whole environment they know as children – has simple dimensions:

'Thus workhouse misery did we both abide
'Till our own strength its poverty supplyd
'& service freed us—freedom did we find
'In labour there to slavery left behind
'& Mary grew in spite of every harm (ll. 73-7)

⁷⁰ Two other poems – both of them love poems of desire with no mention of a workhouse or anything like it – feature the name of a loved addressee, 'Mary Lee': 'Mary Lee' of 1830 (MPIII, pp. 410-11) and an untitled lyric of 42 lines, first line 'If I was bonny Mary Lee' of 1834-5 (MPV, pp. 237-8).

They seem to work their way out of this workhouse world – but the style of the syntax in these lines does not cleanly liberate them from the inhabitations of ‘workhouse’, ‘poverty’, ‘service’ or ‘slavery’. Still, it appears that all of these places are temporarily ‘left behind’ – and the two make it into adulthood. Yet Mary Lee is rendered so naïve and unworldly by the crippling development afforded to her by the workhouse, that she is immediately deceived by the flattery of a ‘big young coxcomb farmer Follys son’ (l. 85). At this point the tale takes a familiar enough turn: pregnancy out of wedlock is lifted straight from folksong tradition, and was the core issue of the poem ‘Dolly’s Mistake’ that roused such censorious activity in Clare’s early patron, Lord Radstock.⁷¹ Sure enough, Mary Lee has a child, and while the father appears to nominally support the child initially, she is reconfirmed as an outcast:

‘Now pind & starvd despisd by all she knew
 ‘Too weak for toil yet wishing to pursue
 ‘Some means for life now linkd with tender tye
 ‘Which but for that had been a joy to dye
 ‘She made her matches & her burthen bore (ll. 121-5)

This work of match-making is not sufficient, so Mary Lee begs and seeks food in the fields, and is now doing so with her baby. The exposure of this young mother and her child to nature is absolute. The natural world is now her place, her ‘environment’ beyond the workhouse, but of course, given her abject socio-economic situation, there is no succour here. Clare constructs her destitution through Robin’s deft storytelling skills with a despairing companionship with birds:

‘She oft was seen to wander round the fields

⁷¹ In July 1820 Clare was infuriated that ‘false delicasy’ meant the poem was extracted, meaning ‘the gold is lickd off the gingerbread’ that was his first collection (*Letters*, pp. 83-4). See also the discussion of ‘Dolly’s Mistake’ and the popular song from which it derives, in Deacon, pp. 47 and 58. On Clare’s patrons, editors, and this song – along with others that similarly fell away from *Poems Descriptive* after the first edition – see Roger Sales, *John Clare: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 56-7; Chirico, *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader*, p. 9; *John Clare, Politics and Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 96-7; and Bate, *Biography*, pp. 164-5.

'& sought the berrys which the autumn yields
 'Feeding with birds that twitterd by her side
 'Content to spare her what the proud denyd
 'Thus oft half famishd she from town sojournd (ll. 133-7)

No tactics are available to her, other than the pathetic trespassing theft of foraging. The death of her child a few lines later, which Robin himself is a witness to, sends her into a delusional state, and she makes a 'cradle' for her child out of grass (l. 158). With nameless others, Robin takes her back to 'misfortunes den' (l. 163) – the workhouse – but by now 'she could not live' (l. 165) and she dies. The tale then makes its final bitter mark – and secures for Mary Lee a home at last, sardonically, in the harsh particularities Robin provides, of her position in the ground:

'In the cold grave from every ill she slept
 'Nor felt the distance which distinction kept
 'North side the church no choice will occupy
 'Force finds the workhouse tenants room to lye
 'Where cold winds frown & sunbeams never come
 'There mary rested in a better home
 'A lone cold corner by the charnell pent
 'Where nettles spread her only monument (ll. 171-8)

'Down to earth' now, Mary Lee is exposed yet again by the stifling social 'distinction' that the church constructs in its apportioning of burial space, the quality and position of her final 'home' being based on her wealth and status. Clare makes it clear: there is no tactical 'choice' for people like Mary Lee, and the same 'force' which drives her to the workhouse as a child, has driven her to the 'lone cold corner' of the churchyard. Interestingly, in the 43-line section on the workhouse in *The Parish*, Clare writes that the building 'was not contrived for want to live but dye / A forced concern to satisfy the law'⁷². Here the 'force' that constructs the place, is never aimed as providing home or safe place for the poor at all: it is a legal necessity only – built by order of the state, and

⁷² *The Parish*, EP11, p. 765, ll. 1797-8.

with no social love, as far as Clare's hard-hitting satire sees it at any rate. And similarly in 'The Workhouse Orphan', there is no 'home' in the churchyard for Mary Lee – alive or dead. Nature bears a miserable face too, for the body of this woman. This is a poem of 'environmental protest', because it is all about Mary Lee's constantly inhospitable environment. The qualities of her attachment to nature are exposure, isolation, destitution and death. Mary Lee's class position cuts out any form of sentiment for 'nature', or any hope of 'connectivity' or broody decadent simmerings of 'dark ecology'.⁷³ This is one of Clare's most controlled and important poems of social fury, and one of many that has been anthologised but critically ignored. It was not published in Clare's lifetime.

The next poem for consideration has been more widely studied and is a poem about cottage security, and offers a domesticated, homely 'sense of place' Mary Lee could never know.⁷⁴ The sonnet 'To My Cottage' appeared in 1821 in *The Village Minstrel*, Clare's second collection. Here is that published version:

Thou lowly cot, where first my breath I drew,
 Past joys endear thee, childhood's past delight;
 Where each young summer's pictur'd on my view;
 And, dearer still, the happy winter-night,
 When the storm pelted down with all his might,
 And roar'd and bellow'd in the chimney-top,
 And patter'd vehement 'gainst the window-light,
 And on the threshold fell the quick eaves-drop.
 How blest I've listen'd on my corner stool,
 Heard the storm rage, and hugg'd my happy spot,
 While the fond parent wound her whirring spool,

⁷³ This is Timothy Morton's term, developed in part out of his reading of Clare's 'I Am' – and pretty much only this poem – in 'John Clare's Dark Ecology', *Studies in Romanticism*, 47.2 (2008), 179-93; this is developed further in his *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), especially pp. 197-205. For a sustained critique, see Emma Mason, 'Ecology with religion: kinship in John Clare', in *New Essays on John Clare*, pp. 97-117.

⁷⁴ In Clare's first two collections we might also consider 'Helpstone' (PD), 'Helpstone Green' and 'Home' (VM) as poems about village and cottage comforts, though of course the home is present in many other poems too.

And spar'd a sigh for the poor wanderer's lot.
 In thee, sweet hut, this happiness was prov'd
 And these endear and make thee doubly lov'd.⁷⁵

The oldest meaning of the word 'cot' is 'a small house, a little cottage; now chiefly poetical, and connoting smallness and humbleness, rather than the meanness and rudeness expressed by hut', according to the *OED*. 'Hut' is present in the poem in the penultimate line. The poeticisation of 'cot' is signalled in the translatory title, in the sense that 'cottage' is the dominant term that does not need explanation. It is in the Romantic period that 'cot' begins its shift to the current meaning of a small bed for a child (the *OED*'s earliest instance occurring in 1813). This meaning is implied in this poem too, because this is Clare's cottage imagined as it was when he was born. The cottage is a cradling place of enclosed, familial protection – replete with the cosiness of a baby's bedding. It is the epicentre of safety as the child first experienced it. In recollection, the 'cot' was at its best when the season brought awful, noisy weather – Clare's understanding being perfectly consistent with Gaston Bachelard's passionate valuation of this same experience:

...faced with the bestial hostility of the storm and the hurricane, the house's virtues of protection and resistance are transposed into human virtues. The house acquires the physical and moral energy of a human body... Such a house as this invites mankind to heroism of cosmic proportions. It is an instrument with which to confront the cosmos.⁷⁶

While the influence of this building on Clare's mind as a child, and as a poet, should not be underestimated, this is a home yet, as Valerie Pedlar notes, the word 'home' does not appear in this poem at all.⁷⁷ That naked absence is indicative of how this internal place is configured in the recollected child's mind – a child's mind which is itself recollecting its earliest times in the cottage. Is the poem really that sure of 'home'?

⁷⁵ *VM*, 2, p. 152. For a manuscript-based transcription, see *EP*II, p. 28.

⁷⁶ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (London: Penguin Books, 2014), p. 67. First published in French, 1958.

⁷⁷ Valerie Pedlar, 'John Clare's Recollections of Home: the Poetics of Nostalgia', *JCSJ*, 33 (2014), 5-19 (11).

Though not featuring a traditional sonnet 'volta', the moment of counterpoint in this sonnet – a place where it *ever-so-slightly* turns – is subtle: the working 'fond parent' takes the sonnet externally in its considerations when this adult mind 'spar'd a sigh for the poor wanderer's lot'. The relatively secure, domesticated working woman considers someone who might be outside – a 'poor wanderer'. Notably, she is not called 'mother' here but given the neutralising title 'parent'. A poem dedicated to a wombic place of security, moves beyond it, in female consideration of a rootless, possibly homeless, nomadic 'wanderer'. This is much more than tokenistic. This adult act of thought for the 'wanderer' is an affection at the learned core of Clare's childish understanding of what a family home is: it is a place that offers love and protection, yet it is also always communitarian in opening itself up to the displaced, the transitory, the exposed. The parental definition of how the child's environment is to be conceptualised, is foundationally significant. As theorist of space and place Yi-Fu Tuan puts it, the 'first environment an infant explores is his parent... necessary not only for the child's biological survival, but also for developing his sense of an objective world.'⁷⁸ The place as defined by the sensations of the child is understood through the cottage's protective material qualities, but for all its ostensible defensiveness in relation to a wild outside world, it is not closed off from it. This place is social and open sympathetically to a wandering, mobile world, as defined by the parent.

It is crucial too that the world of hand-producing work is present here, inside what we might call the 'domestic sphere' – though it would be reductive to label it so. As John Goodridge has noted, Clare repeatedly appreciates 'a vital root of his art in the rhythms and patterns of women's domestic and agrarian work'.⁷⁹ And so here too, the cottage is a 'sphere' of familial domesticity and domestic work, but it is also one that houses a woman's cash work – labour for money. This is a place threatened by the 'vehement' energies of wild weather – so much so that 'mother' and 'home' are left to be implications rather than statements of determined facts. Valuation of the cot is established upon a persistently sensory and parentally ethical awareness of what it would be like to be without it: home is not assumed and it is not owned, so is not named. The woman is never 'only' a 'mother' – she is a cash worker too, centred on her spinning rather than the child – and so she is called 'parent'. The working day might be long over in the outside world of barn and field, but

⁷⁸ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), p. 22.

⁷⁹ John Goodridge, *John Clare and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 169.

in the home, for the woman, it persists. This is reminiscent of a distinction in a later Northborough-period sonnet, the first five lines of which read:

Tis late the labouring men come dropping in
 The old cat licks herself before the fire
 The work is done the maid sits down to spin
 & the old cart horse free from muck & mire
 Stand in the stall & eats his whisp of hay⁸⁰

Here, in this untitled 16-line sonnet, the speaker does not seem at all sensitive to the fact that while the men, the cat and the horses can relax, clean up and eat of an evening, ‘the maid sits down to spin’ immediately ‘work is done’ – meaning of course that for her, the work is not done at all. The evening retreat to the cottage marks just a shift in the nature of labour, not in its end, for the women in this short poem. This is a community shifting gear, coming inside, at the end of a labouring day; but for women, the home is just another stage for a different mode of work. In ‘To My Cottage’, the speaker’s sense of place is coherent, yet somewhat hesitant, because it is framed by thoughts of unliveable weather, exposed wandering and the house as a site of adult work. It is precisely this ethics of place, created in and by the cottage home, that leads to Clare’s conceiving of poems like ‘The Workhouse Orphan’. Place is never straightforward in Clare, and primarily because of issues of class.

Genius loci: tracking Clare

As we have seen, class and place can be ignored if the ‘green’ agenda of ecocritics is forceful, or if material histories are conflated too keenly with specifically contemporary concerns. Similarly, when a modern form of ‘green’ anger drives a reading of Clare and the tracking of his places, the conflation of his poetic tracings of environmental concern in (or out of) a specific historical situation, are de-historicised and deployed to enhance and articulate versions of modernity’s own environmental situation. As co-ordinating palimpsests of maps old and new might offer the same locations, and named places and place names in Clare’s poems might be ticked off a

⁸⁰ Transcribed from Pet. A61, p. 50. See also MPV, p. 271, ll. 1-5.

list or marked with a grid reference, but much of the places' historical environmental distinctions can be lost and conflated. This conflation of time that the self-same process of locating poetic places seems to allow and inspire, can lead to awkward results, if predetermined by the polemics that brought the reader to value Clare in the first place. Commonly now, if historical attempts are made by a touristic green criticism seeking the spirit of Clare's place, the result is often a feeling of loss, perhaps because the landscape is so different to what it is understood to have been in Clare's day, or because – as Jameson says above – in our postmodern situation, the 'spatialization of the temporal', always inscribes a 'sense of loss'. In some critics, it is I think assumed that the vivid evidence of loss – of time passing, landscapes shifting, and of our distance from Clare's environments – is felt to be the *same affect* as Clare's own critically reiterated sense of displacement and alienation. The next inevitable step it seems, to 'immerse' critically in Clare's place once that loss is felt, is to avoid the pylon-stalked horizon, and to focus on the tiny, to get low-down and eye-level with flowers and grass, and to muffle the noise disruptions of cars and trains, by diving into the midst of some of the remnants of copses and heaths that remain 'in place' as they might have been (maps tell us) in Clare's time. The sentimental adoption of Clare's posture of hiding (a frequent tactic he uses to avoid the nose-pokey surveillance of the village⁸¹) is touristically to duck out of and to avoid the wider environmental facts of his locality now. The localised in miniature becomes Clare's ever-narrowing world. That Clare microcosm becomes – if we forego logic and pace and scale and history – a model for the blue planet. And for Rigby, beyond the blue planet, to a red one. Why not?

History is unmapped and displaced, *pace* Rigby, in the focus on the placing of Clare's place, on the 'foot-stepping' of the biographical critical inquiry: through the tracing of his poetic pathways on the clean lines of tarmac and concrete of modernity, because the tracks, inhabitations and tactics of the rural poverty Clare charts are ugly, temporary and always undergoing a process of erasure. When in self-regarding panic about the fate of the globe, green criticism seeks out commonalities with the Clarean past, through a cod-Romantic sense of spiritual eternities in a named place. In so doing green criticism wilfully avoids the histories of environment altogether, and the intrusion of contradictory accounts – relativism, slippery meanings, fictions, historical facts and figures, paradoxical behaviours and the temporary tactics of the poor. In its keen weaving of an a-

⁸¹ See Ronald Blythe, 'Clare in Hiding', *Talking About John Clare* (Nottingham: Trent Books, 1999), pp. 39-47.

temporal green thread, ecocriticism sometimes conflates places past with places present, to secure the rigging for its contemporary moral agendas. It is the position of this book that ecocritical work (or any other theory-driven approach) on Clare does not have to be ahistorical.⁸² Equally, the historicising critical work that attempts to place Clare in a site and a socio-economic situation does not have to be anti-theoretical or anti-ecological. There might also be ways into reading Clare as a presence in our contemporary situation without entirely evacuating our sense of his place, and without diluting or over-simplifying his conflicting histories, or ignoring our own historical prejudices. Clare can be our contemporary without foregoing so much of his past, as we will explore in the final chapter.

Tracking Clare's various moves of place, and following uncritically his own Romanticisation of his located identity, the general story of Clare runs as follows: so elevated and acute were his senses, so attentive was he to the meaning of his material location, so accurate were his documentations of place, and so dependent was his subjectivity and understanding on familiar locations – that to take the poet out of the place, is to mean the poet is no more. Stabilised and grounded by the poetic tripod of 'nature, feeling, and fidelity' – such approaches value first and foremost poems such as the early 'Helpstone', which as James C. McKusick writes in his influential book, works in 'establishing a frame of reference for the subsequent poems in the collection and bearing witness to the priority that he accorded to his sense of rootedness in the local environment'.⁸³ At the other end of this slice across Clare's 'rootedness', sits 'The Flitting', a poem written in response to his move from Helpston to Northborough in 1832,⁸⁴ which seems to offer autobiographical access to a defining moment of crisis in his 'personal journey' – and is either a poem 'of alienation in the immediate aftermath of the move' as Jonathan Bate⁸⁵ describes it, or else a response to the experience of the exchange of 'one experience of nonbelonging and homelessness for another' as Sara Guyer has written recently; Clare, Guyer writes, had 'an

⁸² Helen Feder makes a similar point in her fine essay, 'Ecocriticism, New Historicism, and Romantic Apostrophe', in Steven Rossendale (ed.), *The Greening of Literary Scholarship: Literature, Theory, and the Environment* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), pp. 42-58.

⁸³ James C. McKusick, *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 79.

⁸⁴ For an summary of the ways in which critics tend to see the move to Northborough as a catastrophe of displacement, see Simon J. White, 'John Clare's Sonnets and the Northborough Fens', *JCSJ*, 28 (2009), 55-70 (55-57). White suggests any changes were more to do with altered topography rather than the mere fact of leaving Helpston.

⁸⁵ Bate, *Biography*, p. 389.

excessive attachment to place that reveals a scene of minor, unremarkable movements as the occasion of profound displacement'.⁸⁶ Shalon Noble reads 'The Flitting' as a destructive move: '[a]fter the move to Northborough, Clare's poetry takes a markedly dark turn.'⁸⁷ There is no certain evidence for this, beyond the odd lyrical poem if treated as autobiography, and a life-story that unravelled some five years *after* his move to Northborough. But Noble is following a well-worn track. In his elegiac poem of 1967, James Reeves thought Clare an extreme case proving that 'Man is born homeless'.⁸⁸ Following Edward Storey's biographical line, Cecil Scrimgeour sees a self-defeating paradox of passions in Clare:

On one side of himself he wanted to assert himself socially and raise himself to the esteem granted to a master-poet; on the other side his devotion to his native Helpston country scene was a haunting passion and to be separated from it was to undergo a kind of death.⁸⁹

More recently, Theresa M. Kelley finds irony in his attachment to place, noting 'a paradoxical logic of Clare's poetic adhesiveness to place' – a place that enclosure meant was owned by others, so that his recourse to resolutely local and common language becomes an assertion of intent from an impossibly defeated social and environmental position.⁹⁰

But in general, the story about the impossibility of Clare's situation supports both those critics who read Clare as a poet of place, like Barrell and McKusick, and those like Guyer and Noble, who read him as a poet who was always 'homeless'. This is a problematic term, surely, with regards to the *actually* homeless people Clare knew and valued so much (gypsies especially – though of course the conception of home for them was antithetical to its normative constitution in fixity, or in ownership, or residence), and to the homes that he made and worked on, with his large family. To call Clare 'homeless' is to ignore the what the word means – is to use it metaphorically – and,

⁸⁶ Sara Guyer, *Reading With John Clare: Biopoetics, Sovereignty, Romanticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), pp. 98 and 98-9.

⁸⁷ Shalon Noble, "'Homeless at Home": John Clare's Uncommon Ecology', *Romanticism*, 21.2 (July 2015), 171-81 (173).

⁸⁸ James Reeves, 'The Savage Moon: A Meditation on John Clare', *Selected Poems* (London: Allison and Busby, 1967), pp. 31-8 (p. 36).

⁸⁹ Cecil Scrimgeour, 'John Clare and the Price of Experience', *JCSJ*, 2 (1983), 28-39 (32).

⁹⁰ Theresa M. Kelley, *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 128.

dangerously, to ignore class. Being ‘homeless at home’ – a key *poetic* phrase for recent Clare criticism – is not the same as being simply ‘homeless’. Even at the end of ‘Recolections &c of journey from Essex’ when the phrase appears most pointedly and bleakly, Clare writes:

so here I am homeless at home & half gratified to feel that I can be happy any where⁹¹

The second half of this sentence is hardly ever regarded because for contemporary critical stories, it is necessary for Clare to be only alienated, and even ‘half’ gratification at his being ‘happy any where’ is too complex. Critics don’t allow for Clare’s own determination to be gratified, to work against his own alienation, if that is what his written account of experience persistently attests to. A completely alienated poetic subject offers easier and more dramatisable critical pickings – but overall this becomes a slipshod and damaging story, delimiting Clare and placing him artificially, with only partial commitment to the subtle and complex evidence Clare himself offers. Given its context, in the concluding lines of the famous prose account of Clare’s escape from the Epping Forest asylum, ‘happy’ cannot convince us of course, and is not meant to, but similarly its intended presence cannot be denied and should not be ignored. Do we just ignore the word ‘happy’ and the struggle to attain it in that excruciating attempt to see the cup half full – in that hesitant ‘half gratified’? By way of conclusion to his most epic, daring and purposefully intentioned and homeward-bound of adventures, Clare states that he could be ‘happy any where’. This is a remarkable conclusion for someone at the end of a line he drew and followed, for someone so drawn to home, and for someone so determined to follow a clear path North.

Could Clare have been *happy any where*? In a reduced life story where poetry operates as documentary evidence, the *genius loci* with no locus, can be no genius poet at all. As commentators have often pointed out, the etymological relationship between ‘spirit’ and ‘genius’ is close indeed; in Latin ‘genius’ could – on its own without ‘locus’ – indicate the ‘spirit of a place’. The word ‘genius’ is bandied about so much by writers in the Romantic period, that Clare’s particular access to it, seems always to be inflected with one of its root original Latin significations – that is ‘spirit of a place’ – the indefinite article begging us to specify precisely what place it is that has inspired – in-

⁹¹ *Living Year, 1841*, p. 154.

spirited – the ‘genius’ poet in question. For Clare however, if it was to secure permanence, literary genius simply had to lift up, up and away, way beyond place.

Clare through Byron: lift-off

Clare’s particularly rooted variety of poetic genius as criticism would generally have it, has a clear and shaping class dimension. The specific turn of the word ‘genius’ in Clare’s case – its determinedly, geographically and socially stratified ‘placed’ meaning – also serves to curtail what Clare’s work could ever amount to. The manner in which Clare’s sense of a ‘spirit of a place’ worked in support of early presentations of his work, is testable by considering in tandem, how Byron’s ‘genius’ was never constructed as that of a particular or singular place – but was instead rare in its trans-continental pan-European superhuman supremacy; and in its enriching multiplicity of places. The poet of metropolitan and international mobility – whose name and fame were made by the poetic presentation of a rootless subjectivity in exile – in the guise of Childe Harold initially – garners a claim to a supra-European genius which has little to do with a settled place at all. It is the sheer array of places in Byron – his assumption of the socio-economic confidence to exhibit mastery of places both classically old and recently battered by the Napoleonic wars, combined with his mastering of places way beyond the reach of most travellers and those recent spheres of conflict (therefore new both to him and to much of his audience) – that first generated a widely appreciated and excitedly testified sense that this was a poetic genius without precedent or equal. Clare’s 1832 poem on masculine literary power ‘Genius’, turns to Byron’s posthumous position in a pantheon that only seems to include him and Walter Scott – the same two poets of whom Hazlitt thought ‘[i]n their poetry, in their prose, in their politics, and in their tempers, no two men can be more unlike.’⁹² Not so for Clare. His poem was prompted by the death of Scott in September of 1832,⁹³ yet it is Byron who soars ‘like an eagle’.⁹⁴ On sending the poem to someone whose publishing help he wished to secure, Clare said that he was ‘like a packhorse tied to the gate of an

⁹² William Hazlitt, ‘Lord Byron’ in *The Spirit of the Age: or Contemporary Portraits*, 2nd edn (London: Henry Colburn, 1825), pp. 149-68 (p. 149).

⁹³ This transcription that this quotation is from MPV, though it is also available in *Letters*. Clare first sent the poem to the sculptor Henry Behnes in November 1832, who did not like it at all. Clare’s aim was to rouse Behnes’ interest in his building subscriptions for a putative collection, and to help him find a publisher for his work. 10 November 1832, *Letters*, pp. 596-600 (p. 599n1).

⁹⁴ MPV, p. 9, l. 21.

hedge alehouse on a winters day with nothing before him about him or above but hard fare & bad weather⁹⁵ – tied to a place, alone, hedged, enslaved, exposed. Given the immiserated place Clare wrote from, it is remarkable that he could turn to thoughts of condors:

He dared the world a war to wage
 He scorned the critics mock
 & soared the mightiest of the age
 The condor of the rock

Screamed from the dizzy appenines
 As startled by his flight
 When Manfred sought the searing shrines
 Of demons in his might

Fear left him to the thunder shock
 No fellow shared his throne
 The smaller birds in coveys flock
 The eagle soars alone

He died as glory wills to die
 A martyr to its name
 A youth in manhoods majesty
 A patriarch in fame

While Scott from historys visions won
 A heritage sublime
 Rising a jiant in the sun
 Too over grown for time...

⁹⁵ To Henry Behnes (later known as Burlowe), 10 November 1832, *Letters*, pp. 596-600 (pp. 599-600).

But genius soars above the dead
 Too mighty for his power
 & deserts where his journey led
 Beholds it still in flower

A poesy spell for times unborn
 & when those times are gone
 The worth of a remoter dawn
 Shall find his name as one

For poesy is verse or prose
 Nor bound to fashions thrall
 No matter where true genius grows
 Tis beautiful in all...

Its voice grows thunders voice with age
 Till time turns back & looks
 Its breath embalms the flimsy page
 & gives a soul to books...

The grave its mortal dust may keep
 Where tombs & ashes lie
 Death only may times harvest reap
 For genius cannot die⁹⁶

From the start of these extracts from 'Genius', Byron is granted a global reach – challenging the whole 'world' and praised by Clare for his bravery from the outset of his career in his *English Bards*. The condor is of course not a bird native to the United Kingdom, nor to Europe, but to the mountainous regions of the North and South Americas, regions of great wonder and excitement in

⁹⁶ MPV, pp. 9-12, ll. 29-48, 57-68, 77-80, 85-8.

terms of natural history discoveries in the Romantic period. But the condor is not a bird chosen arbitrarily for its geographical exoticism by Clare: by his time, these birds of prey were celebrated for their ability to survive all manner of violence, for the weight and size of the quarry on which they could successfully prey, for the seemingly effortless nature of their flight, for their massive size and wingspan,⁹⁷ and for the unparalleled heights to which they flew.⁹⁸ Supreme in its flight, its hunting, its size, and lifting higher than any bird in the world (it was then thought), this animal of continents Clare would never know in person, captures the poetic daring and abilities of Byron: for Clare Byron could lift above and beyond any ordinary human place, and the realms he occupied were with unknowable gods (his Byronic heroes even more so, of course, but these figurations are all part and parcel of the elevation for Clare). Byron was an untouchable poet, a graceful predator, at the zenith of the literary food chain.

Returning to Europe in his poem, Clare places the hardest rock-dwelling bird in mountainous regions Byron certainly did know and travel through – but the Apennines in Italy are not the home of either the condor nor of the thoroughly Alpine aristocratic protagonist of *Manfred*. It is possible that Clare is wilfully conflating Byron with his play's protagonist (as readers overwhelmed by Byronmania were wont to do), yet the stanza reads like this was a mistake – and one not spotted by his various helpmeets during the production of *The Rural Muse* of 1835, in which an edited version of this poem was published.⁹⁹ Continuing the conflation of Byron with Manfred, the next stanza reiterates the poet's bravery and the concomitant lofty isolation. Clare buys into the heroic modelling of Byron as a 'martyr' and as regally masculine (two elements of Byronmania Duncan Wu has been at great pains to 'correct'¹⁰⁰), and further solidifies the supreme

⁹⁷ Oliver Goldsmith writes 'if size and strength, combined with rapidity of flight and rapacity, deserve pre-eminence, no bird can be put in competition with it.' *A History of the Earth and Animated Nature*, 6 vols (London: Wingrave and Collingwood, et al, 1816), 4, pp. 77-81. Goldsmith cites tales about the condor's legendary ability to survive all manner of violence at the hands of man, and to pick up sheep, cattle and even children when hunting.

⁹⁸ In Clare's time, the Andean Condor was thought as remarkable for being one of the world's largest birds, but also the highest-flying bird, recorded at an estimated 20,000 feet. 'Of all living beings, it is without doubt the one that can rise at will to the greatest distance from the earth's surface' wrote the influential naturalist of South America, Alexander von Humboldt, 'On the Lofty Flight of the Condor', *Edinburgh New Philosophical Journal* (January-April 1830), 142-3 (143).

⁹⁹ *The Rural Muse* (London: Whittaker & Co., 1835), pp. 94-8 (p. 95).

¹⁰⁰ See Duncan Wu's chapters 'Byron was a great lover of women' and 'Byron was a "noble warrior" who died fighting for Greek freedom' in *30 Great Myths About the Romantics* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 140-8 and 156-64. If these are myths, they were foundational for Clare's appreciation of Byron, as was

maleness with a rare use of the word ‘patriarch’. Turning to Scott, Clare celebrates the novelist’s ‘history’ and ‘heritage’ – and he deploys a similarly masculine ‘sun’ metaphor common in Clare’s accounts of literary fame.

In Clare’s ‘Lord Byron’, a poem published in the *Stamford Champion* in 1830, the poet is a ‘splendid sun’, his ‘genius... a portion of eternity’.¹⁰¹ Here in ‘Genius’ Scott is a sun too massive and permanent for ‘time’ to control. It is as if, through writing ‘over grown’ (long, sprawling, unclipped, unedited, ‘natural’?) historical fiction, Scott himself has had an impact on culture so great that history could not cope with it, or weather it, or forget it, without plunging into darkness. The next stanza (beginning ‘But genius soars above the dead’) makes the point the poem closes with: that ‘genius’ is immortal, fertile and life-giving where other, presumably lesser, forms of art, and other artists, whither and bleach in old age.

Now Clare looks to the future – to ‘times unborn’ – which fold into yet more historical periods where ‘his name’ is to be maintained inviolate. Clare reveals that for him ‘poesy is verse or prose’ – meaning to include Scott’s fiction alongside his and Byron’s poetry; and that this inclusive trans-genre brilliance is not dictated to by ‘fashions thrall’ – another way of pointing to the cultural specificity of the high Romantic moment of the two authors. Their original genius means they are in effect removed from historical relativism, just as they do not require a specific location (‘No matter where...’) to flourish for all time. Their triumph is in total displacement, and in effacement of the usual material foundations (time, place) of assessments of their influence.

In the next stanza quoted above, the titans of genius and time effectively fight; all that time can do is preserve the corpse of ‘the flimsy page’ and so lend the books into which the individual leaves are bound an eternal ‘soul’ (this having a rare appearance in Clare’s conception of time and literature). The poem’s final move asserts a triumphant end across three successive lines carrying ‘grave’, ‘tombs’ and ‘death’. At its last, this poem is a ‘public’ memorial in the sense that it is about the public afterlife of two of the most famous male literary figures of an era swiftly retreating into the distant past by the time Clare is writing. This is also a public poem in its grandiloquent diction,

the other ‘myth’ Wu scorns, that ‘Byron was a champion of democracy’ (pp. 149-55). Wu has no patience with the idea that myths (if that’s what these aspects of Byron are) can be as historically significant as facts; or that, sometimes, in literary history facts might not matter much at all in the appreciation and celebration of a poet and the work.

¹⁰¹ MPIV, pp. 158-9, ll. 1, 13-14. Here the Oxford editors note that ‘Lord Byron’ was published in the *Stamford Champion*, 16 March 1830, and in *The Rural Muse* (1835), p. 120.

and in the arch concepts of time, history and Clare's stylistically brittle assertions about a solid and certain futurity for the enduring genius of the two writers.

Crucially, for our purposes in this chapter, Clare denies the significance of place in securing a future for the fame of these writers; he also denies the significance of the huge fame, sales and money both Scott and Byron (and their publishers) enjoyed. Clare builds the writers as eternal verities, beyond market, situation, historical or historicising evaluation: their quality is true and will be so for all time. Literary freedom – or real cultural power – requires an eternalising process of displacement. These two writers seem to need no 'place' to help to secure that fame or their genius for them; the implication is that 'place' would be a hindrance, a dead weight, that could only stultify these soaring posthumous careers.

How might we interpret Clare's pointed denial of place and situatedness as a constituent in the posthumous success and influence of 'poesy', when he himself is supposedly so committed to a singular locale, and so ruined when he was removed from it? It might be that, to use de Certeau's model, Scott and Byron's access to supreme cultural power affords their work dynamic movement through space – and mobile claims on many places as they cross that timeless, rootless space – rather than the disempowerment of situatedness in one, alienating place that cannot be controlled by Clare.

To compare the multiply-displaced Byron with the singularly-envillaged Clare is of course to reach across a broad socio-economic gulf, as well as a vast gap of geographical, mapped reach. Maybe we should not be so surprised. Clare's response to Byron was part of a wider class-crossing trend, a characteristic of the Lord's influence that Clare was aware of when he witnessed Byron's funeral cortège in London,¹⁰² but which is also reflected in the scholarship on his labouring-class peers. Summarising Byron's presence in the work of a host of poor poets he is introducing, Scott McEathron writes:

Byron's role in this literary milieu may at first glance seem bewildering, given his contemptuous references to Lofft and the Bloomfields in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. Yet, perhaps partly because of his avowed hostility, he served several of these figures as a force to grapple with, to imitate, and sometimes to impersonate. Further, the

¹⁰² *By Himself*, pp. 156-8.

aggressive self-indulgence of his verse, especially *Don Juan* but including *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, seems to have suggested a new avenue of artistic empowerment, and his influence is clear (and often announced) in the vein of wit, satire, and iconoclasm that runs through the present collection.¹⁰³

There is no doubt that by 1841, Byron was a channel of 'artistic empowerment' for Clare. But before even the publication of Clare's first book, Byron was a significant presence in the poet's rapidly expanding literary horizons. Clare thoroughly enjoyed *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* early on in his reading of Byron in 1819 – indicatively asking Gilchrist for a loan of more Byron at the same time as sending back Wordsworth after one reading.¹⁰⁴ While his subsequent and increasing fascination with the aristocrat seems not to have been maintained specifically by an envious attraction to Byron's restless urges (never mind his material freedoms) to travel, Clare's response was nevertheless informed by Byron's easy, bold and promiscuous facility to go beyond the strictures, conventions and expectations of a known, singular place. Long before Gilchrist loaned him books, Clare had copied out the journal of a sailor who had been at sea with a Byron who 'was known among the Sailors as a Traveller and not a poet'.¹⁰⁵ Though this was not to be the only person Clare met who had known Byron, this early second-hand proximity was to be a defining encounter because Byron was conveyed to Clare as a 'Traveller and not a poet'.¹⁰⁶

As Stephen Cheeke has illustrated, Byron's fame, and much of his poetic originality, is informed by a rare commitment to being in, and writing out of, particular named places – places that are historically significant, culturally crucial, or unknowably mysterious – but all of them real and locatable. For the touring Byron fan, the explicit verse situations meant they could be visited, meant that textuality could be crunched into a gravelly materiality reassuringly by the traveller's

¹⁰³ 'Introduction', in Scott McEathron (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets*, vol. I: 1800-1830 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006), p. xix.

¹⁰⁴ In his first couple of letters to Octavius Gilchrist in late 1819 and early 1820, Clare asks for Byron 'that Vol which has the smaller poems' and then asks to keep hold of a particular volume 'a little longer wishing to read "Child Harold" a Second Time' (*Letters*, pp. 23 and 24).

¹⁰⁵ *By Himself*, p. 65.

¹⁰⁶ For example, John Hamilton Reynolds was Clare's favourite of the *London Magazine* scene and he seems to have got to know him well. Reynolds had received praise from Byron in rich correspondence, and then had dined with the Lord and received advice from him on how to cope with reviewers. See Leonidas M. Jones, *The Life of John Hamilton Reynolds* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1984), pp. 49-50. For Clare's account of Reynolds and his association with Byron, see *By Himself*, pp. 140-1.

foot, the placed poetry ticked off against confirmations of the first-hand enriching experience of travel. Cheeke surmises:

...Byron wrote about historical places, about specific 'spots', as if they were sites in which direct connection with the buried subjectivity of the lived experiences associated with those places was somehow (supernaturally) possible... Byron's own subjectivity, which has occupied so much critical attention, is perhaps most available to us through place, or most open to our knowledge in those historical locales into which it is written...¹⁰⁷

Cheeke's account revalues Byron's own 'sense of place' against a Romanticism that has more often, and more traditionally, favoured inspiriting value in Wordsworthian constructs of named, sacrosanct and memorialised places, who might seem, like Clare, to be the model of a poet of a specific set of named, mapped places.

A distinction between Byron's 'sense of place', and that of someone like Clare, might emerge in that for the former, the commitment is to a set of locales of historical significance – or of a poetic significance in a mythos invented, reborn or revoiced – which is tantamount to a self-willed narrative to explore: an intellectual, researched story of recent or distant history, to be resituated, once visited, in a subjective poetic journey all of Byron's own making, but one that is self-consciously paraded within a classically-verified tradition. Byron's 'sense of place' is multiple, and highly resourced, in the sense that it flits, from place to place, and is driven and informed by recent and long-standing histories of European culture at its broadest reaches and beyond. Byron travelled, and his travel was enabled (and ennobled) by having money, social position, reading history, and having servants. The multiple nodes that Cheeke and all Byron scholars have to follow on Byron's journeys from place to place, construct an idea of place that is informed by the importance of 'being there', but which also draws in textuality – myths, literature and histories – as a way of understanding, enlivening, and expressing, place. Cumulatively, Byron's mobility amounts to a dynamic mapping of spaces, and an extension of ownership in the declarative poeticising act. This is *nothing like* Clare's 'sense of place' if we mean his lived experience of Helpston and its

¹⁰⁷ Stephen Cheeke, *Byron and Place: History, Translation, Nostalgia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 13.

surrounds, and his accounts of its evolution as a lived and managed landscape – not to mention his sense of being an interloper. This would explain why Clare displaces – or de-places – Scott and Byron as he attempts to represent their fame, which for him, will be eternal. In 1851, a special correspondent for *The Morning Chronicle* who visited the Northampton Asylum and met Clare, reported that ‘the bitterest complaint which he made to me was of the injustice done to him by the public in not recognizing him, instead of Scott and Byron, as the author of *Marmion* and of *Don Juan*...’.¹⁰⁸ The two were still melded together, but by now Clare was piqued at his fame having not yet taken flight in their wake.

Clare’s is a knowingly literary presentation of his place. Committing to and reworking traditions of various kinds, he draws on all manner of texts to make sense of, and sometimes to destabilise, the places he finds himself in. But of course the sheer quotidian, diurnal, iterative pre-writing depth of worked and familial familiarity with his places, requires no texts to orientate, no maps to guide, no guidebooks to inform and warn, and no textual histories to access the stories and mythos of the place before it is arrived at in person. Byron might well have valued ‘being in a place’ in order to write about it, but the reason that was such a determined and artistic act, was that outside of forms of text, the place was otherwise alien and unknown. The choice to go to such places, comes from a position of strategical power to choose; an artful and excited enactment of desire to build an empire of poetic territory. The ‘sense of place’ then, is a deliberative act of commitment.

In contrast, Clare’s ‘sense of place’ was constructed by few if any choices as such. Conscious and artful he may well have been about his topic when he wrote about a place and its significance to his identity and knowledge – nevertheless there is a sense in which the placing of Clare *in this place* is an accident of birth and restrictions, the social over-determination of which, no other poet among the major Romantic writers could possibly attune to. Other than the itinerancy necessary in the hunt for work, wage-labourers stayed where they were: the ‘peasant’ label was rooted deep, concreted over by a stagnant social and economic system which prevented and discouraged mobility of any kind, beyond the bounds of a tight circumscription. Travel, pedestrian leisure, the freedom to walk in working hours, bred suspicion, and not just in the heightened tension of the

¹⁰⁸ Anonymous, ‘Labour and the Poor’, *The Morning Chronicle*, 16 January 1851, pp. 5-6 (p. 6).

Napoleonic wars – during which every walking stranger was a potential French spy.¹⁰⁹ The awkwardness of Clare’s landless occupancy of his place, is sourced in an awareness that others in the poetic world exhibit some choice about the spaces they move through (if not always the opportunities to take up their desires). They can make of a singular place a plural set of spaces through the displacement of travel: Byron in a bespoke coach across Europe, Wordsworth the intrepid walker on foot, Keats and his various literary pilgrimages. Even a cursory consideration of the choice to pursue spaces in the movements of other writers of Clare’s time throws a cold light on the sheer restrictions of Clare’s own ‘emplacement’, and the tactics to which he could only have recourse in recompense. The fact that a village twenty-four miles away from Helpston took Clare beyond a comfort zone of known territory, does not mean that he wanted to stay at home forever, no matter how discombobulating that first journey might have been. For example, he writes that ‘Wisbeach was a foreign land to me for I had never been above 8 miles from my home in my life and I could not fancy England much larger than the part I knew’.¹¹⁰ This is an account of the changing territories of his youth – each journey taking him beyond the ‘edge of the orison’,¹¹¹ maturing him, changing him, as his world expanded. His sense of discombobulation when visiting other places does not equate with a *wilful* delimitation of his knowledge and experiences to the one village: any constriction on his experience was the result of class-based scope for travelling.

To an extent, Clare is ‘settled’ in a place by the social sediment on top of him: grounded into rootedness by the lack of free movement around and above him; a poet of the earth (down to earth, singing the song of the earth, earthy); a mole who was not socially or economically permitted to fly as the eagle nor, indeed, as the condor. Clare is a poet of place, because society deemed that to be the only possible positive outcome of his economic and geographical situation. We can – and critically we must – make a positive out of this restriction on Clare and the tactics he used to write beyond his situation: but alienating restriction it most certainly could be.

Clare could not move to London and probably did not want to, but he did wish London was closer to him. In a letter to his London publisher James Hessey, in which he is excited about Charles

¹⁰⁹ See *By Himself*, pp. 11 and 93, for example.

¹¹⁰ *By Himself*, p. 70.

¹¹¹ *By Himself*, p. 40.

Lamb's 'Elia' essays of 1823,¹¹² he is also waiting on an artist to make a fresh engraving of his cottage as a frontispiece for publication in a repackaging of *The Village Minstrel*. Clare is therefore anxious about the appearance of the cottage – about the political and cultural dimensions of its representation:

the trees have been [bound?] up like maypoles latly & my hut stands beneath them like a grotto or moss house or the rem[ains] of a London [?whim] a cockney cottage Artis considers the effect spoilt & declines giving an outline saying the old one is better then aught that can be taken now so let it pass & I expect to see the second Edit: out directly for I imagine New title pages & a wood engraving will not take long doing—my anxiety increases with the delay¹¹³

This passage betrays concern that a 'cockney cottage' would be a beflowered, stylised, effete, baroque representation of his home; that such seeming luxury would stymie reception of the poems in the book, and that such associations would steer readers to think badly of him by association with the excesses and politics of that cockney scene. Or it implies that Clare is revelling in the idea that his cottage had become an outpost of cockney culture. Actually, the passage could be attesting to both: throughout the 1820s, Clare revelled in his cockney sociability, in his *London Magazine* friends and in his real friendships with his Taylor and Hessey stablemates, but this passage shows just how acute a sense of his own ruralised position in relation to that culture he held. It might be that, no matter how much he enjoyed his cockney friends on the *London*, as Richard Cronin writes, Clare was deployed 'as an antidote to its own Cockneyism';¹¹⁴ his awareness of this role places pressure on ensuring the pose of suburban, festive pastoral is not apparent in an engraving of his home at an atypical moment of the year. Clare's place was on the fringes of the cockney adventure – and that was a frustrating and precarious place to be. If claiming a place in cockney sociability was an uneasy stretch, by contrast social life in Helpston could be drudgery. A year earlier Clare had written to John Taylor of his despair at the poor sales of *The Village Minstrel*

¹¹² For critical accounts of the relationship between Lamb and Clare, see Scott McEathron, 'John Clare and Charles Lamb: Friends in the Past', *Charles Lamb Bulletin*, 95 (July 1996), 98-109, and Simon Kövesi, 'John Clare, Charles Lamb and the London Magazine', *Charles Lamb Bulletin*, 135 (July 2006), 82-93.

¹¹³ To James Hessey, 7 January 1823, *Letters*, pp. 255-57 (p. 256).

¹¹⁴ Richard Cronin, 'John Clare and the *London Magazine*', in *New Essays on John Clare*, pp. 209-27 (p. 211).

and at his own inability to be inspired to write, and the movement of place he wants to see in response is a remarkable fantasy:

I wish I livd nearer you at least I wish London w[ould] creep within 20 miles of helpstone []
 I dont wish helpstone to shift its station I live here among the ignorant like a lost man in
 fact like one whom the rest seems careless of having anything to do with—they hardly dare
 talk in my company for fear I shoud mention them in my writings & I find more pleasure in
 wandering the fields then in musing among my silent neighbours who are insensible to
 every thing but toiling & talking of it & that to no purpose¹¹⁵

As this passage reveals, Clare’s responses to his own places – home, village, region, community, class – are never straightforward, and his concerns about them are never only sympathetic or sentimental.

Emplacement and alienation: the cottage and the barn

The accepted story of Clare’s located sensibility is used way beyond the ascetic confines of literary criticism. It has attracted UK government-run ‘lottery’ heritage funding to turn that most holy of holies in the route map of any poet’s tour – the home in which he was born and raised – into a multi-million pound museum and visitor centre.¹¹⁶ British gamblers’ losings¹¹⁷ have been converted into the winnings of a peasant poet’s mini-palace: a pristine venue far larger, and far more empty of noise, dirt, odour and work, than the thin slice of that original building Clare and his

¹¹⁵ To John Taylor, 8 February 1822, *Letters*, pp. 229-30 (p. 230).

¹¹⁶ In 2007, the John Clare Trust – set up to purchase the cottage in Helpston – was awarded £1.27m by the UK government’s Heritage Lottery Fund. This was supplemented in 2013 by a £500,000 ‘matched funding’ endowment grant. See <<http://www.hlf.org.uk/our-projects/john-clares-cottage-opening-door-countryside>> and <<http://www.clarecottage.org/pages/catalyst>> respectively [accessed 13 November 2016].

¹¹⁷ The 2010 report of the UK government’s gambling commission revealed that the UK National Lottery Draw was by far the most popular form of gambling in the country. It is popularly thought that this is another form of tax on the poor (some sorts of gambling – football pools, bingo, betting shops – seeming to be more central to working-class culture), yet the 2010 report reveals that the lottery is fairly equally popular across all household income brackets and social classes. Helen Wardle et al, *British Gambling Prevalence Survey 2010* (London: Gambling Commission, 2010), <<http://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/PDF/British%20Gambling%20Prevalence%20Survey%202010.pdf>> especially ‘Profile of Gamblers’, pp. 37-51. Profits from the government-sanctioned lottery support the Heritage Lottery Fund, which is overseen by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.

family rented. National funding implies that the poet is now a landmark of a nation-story of English poetry: Clare has been re-housed by the state, under the auspices of a project initiated by Clare scholar Paul Chirico and driven by his father-in-law, the veteran Labour Member of Parliament and former Chair of the Education Select Committee,¹¹⁸ Barry Sheerman. As Sheerman himself ambitiously put it, the cottage “‘is both a place where you can worship John Clare, but also it’s a national centre of learning outside the classroom’”.¹¹⁹ This is to be a place of worshipful, respectful, pilgrimage, and a grand centre for poetically- (and politically-) driven ‘education’, for the ‘nation’. For these reasons and more, the cottage was greeted with suspicion by some Clare enthusiasts, but then that would surely be the kind of reception any big-capital project developing a sensitive area of specialised cultural interest would expect. Yet for all the early doubt, the development is a magnificent testament to Clare’s status in the twenty-first century as a major feature of folk and rural histories, of the Romantic period, of early nature writing, of a working-class literary tradition increasingly writ large, and now, as far as anyone can tell, permanently so. As Linda Young wittily puts it, ‘[t]oday’s literary critics and historians squirm a little to find themselves being moved by the experience of a writer’s house museum, but in the end, they won’t deny it.’¹²⁰

The cottage has been home to and stimulant of an array of artistic, historical, educational and community-based endeavours, and while the security of its finances might depend on the vagaries of political and economic weather, its future at the time of writing, appears secure. It marks Clare out as a literary hero, worthy of territory, worthy of a literary pilgrimage, in a country and a culture in which ‘house museums’ proliferate and are dominated by a preponderance of literary heroes’ homes.¹²¹ The Clare cottage is a grand demonstration of how the particularity of stories of a place can work well to generate and confirm a fascination with the locality of a writer – as of course could be said for many of the period’s far more popular writers: such as Dove Cottage and Rydal Mount for the Wordsworths; Jane Austen’s House Museum in Chawton, Hampshire; the Keats House Museum in Hampstead and the Keats-Shelley Memorial House in Rome; and Newstead

¹¹⁸ Barry Sheerman MP was Chairman of the Education Select Committee from 2007-10.

¹¹⁹ Rebecca Cooney, ‘Barry Sheerman: his story’, *FE Week* (10 March 2014), <<http://feweek.co.uk/2014/03/10/barry-sheerman-his-story/>> [accessed 1 September 2016].

¹²⁰ Linda Young, ‘Literature, Museums, and National Identity; or, Why are there So Many Writers’ House Museums in Britain?’, *Museum History Journal*, 8.2 (July 2015), 229-46 (242).

¹²¹ Linda Young estimates ‘a ratio of nearly 60% of writers to little more than 40% of all other vocations among UK heroes’ house museums’ in her article, *op. cit.*, 233.

Abbey (partly) for Byron. All of these places are founded on the idea that an understanding of the one-time home of a writer is a significant and meaningful part of the process of grasping a set of texts, and that author's legacy. Gaston Bachelard would have it that anyone's first house 'has engraved within us the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting. We are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house'.¹²² This myth of situation suggests that if you know the house, you will better know the former inhabitant, and this is the primary attraction of a place like the Clare cottage. The cottage is unquestionably a primary point of access to Clare – habitable, welcoming, informative, open and interactive. Kate Soper writes that it 'has been suggested that heritage is to "cultural" preservation what environmentalism is to the preservation of "nature"',¹²³ and certainly the Clare cottage tries to bring both together under the same newly-thatched roof.

To see an aspect of Clare's material 'legacy' go through that same process of domesticizing memorialisation, of museumification, and to see 'his world' and work attract such vast riches from the government and politicians and their rich philanthropic associates, has been breath-taking and unsettling in equal measure. To see Clare artefacts under glass, to see the artificial renderings of a peasant's kitchen, with its models of apple slices, berries and pastry in mid-preparation on a sturdy wooden table, or the stipples of soot-marks above a fake fire-place, or the broad-brimmed hat pinned to the back of a chair as if Clare had just stepped out – and to listen to the readings and instructions on the high-tech audio devices – can altogether seem rather curatorially packaged, managed, authorised – we might even say state-sanctioned, given the source of much of the funding. A 'Clare experience' is channelled through brick, mortar and double-glazed refurbishments to the cause of a regional story (a story which, in the cottage-framed telling, evidently aspires to be of national purport).

Sit on the bench in the neatly parcelled garden, key the location number into the phone-like device, and the loco-specific recorded actorly voice instructs you to 'be inspired'. The place, as it is now, is technologically set up to work a narrative of locally-specific effects: the sense of each place within the cottage and even around the village, authorised and explained by the voices on the visitor's big black handset. And the latent dissonance of the cottage rests in its relationship to place. Clare and his family never owned even their narrow rented slice of the cottage building, as detailed

¹²² Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (London: Penguin Books, 2014), p. 36. First published in French, 1958.

¹²³ Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 199.

in information the cottage itself offers. The trust owns the entire building, has extended it, owns the neighbouring dovecote, and territory beyond anything Clare could have understood as being 'his home'. The trust has even bought the Exeter Arms pub.¹²⁴ The business entities¹²⁵ that own the buildings necessarily have an empowered and controlling relation to the space of the cottage that is distinct and, in some ways, sits in opposition to that of Clare and his family. While the cottage does offer stories of Clare's dire poverty, the gulf between Clare's 'home' and this building as it is now of course cannot be foregrounded too much by the materials in the cottage itself, without distracting self-harm.

Use of a handset is optional. To sit on what was *possibly* Clare's own bedroom window sill, in silence, and look across the street at the barn that he *possibly* worked in with his father, is an offering unique to the building, to the cottage project, and to the access to places and viewpoints only it can afford the visitor. In this house, kids can even dress up as a peasant, and play with a mock child-sized threshing flail. Like all writers' house museums, the cottage has to offer a *possibility* that we might locate and experience Clare's 'sense of place' here, might live momentarily through his sense of Heideggerian dwelling, metaphorically walk in his muddy peasants' boots, and locate the truth that only an art experience can offer – 'the silent call of the earth'.¹²⁶ Clare finds locales and makes the nondescript, described – and we tourists are to re-find them in his home – time-travel through being in a place, all labelled neatly and bound up in a contemporary Clare story. There is a more serious political claim on this image too. For Marxist playwright Edward Bond,

¹²⁴ Tom Peck, 'Rhyme and reason for the MP who bought country pub in the village of the Peasant Poet', *The Independent* (7 April 2012), <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/rhyme-and-reason-for-the-mp-who-bought-country-pub-in-the-village-of-the-peasant-poet-7624919.html>> [accessed 1 September 2016].

¹²⁵ Sheerman is listed as Director of two separate entities relating to the cottage: John Clare (Helpston) Limited and the John Clare Trust. <<http://companycheck.co.uk/director/904343900>> [accessed 1 September 2016]. The net worth of the latter is £1.5m.

¹²⁶ Famously Martin Heidegger roots his sense of the truth that only art can evoke, in Van Gogh's painting of a muddy peasant's boots. See 'The Origin of the Work of Art' in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 1-56. Reaching his climax, Heidegger writes: 'The shoes vibrate with the silent call of the earth, its silent gift of the ripening grain, its unexplained self-refusal in the certainty of bread, wordless joy at having once more understood want, trembling before the impending birth, and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the earth and finds protection in the *world* of the peasant woman.' (p. 14). For the best account of Heidegger and Clare, see Emma Mason, 'Ecology with religion: kinship in John Clare', in *New Essays on John Clare*, pp. 97-117.

writer of the celebrated play about the poet, *The Fool*, Clare ‘talked about economic reality and wrote that you have mud on your boots if you cross a field.’¹²⁷

Did he work there, in that old barn opposite? Given the proximity, it seems logical enough that both Clare and his father Parker threshed with flails in the barn across from their front door, but other than an accident of ‘place’ there is no evidence as such. Clare never mentions the building explicitly (it is now a part of what is called Woodgate Farm), or the Wright family who likely owned it at the time.¹²⁸ An early attempt to present Clare to the world, penned by the eager Edward Drury for John Taylor to use as the introduction for Clare’s first edition (Taylor drew on it, but went his own way), describes Clare as ‘an untaught, unassisted, poverty struck laboring man, who is the son of a thresher’.¹²⁹ Threshing together was a defining moment for Clare’s father too. Clare recalls a moment of his father’s pride as follows:

surely it is a thrilling pleasure, to hear a crippled father seated in his easy arm chair comparing the past with the present, saying ‘Boy who could have thought, when we was threshing together some years back, thou wouldst be thus noticed and be enabled to make us all thus happy.’¹³⁰

Although he might more accurately be described as a gardener, threshing first defined Clare in terms of labour, and in terms of his relationship with his father. While he might be sentimental, here the father is not proud of the threshing itself: rather it is the family’s nadir from which Clare’s poetry establishes signs of distance. The social status of the thresher was low indeed. The denigrating local term ‘whopstraw’ – which *The Village Minstrel’s* own glossary defines as ‘a

¹²⁷ David Tuillon (ed.), *Edward Bond: the Playwright Speaks* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p. 31.

¹²⁸ Local historian of Helpston Peter Wordsworth, who has made a private but as-yet-unpublished study of the documentation attesting to property, ownership and enclosure in Helpston throughout the nineteenth century, is convinced that during Clare’s time, what is now called Woodgate farm (one of whose buildings is the threshing barn opposite the cottage) yet is often referred to as Savidge farm, would in fact have been owned by the Wright family, the male head of which was one William Wright. The Savidge family only took ownership in the 1880s. My sincere thanks to Peter Wordsworth for sharing this information with me. Clare does mention ‘Hellen Wright’, a ‘cruel maid’ who is the addressee of the late love ‘Song’ (first line, ‘O Hellen Wright, O Hellen Wright’, LPII, p. 892) but there is no evidence that she is any relation to the family of Helpston.

¹²⁹ Mark Storey, ‘Edward Drury’s “Memoir” of Clare’, *JCSJ*, 11 (1992), 14-16 (16).

¹³⁰ *By Himself*, p. 5.

contemptuous appellation for countrymen’ – literally means thresher. As a term of abuse in the angry mouth of a military man, Clare makes its purpose and effect stark:

The bumptious serjeant struts before his men,
 And “clear the road, young whopstraws!” will he say;
 And looks as big as if king George himsen,
 And wields his sword around to make a way...¹³¹

There was no getting away from the status of threshing, or its perennial presence in the young Clare’s family life. A threshing barn sat directly opposite Parker Clare’s crippled thresher’s body even as, from his chair, he glowed with pride about his son’s poetic achievements. As Clare wrote in the 1830s with the by-then characteristically muted social fury, for the thresher ‘[h]ard labour is the all his life enjoyed / His idlest leisure is to be employed’.¹³²

The resonance of the particular place of the cottage, and the voyeuristic sense of cosy restitution it offers for the Clare pilgrim-tourist of the visual link between bedroom window and high-lintelled barn – between place of rest and place of work – both buildings listed¹³³ and so ‘protected’ from the supposed ravages of modernity – is made even more awkward and entirely discomfited by Clare’s own prose account of what threshing in a barn meant to him:

In cases of extreeme poverty my father took me to labour with him and made me a light flail for threshing, learing me betimes the hardship which adam and Eve inflicted on their childern by their inexperienced misdeeds, incurring the perpetual curse from god of labouring for a livelihood, which the teeming earth is said to have produced of itself before, but use is second nature, at least it learns us patience I resignd myself willingly to the hardest toils and tho one of the weakest was stubborn[n] and stomachful and never flinched

¹³¹ ‘The Village Minstrel’, *VM*, I, stanza LXVII, p. 36, ll. 1-4.

¹³² ‘With hand in waistcoat thrust the thresher goes’, *MPV*, pp. 276-7.

¹³³ The official entry for this building on the UK’s ‘Statutory List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest’ reads: ‘Probably early C18. Small coursed stone rubble barn with steeply pitched slate roof with coped gable ends. Facing road a central doorway with chamfered lintel and plank door. Date “1832” inscribed above door. Barn doors facing garden at rear. Square ventilation holes in north end and loft door in south end.’ See *British Listed Buildings Online*, <<http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/en-50109-barn-immediately-south-west-of-no-17-spri#.VbgJuPIViko>> [accessed 29 November 2016].

from the roughest labour... I believe I was not older then 10 when my father took me to seek the scanty rewards of industry Winter was generally my season of imprisonment in the dusty barn¹³⁴

This account changes somewhat in the hands of the early biographers. Frederick Martin has it that 'John was sent to the farmer's to thrash before he was twelve years old, his father making him a small flail suited to his weak arms'. J. L. Cherry, probably following Martin uncritically, says Clare was 'set to assist his father in the threshing barn', while the Tibbles say that to pay for his Glinton schooling he 'helped his father at threshing, with a small flail his father made for the purpose'.¹³⁵ The view of the barn from the cottage bedroom window can only be experienced in that specific place. What being in that place might mean, is constructed entirely by the subject-position (the reading, attitude, knowledge, prejudice, mood) of the sitter, just as the reading of all poetry and history, is similarly so determined. But it is that location alone that offers the *possibility* of re-enactment of a simple view, from one old building to another.

It is an emplaced view that changes *entirely* the moment Clare's text intrudes – because what he is talking about is his first taste of child labour. He claims bravery and a stern and honourable commitment to hard work, yet in reaching first for the original biblical punishment to explain where this suffering came from, in suggesting resignation, and then installing the sheer shock of recollection stylised through the negating, delicate staging of 'I believe I was not older then 10' towards the close of this account of early labour – Clare artfully builds towards a shocked revulsion in his own dramatised recollection, at what he and all labourers have to endure, and will always have to endure. This is punishment from above – and is therefore inexplicable and ineluctable: a permanent God-given state of affairs. The 'sense of place' is despoiled only in the realisation that any 'sense' derived in experiencing the proximity of bedroom window to barn door is an ahistorical romanticisation. Clare's text has to spoil our touristic experience the 'place' of the cottage has to offer – and sour our child's play at being a mini-thresher-cum-peasant – because while the barn represents a complex of historical meanings in relation to Clare's one-time home,

¹³⁴ *By Himself*, pp. 3-4.

¹³⁵ Frederick Martin, *The Life of John Clare* (London and Cambridge: Macmillan, 1865), p. 9; J. L. Cherry, *The Life and Remains of John Clare* (London: F. Warne, 1873), p. 6; J. W. Tibble and Anne Tibble, *John Clare: A Life* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1932; revised edn., London: Michael Joseph, 1972), p. 11. See also Bate, *Biography*, p. 22-3.

the meaning of threshing for our poet overall is stunned alienation – and a child’s confusion – over the need to labour, the urgency of social and familial pressure for a child to do physical work. Time in the barn threshing – in any other barn in Helpston if not that precise one – is ‘imprisonment’. The threshing barn opposite with its massive iron threshold amounts to a solid threat: the threat of repetitive work, the threat of flailing pain, the threat of arduous boredom. The barn is a place of intense and prolonged suffering. Its place diagonally opposite Clare’s window is now as bleak as the closing lines to ‘November’ in *The Shepherd’s Calendar*. When all other labouring has stopped, threshing carries on, and on:

At length the noise of busy toil is still
 & industry awhile her care forgoes
 When winter comes in earnest to fulfil
 Her yearly task at bleak novembers close
 & stops the plough & hides the field in snows
 When frost locks up the streams in chill delay
 & mellows on the hedge the purple sloes
 For little birds – then toil hath time for play
 & nought but threshers flails awake the dreary day¹³⁶

The barn building is now protected by government order, and so what Clare classed as his first prison is preserved, in a face-off of preservation with the cottage-cum-museum.

Immediately following the recollection of his father’s pride in Clare having moved so far away from threshing, quoted above, Clare writes:

About this time, which my fathers bursts of feeling aludes too, I began to wean off from my
 companions and sholl about the woods and fields on Sundays alone conjectures filld the

¹³⁶ Tim Chilcott (ed.), *Shepherd’s Calendar*, pp. 180 and 181, ll. 172-81 (MS transcription). Interestingly, in the instance of this particular stanza, alterations between the published 1827 version – apart from the first line – are relatively light.

village about my future destinations on the stage of life, some fanc[y]ing it symptoms of lunacy...¹³⁷

Is this the description of a traumatised child? The experience of threshing with his father is given a direct and causal relationship by Clare in this prose autobiography to his early solitary musings. The trauma of threshing forms the conditions for the beginnings of an intellectual consciousness that cleaves Clare from his community, and casts him as an outsider. He writes that ‘at this time my passion for reading began to be furious and I never shold out on a Sabbath day but some scrap or other was pocketed for my amusement’.¹³⁸ Could it be that his ‘furious’ commitment to reading is somehow a refracted response to the miseries of threshing, and the humiliation of working with his father?

Modernity was disparaging the barn even as Clare first picked up his bespoke child’s-sized flail in his tenth year. Regarded by modernizers as tremendously hard and inefficient work, threshing was one of the areas under great pressure of the invention of a variety of mechanised replacements for precisely the kind of flail-work in which Clare’s labouring life painfully commenced. As staples of the British farm and its building complex, the thresher and his threshing barn were to be made redundant as John Sinclair, the President of the Board of Agriculture, put it in 1813:

Grain in the straw, keeps infinitely better in the open air, than in close barns; it is less apt to be destroyed by vermin, and saves the enormous expence of constructing and repairing great barns. Threshing-mills, when generally introduced, will soon prove the absurdity of erecting such unnecessary buildings.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ *By Himself*, p. 5.

¹³⁸ *By Himself*, p. 5.

¹³⁹ John Sinclair, *An Account of the Systems of Husbandry Adopted in the More Improved Districts of Scotland*, 2nd edn., 2 vols (Edinburgh: James Ballantyne, 1813), 2, p. 17. For an extended discussion of the problems of barn flail-threshing, and the improvements offered by threshing mills, see for example, R. W. Dickson, *Practical Agriculture; or a Complete System of Modern Husbandry*, 2 vols (London: Richard Phillips, 1807), 2, pp. 294-301; and Anon., *The Complete Farmer; or General Dictionary of Agriculture and Husbandry*, 5th edn., 2 vols (London: R Baldwin, *et al*, 1807), 2: see entries for ‘Thresher’, ‘Threshing’ and ‘Threshing Machine’ (alphabetised entries; no pagination).

For Romantic-period agricultural improvers the barn is itself redolent of old-fashioned methods and farming cultures: it is on its way out. It is a building of nostalgia, even in Clare's time, and the job he first steps into is already becoming redundant, as water-, horse- and steam-powered machinery became ever more available and popular. That threshing machines were a particular focus of the violent ire of the Captain Swing riots of 1830 and 1831 was an indication that the barn-free village remained a distant dream for the mechanisers and modernizers.¹⁴⁰

The barn is also a cornerstone in the map of Clare's alienated situation in relation to capital and culture, and his account is witness to the start of the battle for him between the place of his labour-intensive village life, and the reach beyond his place, of literature, which returns us directly to Cronin's model of Clare's binary estrangement, discussed above. This dialectic in Clare's understanding of experience of his place, productive of so much created textual life, and of a profound alienation, which in turn generated more poetry through a compensatory attachment to the natural world, is outlined in an account nowhere bettered than as follows, by Merryn and Raymond Williams:

This is the complication: a class consciousness which is most sharply experienced as an alienated individual consciousness; the knowledge of a spectrum of deprivation which, as he directly experiences it, really does run from the more readily acknowledged and recorded facts of low wages and high prices, the humiliation of hirings, to the more painful and sometimes more immediate recognition of limited knowledge, limited interests, limited tolerance of other possible ways.

This complex is then interpreted, in an intensely personal way, as a double deprivation: at once poverty and a cultural block. It is also, in its outcome, a specific alienation: an alienation which he sought to overcome in the literary market, which then in turn alienated him... He attached himself to what was still, through all the changes, present: the specific and diverse physical world of his own place – the trees, the birds, the flowers, the weather: the midsummer cushion which he could make in his own way.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ An comprehensive account by E. J. Hobsbawm and George Rudé of possible reasons behind the peculiar focus of the Swing rioters on the breaking of threshing machines, appears as Appendix IV, 'The Problem of the Threshing Machines', *Captain Swing* (Old Woking: Lawrence and Wishart, 1969), pp. 359-64.

¹⁴¹ Merryn and Raymond Williams (eds.), *John Clare: Selected Poetry and Prose* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), p. 16.

Clare's places: cul-de-sacs, car parks and songbooks

In Clare's contemporary story, beyond the Cottage and the neighbouring buildings – such as the barn, the Blue Bell pub, St Botolph's Church and the Buttercross – are plaques, memorials, statues and headstones, and then the John Clare Primary School, the John Clare Theatre in Peterborough, even a John Clare Ale at one time: the list of John Clare's situations, placings, namings, within and beyond Helpston is getting longer as his reputation grows, and as the desire to use his name to do something for a new place, or mark an old place, increases. There is even a blue plaque on a building in Epping Forest, courtesy of Waltham Abbey Town Council, that reads 'JOHN CLARE THE FAMOUS POET LIVED HERE IN LIPPITS HILL LODGE 1837-1841'. There is no mention of the fact that this was one of the buildings that housed Matthew Allen's asylum (this is the building behind the hedge, on the front cover of this book). It's not that kind of place, now: it might have once been a lunatic asylum, but it is sane now, the insanity hidden from view, the asylum's history hidden by the plaque. Literary fame though – that is allowed to characterise the place. What 'sense of place' does the name of 'THE FAMOUS POET' give this place? What does it offer any place?

<FIGURE 1.1 HERE>

CAPTION:

Figure: Clare Green Car Park, Queensgate Shopping Centre, Peterborough, formerly known as John Clare Car Park.

There are buildings and streets far beyond Helpston, beyond Clare's walked horizons, which seem to use his poetic expression of rootedness to lay claim to be a special node on his uncommon mapping of common places. Some places claim his name for sites the poet could not have witnessed: the impressively brutalist concrete John Clare Car Park in Peterborough for example,¹⁴² while new housing estates include a John Clare Close in Oakham, another John Clare Close in Brackley, a Clare Road in Wellingborough, while there is Clare Street in Northampton, and a John

¹⁴² Having been called the John Clare Car Park since 1982, the multi-storey facility of the Queensgate shopping centre in central Peterborough was renamed in 2011 with only one zone of it now retaining a trace of the poet in the name the 'Green Clare Car Park'. The word 'Clare' was retained only after public outcry that 'Green' should erase his name altogether. I was told all of this by a local resident, to whom I offer sincere thanks.

Clare Court in Kettering. Located in this way, Clare is the poet of cul-de-sac real estate, in English English – *the close* – a usage which derives directly from the act of ‘enclosing’ a place previously unmanaged and uninhabited. Perfectly nice new streets are given a marker of the permanently extraordinary by a poet’s nominal dedication to them. By no means is it only Clare’s name that is deployed in this way. It is a testament to his status in the English canon that across from Clare Road in Wellingborough is Shelley Road which links to Scott Road, which in turn is connected to roads called Ruskin, Pope, Burns, Shakespeare, Byron, Keats, Tennyson, Chaucer, Swinburne and even Cowper.

Before we sneer at the arbitrary meaninglessness of the adoption of these grand, old and exclusively male names, I should say that my own first *ever* conversation about William Blake – and possibly my first insight into Romantic poetry in any shape or form – was with my uncle Ron, a postman who lived in Blake Close, part of a poetically-named council estate at the foot of Shooter’s Hill, in Welling in south-east London. My discussion with my uncle Ron of the name of his close, led us into a discussion of Blake’s poetry, the wider Romantics and Georgian London. No matter how superficial and canonically hegemonic the mechanisms which generate the process, the naming of an inhabited place generates and proliferates meanings for inhabitants, if they choose to care. As a postman, street names fascinated Ron.

Repeatedly then, a poet’s name is placed in inoffensive celebration, as a hollow form of statist commemoration, concretising a British male tradition at least in the case of the Wellingborough estate (and in Welling too, for that matter). In order to be applied at all the name has to be well-known enough to be mobile, footloose, deracinated. Modern building style means that places like this are enclosed, tarmacked, flattened, clipped, housed, suburbanised – and demarcated as civilisation against the wide expanse of troubling green. Clare’s sense of place is made into a town-planner’s branding tool – giving to a new place that could be anywhere, and to new houses the developer hopes will all the more quickly become homes, an immediate sense of being somewhere identifiable with located, rooted meaning.

Clare’s ‘sense of place’ might seem to have become a nonsense of no place; a senseless guarantor of placedness which actually offers nothing of the sort, other than to make both name and place blandly arbitrary in their nominal collocation. Most paradoxically of all, Clare’s name legitimises and renders sacrosanct the determinedly human habitation of a suburbia retrieved from the rural and the natural: the street, the close, the enclosed. A poet so famous for protesting about

the damage of enclosure – the action of demarcating then converting common land into private ownership – becomes the legitimiser of ‘the close’.

If I read Clare Road in Wellingborough and similar such demarcations as inscribing Clare as the rootless poet of loss – loss of place, loss of natural landscape, loss of locatable meaning – then oddly enough, I am arguing that the anonymous gods called ‘town planners’ get it right more often than Clare scholarship feels comfortable in acknowledging. A Clare road sign signals a poetry of a process of deterritorialisation. It might be that a generative presence which tussles in an uneasy dialectic with place in much of Clare’s work is the undercutting sense that things found, places visited, animals unearthed, flowers caressed, hands held, lovers joined, songs sung, festivities celebrated, poems written, and ‘meetings’ had, are all immediately, ineluctably, threatened by loss, departure, disorientation, disintegration, dissolution, with theft and breakage, with violent termination, and with vanishings. Broadly, Clare is aspirationally a materialist in a grounded non-human sense, but someone who could not securely rely on human aspects of materiality – hence his resort to tactics for an expressive route beyond his place, to the ‘poor wanderer’s lot’ for example. Clare’s poetry does not necessarily offer a countering of displacement or alienation through the seeking of security in the natural. For all the evident desire for such security and solidity, in Clare’s poetry nature is often fluid and ungraspable, as moveable, as shifting and as dynamic, and sometimes as *unstable* as the poet’s subject position. As we shall see across this book, ground dissolves, nature fades and fogs, identities are loosened and sometimes lost. He meets – a woman, a lane, a bird, a flower, near a natural body which he will express as a process, as dynamic and fluid – and that which is met threatens to dissolve almost in the same breath that it is gathered in to an insecure lyrical and ecological subjectivity. The first line or the first poem in his first book, is ‘HERE we meet, too soon to part,’: the meeting is immediately a losing.

This continual process of ‘losing’ was apparent to his first editor, John Taylor (Clare often spells it ‘loosing’ – see chapter 2). In his introduction to the first collection *Poems Descriptive*, while establishing Clare as a poet of a particular place, of extreme poverty and exclusively as a poet of nature, Taylor says that Clare ‘looks as anxiously on [nature’s] face as if she were a living friend, whom he might lose’.¹⁴³ The slipping away is as immediately present as the poetic expression of

¹⁴³ *PD*, p. xx.

connection. That the immediacy of the threat of loss is for Taylor the reason Clare's vision is so acute, so sensitive, and his poetry so immediate:

hence he has learnt to notice every change in her countenance, and to delineate all the delicate varieties of her character. Most of his poems were composed under the immediate impression of this feeling, in the fields, or on the road-sides.¹⁴⁴

Loss generates everything: the way he thinks, the way he composes, and when he writes. At the outset, Taylor casts Clare as 'nature lover' – which like so many early models remains dominant today. Yet actual human women, and human-to-human love, as a subject of interest in the poems that follow are not alluded to at all (more on this topic appears in chapter 4). Paradoxically then, after asserting the primacy of his place, and of nature to Clare's existence, Taylor quotes 'The Meeting' which, as the editor says 'came too late to be inserted in its proper place in this volume'.¹⁴⁵ This lyric is a quite traditional male love poem, which as Taylor rightly says reflects Burns's 'O were I on Parnassus' Hill', in both the quite rare stanza form¹⁴⁶ and in its theme of love. Clare would also have seen the stanza in William Wordsworth's 'The Green Linnet', in *Poems* of 1815, albeit with a longer, iambic tetrameter line for the triplets.¹⁴⁷ Like 'The Green Linnet', 'The Meeting' has 'nature' in it – but it is not the focus at all. Nature is present only to forge an understanding of, and to place, the affection described. Nature, here, is ornate, almost baroque in

¹⁴⁴ *PD*, p. xx.

¹⁴⁵ 'The Meeting', *PD*, pp. xiii-xiv (p. xiii). See *Letters*, pp. 20-21. For a full account of the development of this collection, see P. M. S. Dawson, 'The Making of Clare's "Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery" (1820)', *Review of English Studies*, n.s., 56.224 (April 2005), 276-312.

¹⁴⁶ An *aaaabcccb* stanza – again with an iambic tetrameter line – is famously used by Tennyson in 'The Lady of Shallott', first published in *Poems* (London: Edward Moxon, 1833), pp. 8-19, while Christina Rossetti uses an *aaabcccb* octave but with a trimeter line for the triplets, and an even more abbreviated dimeter line for the *c* pair, in 'Dream Land', first published in *The Germ*, I (January 1850), p. 20. Thomas Hardy uses the rhyme scheme for the mournful pentameter poem, 'The Mongrel', in *Winter Words; in Various Moods and Metres* (London: Macmillan, 1928), pp. 83-4.

¹⁴⁷ William Wordsworth, *Poems, Including Lyrical Ballads, and the Miscellaneous Pieces of the Author*, 2 vols (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1815), 1, pp. 243-4. As mentioned above, in December 1819, Clare returned a loan of Wordsworth's poems from Octavius Gilchrist (*Letters*, p. 23; p. 23, n. 2), which means he was reading Wordsworth at the behest of one of his closest admirers, across the time Taylor says he was writing this poem. Byron was looming large, but there is no doubting Wordsworth's presence in his first collection, too, perhaps most especially in the form of this poem written just before publication, in Taylor's account.

its rusticated positioning. The sharpest focus is reserved for affection. Here is the poem in full as it appeared in the first edition of *Poems Descriptive*:

HERE we meet, too soon to part,
 Here to leave will raise a smart,
 Here I'll press thee to my heart,
 Where none have place above thee;
 Here I vow to love thee well,
 And could words unseal the spell,
 Had but language strength to tell,
 I'd say how much I love thee.

Here, the rose that decks thy door,
 Here, the thorn that spreads thy bow'r,
 Here, the willow on the moor,
 The birds at rest above thee,
 Had they light of life to see,
 Sense of soul like thee and me
 Soon might each a witness be
 How doatingly I love thee.

By the night-sky's purple ether,
 And by even's sweetest weather,
 That oft has blest us both together,—
 The moon that shines above thee,
 And shews thy beauteous cheek so blooming,
 And by pale age's winter coming,
 The charms, and casualties of woman,
 I will for ever love thee.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ *PD*, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

This is a poem of location; it structurally voices a resounding commitment to place: appearing seven times, 'here' is the commanding anaphora of the first two stanzas. But 'here' is a literary love landscape, so the topography is that of poetic tradition, not a map of Clare country. The second and third stanzas inscribe the love in a bedding of natural bodies such as plants, birds, sky and moon – but these operate as witnesses, guarantors the speaker swears by. They constitute a natural frame, are arranged to underwrite the pledge of committed love, and they are domesticated, cosy, situated by the woman's door. The 'place' of this poem is not Helpston.

In 'O, Were I On Parnassus Hill!', Burns's speaker wants the muses of Parnassus to help him sing poetry to a woman, but admits he will have to do with local features instead of the classical originals and this central conceit is the comedic spine of the poem. Burns's wry, localised and Scottish trumping of grand classical precedents is taken a step further by 'The Meeting': removing all comedy as he does so, Clare erases all classical traces. Rather than relocating the scene in his own village, he situates the loving pledges in an anonymous rural everywhere, beyond the confines and stylisations of the pastoral. Clare de-localises a Burnsian precedent. Another distinction between the two is that while Burns's poem maintains the strength of the loving feeling '[t]ill my last weary sand was run'¹⁴⁹ – Clare's poem structures a cleaving threat to the love from the first line with the likelihood that the lovers will 'part' – through to the penultimate line – at which point he introduces 'the casualties of woman'. Clare's is a poem which establishes loving connection in the same breath that it confirms all human things fall apart. Loss is built into love: it is a necessary constituent of intimacy and connection. To interrelate is to lose.

To conclude this chapter on place, we will follow the trajectory of this poem with no placedness. This was a poem which lost touch with Clare almost as quickly as it was first printed. Across the first half of the nineteenth century, there is no doubt that this was Clare's single most successful poem – and that it took with it no sense of Clare's 'place' – in any possible sense of that freighted word. And this is an aspect of its international flight that is worth noting – that might have been generative of its success: it is a poem of no place, and as a result, perhaps, it ended up in a lot of places, sounded out in a wide variety of sites and situations – in print and in music, in

¹⁴⁹ 'O, Were I On Parnassus Hill!', *The Works of Robert Burns*, 4 vols (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1813), 1, pp. 291-2 (p. 292).

anthologies and in broadsides. Clare did not know of its success, and the poem when sung as a song did not know of him either, uncoupled from him – as it was much of the time – into musical anonymity.

Music and song was more important to the culture in which Clare grew up than poetry, though the separation of song for singing from verse for reading is never distinct in Clare. Taking the phrase from a well-known Charles Dibdin naval song, Clare described himself as a ‘desert scraper’.¹⁵⁰ His ability on the fiddle and his reading and writing of notation, together with music’s centrality to his family and village life, meant that musicality was partner to his poetic development in ways that warrant more exploration, though pioneering work has been done in this area by George Deacon and Trevor Hold.¹⁵¹ Some of those who nursed Clare’s literary career however, were not so happy about his delight in music. In March 1820, James Hessey warned Clare of the dangers of musical excess:

I trust I need not warn you against devoting too much time to music – It is an infatuating luxury, and unless taken in moderation has a great tendency to weaken the mind and to render it unfit for serious application to study. But moderately used it is a delightful & rational mode of enjoyment¹⁵²

Immediately Clare’s work was made public, however, professional musicians evidently saw in it the potential for musical setting and performance. As many since Frederick Martin have recounted,¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ *By Himself*, p. 82. Clare lifts the phrase from Charles Dibdin’s staple ballad (first line ‘We Tars are all for fun and glee’), which was known as ‘Jack at Greenwich’, and reproduced in songbooks throughout the nineteenth century:

A fiddle soon I made my own,
That girls and tars might caper;
Learn’d Rule Britannia, Bobbing Joan,
And grow’d a decent scraper...

The Professional Life of Mr. Dibdin, Written by Himself. Together with the words of six hundred songs [etc.], 4 vols (London: Charles Dibdin, 1803), 4, pp. 223-5 (p. 224).

¹⁵¹ See Deacon, pp. 37-68 and Trevor Hold, ‘The Composer’s Debt to John Clare’, *JCSJ*, 1 (1982), 25-30.

¹⁵² Hessey to Clare, 14 March 1820, British Library, Egerton Manuscript 2245, fol. 57. My thanks to Erin Lafford for generously providing this transcription.

¹⁵³ See Frederick Martin, *The Life of John Clare* (London and Cambridge: Macmillan, 1865), pp. 103 and 111; Bate, *Biography*, pp. 157 and 166; and Deacon, pp. 65-7. Deacon includes two facsimiles of the song: one an

in 1820 the poem was set to originally-composed music by Haydn Corri,¹⁵⁴ and performed on stage at Drury Lane by Madame Vestris. Clare missed the performance, but wrote that he ‘felt uncommonly pleased at the circumstance’.¹⁵⁵ This performance alone would make ‘The Meeting’ the most immediately impactful of Clare’s poems in the first few months of his published career: but the story is more rich and extended than just this celebrated first gig. The poem-as-song was retitled ‘Here we meet too soon to part’ and set to an already famous aria called ‘Di Tanti Palpiti’, from the opera *Tancredi*, by Gioachino Rossini. As Jonathan Bate recounts, it was then sung in 1821 by Covent Garden soprano Catherine Stephens.¹⁵⁶ Musical historian Philip Gossett states that Rossini was ‘the greatest Italian composer of his time’ and ‘[n]o composer in the first half of the 19th century enjoyed the measure of prestige, wealth, popular acclaim or artistic influence’. Gossett writes further that the fame of ‘Tancredi appeared to rest on the cavatina “Tu che accendi”, with its cabaletta “Di tanti palpiti”... Rossini’s melody seems to capture the melodic beauty and innocence characteristic of Italian opera, while escaping naivety by its enchanting cadential phrase’.¹⁵⁷ This, the most influential setting of ‘The Meeting’, seemed initially to draw on the pre-existing fame of Rossini’s cabaletta, but the partnership of poem and tune worked even more popular wonders.

For most scholars, that’s where the story stops. In fact the song as ‘Here we meet’ continued to be reproduced and set afresh in all manner of broadsides, song-sheets, songsters, anthologies, chapbooks and guides to learning music. Indeed it becomes such a touchstone that it

anonymised setting without music published by Catnach (undated, p. 65) and the other Corri’s original score (p. 66).

¹⁵⁴ Haydn Corri (1785-1860), was ‘Pianist, organist and composer, son of Domenico Corri. In 1811 and 1819-20 he travelled to Ireland as *maestro al cembalo* for a series of performances given by Italian opera singers from London, at Dublin’s Crow Street Theatre. In 1821 he settled in Dublin, with his wife soprano Ann Adams (Adami) whom he had married in London on 15 July 1814... Quickly establishing himself as a teacher of the voice and piano, Haydn played a central role in the musical life of the city for many years... He published a singing tutor and wrote a number of glees and songs.’ Peter Ward Jones and Rachel E. Cowgill, ‘Haydn Corri’, in Stanley Sadie *et al* (eds), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn., 29 vols (London: Grove, 2001), 6, p. 502.

¹⁵⁵ *By Himself*, p. 136.

¹⁵⁶ Bate, *Biography*, p. 214.

¹⁵⁷ Philip Gossett, ‘Gioachino Rossini’, in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 21, pp. 734-68 (pp. 734 and 738). A ‘cabaletta’ specifically ‘denotes the second, usually fast movement of a double aria in an Italian opera, consisting of a melodic period of two stanzas which is repeated with decorations added by the singer after an orchestral ritornello, often accompanied by choral or solo pertichini and followed by matching coda designed to stimulate applause’, according to Julian Budden, in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 4, p. 759.

appears in plays and stories, across Britain and the United States. This was a common enough pattern for the work of Romantic-period poets though. For example, in her introduction to a collection of songs by James Hogg, Kirsteen McCue summarises the dispersal of his songs in a way which (Scots context notwithstanding) could be directly applied the fate of some of Clare's work:

...many of his songs appeared in single song-sheet format, with the names of notable contemporary performers associated with them, supplying evidence of popular performances in theatres and public leisure gardens... Hogg's songs also appeared across his literary works in all genres, and within text-only collections of Scots songs during this time and for many decades following his death.¹⁵⁸

If we follow a similar fate for just one of Clare's songs, we find a quite incredible array of appearances. In the early years of its circulation, Clare's name stayed attached to 'Here we meet too soon to part'. As early as 1820, it was being sung by Mr Broadhurst at the Theatre Royal English Opera, to another original composition, by John Waring.¹⁵⁹ A performance of another, separate, original musical setting was reviewed in August of 1820: placing Clare explicitly in terms of region and socio-economic position, the anonymous reviewer in the monthly *La Belle Assemblée* conveys a rich sense of how the new music and the poem work together, and in front of whom the song was performed – quoted here in full:

The words of this pleasing ballad are written by John Clare, a Northamptonshire peasant; we mention this because we think them very beautiful, and we have before has occasion most

¹⁵⁸ Kirsteen McCue (ed.), *James Hogg: Contributions to Musical Collections and Miscellaneous Songs* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. xxiv.

¹⁵⁹ Published in London by I. Waring, Fleet Street. The Bodleian Library provides a date of 1820 for this item, though the music sheet itself is undated. As both Broadhurst and Waring go unrecorded by Clare or any of his associates, it might be that 1820 is too early (though the Williams and Duruset performance suggests 1820 was a busy year for this song, in ways as yet unregistered). Broadhurst was active at this time – and had been a busy if uncelebrated Regency singer. He is recorded as singing on the London stage as early as 1810. See for example *Teggs' Prime Song Book: Fifth Collection* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1810), p. 1 and *The Jovial Song-Book for 1810* (London: T. Hughes, 1810), p. 22. A reviewer of a performance at the English Opera House on 26 December 1821 notes 'the pleasure we shared with the audience in hearing the songs sung by Mr. Broadhurst in a style at once, sweet, simple, and pathetic'. This was the very same venue at which Broadhurst performed Waring's setting of Clare's song. *European Magazine* (January 1821), p. 71.

sincerely to applaud the compositions of Mr. Williams in making his notes harmonize with, and express the meaning of the words. The andantino at the commencement, with the flute accompaniment, is tender and pleasing, and the expression of the music in the refrain of “How much I love thee,” is well adapted to the sense, and gives room for a judicious ad libitum at the end of the second verse; and we know not any one who can better make use of this musical licence than Mr. Duruset, by whom this ballad has been delightfully sang at the private concerts of the nobility.¹⁶⁰

In 1824 James Ely Taylor anthologises the whole poem as ‘The Meeting’ in his *The Beauties of the Poets, Lyric and Elegiac, Selected from the Most Admired Authors*.¹⁶¹ Another London-based anthology of 1824, *Beauties of the British Poets*, collected by F. Campbell, copies the poem entire from its *Poems Descriptive* publication – with only small variations of punctuation. The poem is prefixed by Campbell with a page of quotations from John Taylor’s introduction to *Poems Descriptive* – covering Clare’s place of birth, his family’s ‘extreme poverty’ and father’s illness, his prospects, education, and the circumstances of his first discovery by booksellers and so on. In this book, ‘The Meeting’ appears sandwiched between a Shakespeare fragment entitled ‘Music’ (uncredited, but taken from the words of Lorenzo, in *The Merchant of Venice*) and James Merrick’s oft-anthologised classical translation ‘The Wish’ on the brevity of life.¹⁶² Also in 1824, the song as ‘Here we meet too soon to part’ is published in Philadelphia, ‘adapted to Rossini’s Beautiful Air Di Tanti Palpiti, with New Symphonies & Accompaniments for the Piano Forte, by T. B. Phipps’.¹⁶³

In 1825 the song appears in simplified anonymous form in a musical teach-yourself book, *The Sky-Lark*, which sub-titled itself *A Choice Selection of the Most Admired Popular Songs* – a forum which provides an insight into the song’s sheer presence in popular culture by this point: the

¹⁶⁰ ‘Review of New Music’, *La Belle Assemblée; or, Bell’s Court and Fashionable Magazine*, 139 (August 1820), p. 94.

¹⁶¹ James Ely Taylor (ed.), *The Beauties of the Poets, Lyric and Elegiac, Selected from the Most Admired Authors* (London: John Bumpus, 1824), p. 124. This is a companion volume to Ely Taylor’s *The Beauties of the Poets, Moral and Sentimental, Selected from the Most Admired Authors* (London: John Bumpus, 1824) which includes the Clare poem ‘What is Life?’, pp. 81-2.

¹⁶² F. Campbell (ed.), *Beauties of the British Poets; with Notices, Biographical and Critical*, 2 vols (London: Richard Edwards, 1824). ‘The Meeting’ and note: 1, pp. 110-11.

¹⁶³ Published in Philadelphia by G. E. Blake, 13 South 5th Street.

compiler assumed that people knew it, and would want to play it.¹⁶⁴ With Clare's surname appended this time, the song was included in the mammoth three-volume *Universal Songster of 1826*; indicative, again, of its widespread popularity, is the fact that in this collection a song entitled 'In these arms, my Julia, Rest' is said to be sung to the 'air' of 'Here we meet...'.¹⁶⁵ In 1829, Rossini's setting leads the otherwise anonymised presentation of the song in John Parry's *The Vocal Companion*, a collection of scores adapted to assist the self-improving amateur musician.¹⁶⁶ In 1830, having been anonymised, the song featured alongside other 'popular songs' in Dean and Munday's *London Songster*.¹⁶⁷ In 1831, the poem was selected for inclusion in *Hodgson's Fashionable Song Book*.¹⁶⁸ In 1832, James Catnach, 'leading broadsheet seller of his day' according to the *ODNB*, was listing 'How we meet too soon to part' as a broadside song for sale in his huge and influential catalogue. Like other songster publishers, Catnach included the poem in cheap songsters across the 1830s – such as the undated, unpaginated *The Harp*, also by Catnach, in which the lines are entitled 'The words from Clare's poems' (and are situated just beneath an illustrated gun-hunting poem).¹⁶⁹ But one of the most intriguing 1830s reprintings of the poem is as the closing text of the bawdy song book, *Tommarroo Songster*, published by Lovelace and Perkes in

¹⁶⁴ *The Sky-Lark: A Choice Selection of the Most Admired Popular Songs, Heroic, Plaintive, Sentimental, Humorous, and Bacchanalian. Arranged for the Violin, Flute, and Voice.* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1825), pp. 112-13.

¹⁶⁵ *The Universal Songster; or, Museum of Mirth*, 3 vols (London: John Fairburn; Simpkin and Marshall; Sherwood, Gilbert, and Piper, 1826): 'Here we meet...': 2, p. 57; 'In these arms, my Julia, Rest': 3, p. 151.

¹⁶⁶ The long title of this work provides the context in which the song was appearing: John Parry, *The Vocal Companion, Consisting of Favourite Songs, Duets, Glees... Comprising Many Works by the Most Celebrated Composers, adapted for the Voice, Violin, or Flute.* Volume the First. (London: Goulding and D'Almaine, 1829), pp. 38-9. The second volume in Parry's series was *The British Minstrel* of 1830, while the third was *Flowers of Song*, 1837.

¹⁶⁷ Again, the long title of this collection is worth reproducing in full, as it shows how the song was regarded by the collectors: *The London Songster; A Cabinet Edition of Naval, Military, Bacchanalian, Comic, Sentimental, Love, Patriotic, and Other Popular Songs, English, Irish, and Scotch: comprising those Singing at the Theatres, Private Concerts, and other Places of Fashionable Resort, we well as those held in General Estimation* (London: Dean and Munday, 1830), p. 59.

¹⁶⁸ *Hodgson's Fashionable Song Book, for 1831: A Choice Collection of Nearly One Hundred Popular, Favourite, and Entirely New Songs* (London: Bernard Hodgson, 1831), [no page number].

¹⁶⁹ See *ODNB* on James Catnach (1792-1841). *Catalogue of Songs and Song books. Sheets, Half-Sheets, Christmas Carols, Children's Books, &c. &c. &c.* (London: J. Catnach, 1832), p. 3. See Steve Roud and Paul Smith (eds.), *A Catalogue of Songs and Song Books Printed and Published by James Catnach 1832: A Facsimile Reprint with Indexes and Examples* (Doncaster: January Books, 1985), p. 19. *The Harp* was an illustrated collection published by 'J. Catnach, 2 Monmouth Street', which the Bodleian dates c. 1830-7. Many cheap songsters in which Clare's song appears are undated, in the Harding collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford, but are likely of the 1820s and 1830s.

London, probably in 1833, recently discovered by Derek B. Scott.¹⁷⁰ The poem text itself is much the same as the two-stanza version that appears elsewhere, and other than repeating the first four lines of the first stanza at the end of each stanza, and losing the third stanza entirely, considering the distance from the poem's original appearance in 1820, this appearance remains remarkably faithful to Taylor's original 1820 setting. Beneath the title, appears the italicised line 'Sung by Madame Pasta', indicating that the song was performed by celebrated soprano Giuditta Pasta, 'who performed regularly in London in the late 1820s and early 1830s', as editor Derek B. Scott points out.¹⁷¹ An Italian soprano of the London stage, Madame Pasta was a far more highly-regarded figure than Vestris, Stephens or Broadhurst; indeed, it could be that Pasta was the most highly-regarded nineteenth-century singer ever to sing Clare's poem. In the publication, the poem is placed as if to raise the tone of an evening of rude comedy songs, closing with this song of a love more elevating and spiritual, and less driven by and towards the body as are the other songs, for the most part, in Lovelace and Perkess's *Tommaroo Songster*.

In 1845, in the United States, the poem is included, with yet another original score, in the *Boston Melodeon: A Collection of Secular Melodies*.¹⁷² In 1846 'Here we meet...' was included in (Edward) Lloyd's *Song Book* in London.¹⁷³ In 1847, the song appears in the Philadelphia-published *Grigg's Southern and Western Songster* – the geographical specificity of which reveals that the collectors somehow came to think that this song an American regional folk original.¹⁷⁴ Two creative references to the song in late 1840s America, show just how well known it must have been: there is a fleeting reference to just the song's title in 'We Are All Singing', a poem in S. M. Hewlett's *Temperance Songster* published in New York,¹⁷⁵ while in a Philadelphia-published collection the

¹⁷⁰ *Tommaroo Songster* (London: Lovelace and Perkess, ?1833), in Patrick Spedding and Paul Watt, gen. eds, *Bawdy Songbooks of the Romantic Period*, 4 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011), 4, Derek B. Scott (ed.), pp. 327-55 (pp. 354-5).

¹⁷¹ Derek B. Scott (ed.), *Bawdy Songbooks of the Romantic Period*, vol. 4 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011), pp. xix-xx.

¹⁷² E. L. White, *The Boston Melodeon: A Collection of Secular Melodies, Consisting of Songs, Glees, Rounds, Catches, &c., Including Many of the Most Popular Pieces of the Day Arranged and Harmonized For Four Voices*, 2 vols (Boston: Benjamin B. Mussey & Co., c. 1845), 1, p. 152.

¹⁷³ *Lloyd's Song Book; containing upwards of Four Hundred Songs, Duets, Glees, & c., &c.* (London: E. Lloyd [1845]), p. 66.

¹⁷⁴ *Grigg's Southern and Western Songster: Being a Choice Selection of the Most Fashionable Songs...* New edn. (Philadelphia [PA]: Grigg, Elliot & Co., 1847), p. 234.

¹⁷⁵ S. M. Hewlett, 'We Are All Singing', *Hewlett's Temperance Songster. A Collection of Songs, Dedicated to All the Temperance Societies in the World*, 6th edn. (Cooperstown [New York]: S. M. Hewlett, 1846), p. 11.

song is alluded to albeit briefly, in that the first line – which had become, by now, the title – is said to be sung, by a Mrs Lovely, in *Three Eras of a Woman's Life: A Dramatic Sketch, in Three Parts*, a play by James Rees.¹⁷⁶ For a poet and a playwright to include such fleeting references, suggests the song was so well-known in America that even a hint of it was sufficient to stimulate a clear and comforting nod of recognition in an audience. Back in London, the 1848 catalogue of the significant publisher Duncombe and Moon, lists it as follows: 'Here we meet too soon to part, a favourite Song, the Words by Clare, the Music by Rossini, sung with universal applause at Public Concerts'.¹⁷⁷

An anonymous article entitled 'Labour and the Poor' in *The Morning Chronicle* of January 1851, reports on a visit to Clare in the Northampton asylum, stating that 'Clare was the writer, though not generally known as such, of the lines, "Here we meet too soon to part"—which, set to one of Rossini's most beautiful airs, were some time exceedingly popular'.¹⁷⁸ The report is immediately picked up by other papers, such as the *Aberdeen Journal*, which summarizes Clare in a way that suggests the poem was by far his most prominent at that time. Here is the complete note:

Clare, the Northamptonshire poet (author of "Here we meet, too soon to part," and other well-known pieces) is still an inmate of a lunatic asylum. He complains that he has been defrauded of the honour of writing "Marmion" and "Don Juan," and winning the battle of Waterloo.¹⁷⁹

This account (repeated in the *Dundee Courier* and the *Caledonian Mercury*) is the only suggestion that asylum-bound Clare claimed Walter Scott's work as his own, alongside those we more commonly know about – Byron, Burns and Shakespeare. As if destined to be as successful as Scott, the spread of Clare's poem in print and in song continued. In 1853, the poem appears with a

¹⁷⁶ James Rees, 'Three Eras of a Woman's Life: A Dramatic Sketch, in Three Parts', in *Mysteries of City Life* (Philadelphia [PA]: J. W. Moore, 1849), pp. 182-198 (p. 191).

¹⁷⁷ 'Here we meet...' appears as song 404 listed in the catalogue of *Duncombe's Music for the Million!* (London: Duncombe and Moon, c. 1848).

¹⁷⁸ 'Labour and the Poor', *The Morning Chronicle*, 16 January 1851, pp. 5-6 (p. 6). This is one in a series of correspondent's letters covering the poor across rural areas, the full title of this instance being 'Labour and the Poor. Rural Districts [from our Special Correspondent.] Counties of Northampton, Leicester, Rutland, Nottingham, and Derby. Letter XLIV.'

¹⁷⁹ 'The Income Tax (*From the Times*)', *The Aberdeen Journal*, 29 January 1851, p. 3. See also *Dundee Courier* 29 January 1851, p. 1, and *Caledonian Mercury*, 27 January 1851, p. 1.

version of the Rossini score, in *Davidson's Universal Melodist* – a collection of ‘Popular, Standard, and Original Songs’ published in London,¹⁸⁰ with no name or score in the *Cyclopedia of Songs and Recitations* published in London,¹⁸¹ and in *Selkirk's Songs & Ballads for the People*, published in Newcastle in the same year.¹⁸² In 1856 we find the song in Glasgow, in *The Popular Vocalist*.¹⁸³ The song was a standard on the stage of the Victorian Music Hall, according to its appearance in *Diprose's Music Hall Song Book* of c. 1859-62, and the same publisher's flag-waving *Red White and Blue Monster Song Book* of about 1860.¹⁸⁴ In the year Clare died, the song appears with his name re-attached, in J. E. Carpenter's *Songs for All Ages*.¹⁸⁵ Potentially the widest single circulation the song would have received, however, and its most literary setting of the nineteenth century, was when it appeared as a full quotation and subsequent discussion in a ‘Johnny Ludlow’ story, written by the hugely popular bestselling writer and editor Mrs Henry Wood (Ellen Wood), in an issue of her monthly literary compendium, *The Argosy*. The song is sung in a story called ‘The Tragedy’, serially published from January through to April 1886.¹⁸⁶ ‘The Tragedy’ sees a hapless Valentine Chandler sing it with his beautiful voice at a sociable evening at Colonel Letsom's, by way of continuing to charm Jane Preen. The narrator, Johnny Ludlow, introduces the song thus:

The song he chose was a ridiculous old ditty about love; it went to the tune of “Di tanti palpiti.” Val chose it for Miss Jane and sung it to her; to her alone, mind you; the rest of us went for nothing. [The narrator then quotes all four stanzas of the poem in full.] ...Now, as you perceive, it is a most ridiculous song, foolish as lovesongs in general are. But had you been sitting there with us in all the subtle romance imparted by the witching hour of the evening twilight, the soft air floating around, the clear sky above, one large silver star

¹⁸⁰ *Davidson's Universal Melodist, Consisting of the Music and Words or Popular, Standard, and Original Songs, &c.*, 2 vols (London: G. H. Davidson, 1853) 1, p. 218.

¹⁸¹ *Cyclopedia of Songs and Recitations* (London: ‘for the Booksellers’, 1853), p. 58.

¹⁸² *Selkirk's Songs & Ballads for the People*, no. 9 (Newcastle: Selkirk, 1853), p. 192.

¹⁸³ *The Popular Vocalist; Containing a Choice Selection of Favourite National Songs, as sung at the Different Places of Entertainment by the Most Eminent Singers* (Glasgow: George Cameron, 1856), p. 102.

¹⁸⁴ *Diprose's Music Hall Song Book*, no. 5 (London: J. Diprose, c. 1859-62) p. 34, and J. Diprose (ed.), *The Red White and Blue Monster Song Book* (London: J. Diprose, c. 1860), p. 19.

¹⁸⁵ J. E. Carpenter (ed.), *Songs for All Ages* (London: Routledge, Warne, and Routledge, 1864), pp. 55-6. This book was reprinted by Routledge in New York in 1866.

¹⁸⁶ Johnny Ludlow (nom de plume of Mrs Henry Wood), ‘The Tragedy’, *The Argosy*, January 1886, pp. 28-44; February 1886, pp. 112-28; March 1886, 192-208; and April 1886, pp. 269-85. The song appears in full in the April issue on p. 274, while the narrator's discussion quoted here follows on p. 275.

trembling in its blue depths, you would have felt entranced. The wonderful melody of the singer's voice, his distinct enunciation, the tender passion breathing through his soft utterance, and the slight, yet unmistakable emphasis given to the avowal of his love, thrilled us all. It was as decided a declaration of what he felt for Jane Preen as he could well make in this world. Once he glanced at her, and only once throughout; it was where I have placed the pause, as he placed it himself, "like thee—and me." As if his glance drew hers by some irresistible fascination, Jane, who had been sitting beneath the rock just opposite to him, her eyes cast down—as he made that pause and glanced away at her, I say, she lifted them for a moment, and caught the glance. I may live to be an old man, but I shall never forget Val's song that night, or the charm it held for us. What, then, must it have held for Jane? And it is because that song and its charm lie still fresh on my memory, though many a year has since worn itself out, that I inscribe it here.¹⁸⁷

As the serial story of gentle rural middle-class intrigue, money-induced familial strife and polite domestic affection draws to a close, Wood uses the song to ramp up to a crescendo of sentimental and communal nostalgia, just before an abrupt, suicidal and utterly isolated conclusion for the heroine's suffering brother. Clare's song is the story's core moment of loving innocence and sentimentality, in an otherwise complex and fraught world of rural manners, careerist opportunism and social disappointments. There are no doubt many other instances of the song still to be found, but we will part with the flight of 'The Meeting' for now.

As 'The Meeting' becomes 'How we meet too soon to part', the author's name mostly falls away along with the original title – only to reappear here and there across its varied life in print. In most of these references the song flies far away from the grounded and studied track of Clare's career. Clare therefore made no money from the song, and gained no practicable recognition from it either, though so famous was it, so much a part of traditional and common culture, that when it was attached to his name, it led the manner by which he was recognised and recalled, if at all. The international nature of the song's weird prevalence, its pervasive volume in singing situations high, low and unknown, to various melodies, to various ends – educational, musicological, fictional, bawdy, clubbable, moralising or dramatic – and to audiences of all kinds – is a testament to just

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. 274-5.

how significant Clare's work could be when let loose from the chains of nature and place. His most displaced and detached song – and the first printed in his first book – was by far his most successful and popular across the nineteenth century, in ways and in places which he never knew and which scholars have not considered. It is not a nature poem, and it is not a poem that places Clare, or needs Clare's place, his class or his biography as a reference point. It is an anonymised and declassified constituent of popular culture; it is a prop to – and sentimental reference point within – culture's broad structures of feeling, to use Raymond Williams's term. Given the right winds, Octavius Gilchrist's characterisation that 'Clare's genius is not framed for sustained or lofty flights' could be proven wrong.¹⁸⁸ Creative artists, singers, songbook and broadside makers, and writers of fiction and drama – and singing audiences too – made sure that this first love poem, in Clare's first book, was the text that soared as high, and nearly as far, as the condor of the Americas, both during his lifetime and beyond.

¹⁸⁸ See note 7 above.