SARAH HOUGHTON-WALKER

Introduction

Opening Clare's first published volume in 1820, the poet's earliest readers encountered a title, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, underpinned first by the classificatory declaration, 'By John Clare: A Northamptonshire Peasant', and then by a quotation from Shakespeare's Sonnet 94: 'The Summer's Flower is to the Summer sweet, / Though to itself it only live and die.' On a cursory reading, it might seem that the book is straightforwardly connecting peasant poet and summer flower as equally insignificant, overlookable-if-beautiful, natural objects. But there is a knot of contradiction here, relating to the persona that Clare and his publishers constructed. Since the seventeenth century, Shakespeare had been hailed as England's answer to the stellar classical tradition which previously had held literary pre-eminence. Instead of the regulated, formal perfection of Greece and Rome, England had her own national poet. In Milton's words, 'sweetest Shakespeare fancy's child' had 'Warble[d] his native wood-notes wild':[1] as 'native' manages to imply both an inherent personal genius and an affiliation to nation, Milton's Shakespeare becomes a child genius of the English countryside; a kind of national unlettered rustic. Putting Clare's identity next to Shakespeare on the page like this forcefully draws the parallel, in a moment of disingenuous humility. But of course, to know about Shakespeare is precisely *not* to be unlettered: not to be an isolated genius, but to be part of a literary community. Moreover, anyone familiar with the following two lines from Shakespeare's sonnet would know that they contain a rather more radical sentiment: 'But if that flower with base infection meet / The basest weed outbraves his dignity'.[2] These lines suggest that it is what you do that determines worth, not who you are. In this context, Clare's being a peasant, which we've just been told about on the title page, becomes irrelevant to the quality of his verse. As the last line of the sonnet puts it, 'Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds': Shakespeare's lines speak of the possibility for the lowest of the low to outshine the most highly prized; perhaps even for a Northamptonshire peasant sometimes to surpass a Shakespeare.

Clare knew that people do judge books by their covers and was well aware that the phenomenon of a 'peasant poet' would interest readers as much as his poetry in the first instance. Asserting this persona, Clare participated in a tradition of peasant poetry composed of those whose originality and poetic brilliance supposedly derived from instinct and life experience rather than from book-learning. Beyond his title page, Clare repeatedly aligned himself with this tradition in the early days of his career. An 1818 manuscript containing many of Clare's early poems, for instance, insists that,

> As the ensuing Trifles are nothing but the simple productions of an Unlettered Rustic their faults & Imperfections will undoubtedly be nothing more than what might be expected – as correct composition & Gramatical accuracy can never be lookd for from one whose mental faculties (such as they were) being continually overburthend & depressd by hard labour which fate ordained to be his constant employment – It is hoped the unnoticd Imitation should any occur (being unknown to the author) will not be deem'd as Plagiarisms as the humble station of life in which providence has placed him has ever debarred him from Reaping that advantage of extending his knowledge by reading of Books the small catalogue he has seen might easily be enumerated a Thompson & and a Milton when a school boy was the constant companions of his leisure hours[3]

Here, Clare identifies, justifies, and markets himself as a peasant poet. Here are his claims to being qualified for that job: not being well read; not having had an education beyond a few carefully named 'school boy' hours, and yet producing poetry so good it might be mistaken as having been copied from real, really good poets like Milton. But he is juggling at least two personae here, as all published, self-taught poets must: Clare knows that once he makes the leap to being a published poet, he will by definition no longer be an unlettered rustic, because he will have become part of the metropolitan literary scene. Moreover, peasant poets had to produce poetry which was paradoxically both artful and (supposedly) artless. If verse wasn't good enough, no one would read it; if it was too good, it might lose its selling point as the creation of a genuine peasant. This is latent in the extract above, in the clumsy confusion of tenses, as Clare declares that grammatical accuracy 'can' never be looked for from one whose faculties 'were' overburdened: he can't seem to decide whether he *is* the 'Unlettered Rustic' who has limited mental faculties and therefore doesn't know what a comma is for, or the poet participating in the literary community who is lettered and is looking back to how he *used* to be.

The awkward self-styling demonstrated here, and the reiteration of the idea of unletteredness, continued as publication became a reality. As essays in this volume make clear, Clare's agency in his self-representation depended on

the plans of others and on the market, but in his early work, Clare characteristically uses the word 'little' to describe his learning, the range of books available to him, the physical properties of the books he has access to, and the poems he writes. In 'The Author's Address to his Book', Clare addresses his book as '*little* bookey' and tells his volume:

> Tis thine to meet the learned now
> Wi' scraping boot & bending bow
> & tho in manners little read
> Simple, shanny, lowly bred
> Yet never mind push forward book
> Worth will excuse thy clownish look
>
> (EP I 424–31, ll. 151–6)

The book becomes a euphemism, representing and also excusing Clare. Yet despite the cultivation of this identity, and whilst his education was largely informal, Clare was always greedy for reading material and knowledge, and resourceful when it came to obtaining it; by the time Clare turned to his second collection, *The Village Minstrel* (1821), he was already trying to move away from the persona he had collaborated in creating, of a little-read poet writing little poems in little books. One problematic corollary of the peasant-poet image, and its associations with instinctive genius rather than learned artistry, is the idea that Clare 'found the poems in the fields, / And only wrote them down' ('Sighing for Retirement', LP I 19–20, ll. 15–16). Taken literally, this is a severe misrepresentation of the extent of the literary and other knowledge which is manifest throughout Clare's writings. What Clare really means is that nature herself is the best artist: that there is no basis on which to believe that a poet might 'improve' on nature. Persistently in Clare's writing (in descriptions of contemporary landscape gardeners, or ignorant farmers, or greedy landowners, or ill-informed poets), human interference with nature is spoiling and damaging. Rather, Clare claims, the best poetry represents the experience of the poet in the presence of nature, as accurately as possible. In this sense, Clare's early, submissive recourse to smallness is rerouted into a vital attention to minute and specific detail.

Widely recognized as the finest nature poet of the nineteenth century, Clare's verse prioritizes sharpness of attention and accuracy of description, including the visual, auditory, and emotional experience of being in a specific place at a specific moment. This quality has been central to recent critical interest in place, specificity, and identity, but criticism of Clare's poetry has always been concerned with the implications of his status as a nature poet. His superb knowledge of the pettichap's nest, not only of how the nest is built, but even of the history of the materials used in its construction

('withered leaves make up its outward walls / That from the snub-oak dotterel yearly falls / & in the old hedge bottom rot away', MP III 517–19, ll. 17–18), is exemplary of the breadth of his exhaustive attention to intimate detail. His status amongst naturalists is high, and recent scholarship has awarded him laurels according to a set of concerns including conservation, attention, and an awareness of responsibility to the natural world. At times, the idea of Clare's writing as a 'purely' descriptive (which it certainly isn't) has contributed to the sense of him as an unsuccessful Romantic. In his 1757 *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke had condemned 'naked description', because he felt it in no way represented any 'strong and lively feeling' in the observer.[4] This attitude gained increasing traction with an emergent nineteenth-century Romanticism. But Clare's capacity for meticulous description, rendered into astonishing verse, doesn't eliminate all else: feeling remains vital. Essays in this volume note Clare's attachment to the declaration 'I love', and he has his own defence against the accusation that attention to specifics might be secondary to other, more conventionally Romantic ideals:

> Trifles may illustrate great mysterys without derogating any thing from their grandeur – thus the oak need not be ashamed of the acorn as it is its parent – the lion of the little Jackall as it is his provider . . . & trifles also explain great things the fall of a apple led Newton to the discovery of gravity – the shape of a simple leaf to an order in architecture & the shadow from a lamp on the wall to design and perspective . . . little things lead to great discoverys[5]

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The 'Introduction' to *Poems Descriptive* penned by Clare's publisher and various puff-pieces associated with the book's publication represent the earliest formal responses to Clare's work. Collectively, they intended to celebrate and to excuse any 'provincialisms' or unorthodoxy Clare's first readers might have encountered. They seem to have worked; writing to his publisher in September 1821, Clare remarked: 'I am sought after very much agen . . . surely the vanity woud have kill'd me 4 years ago if I had known then how I shoud have been hunted up – & extolled by personal flattery' (*Letters*, p. 215). Then, pessimistically, he adds, '– but let me wait another year or two & t[he] peep show will be over'. To a great extent, it was. *Poems Descriptive* had gone through four editions in its first year, but Clare was disappointed when *The Village Minstrel* did not meet with similar sales figures. *The Shepherd's Calendar* was in progress by 1824 but only crawled into print in 1827, and by 1829 just 400 copies had been sold. The last book of Clare's verse published in his lifetime, *The Rural Muse* (1835),

met with a strong critical reception, but sales remained slow. Despite occasional appearances in journals or magazines, Clare's commercial success was over.

And yet Clare has always had his champions, many of them poets themselves. Even in his relative neglect in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he was always read and celebrated, particularly by poet-editors, including Edmund Blunden, Arthur Symons, and Geoffrey Grigson. Clare's is also an important historical voice, commenting in prose on politics, religion, and aesthetics as well as writing luminous poetry; critics in turn have followed these leads. Modern interest in Clare has risen with the critical fields within which Clare sits so well, including ecocriticism, discourses interested in various forms of dispossession and mental health, and the recovery of the marginalized. Whilst it is not true to say that he ever completely dropped from view, in the last fifty years the significance of Clare's verse has increasingly been recognized.

Most recent criticism has refused to limit itself to the material published (with, we should continue to recognize, Clare's consent) during Clare's lifetime. Clare wrote a vast quantity of poetry he never saw in print, in which he experimented with form and expression. He also invested energy in generically various prose writing. Much of this work does not fit easily into the narrative of the gentle, nature-loving peasant. Already in the early 1820s, for example, Clare had begun his vitriolic 2,200-line satire, *The Parish*, whose tenor differs radically from that of the works Clare managed to publish in the same decade. The tender Clare who emerges from many of his lyrical pieces took delight in brutal Regency boxing tournaments. He drank, and his writing sometimes lashes out at women: aspects of his asylum poem *Don Juan* (LP I 89–102) are disturbing in this regard. Even the folk rituals Clare celebrates in verse have a darker side which prompts his bleak acknowledgement of the vicious tendencies in both men and nature: the sequence of sonnets culminating in the kicking and tearing of a badger (see MP V 360–2) is profoundly representative of the clash of his desire to record and preserve traditional community structures with an abhorrence of the violent inequality of such contests. Some of the best known of Clare's work dates from his time in lunatic asylums, rather than from his printed collections. Whilst certain preoccupations and stylistic habits remain in evidence in this later verse, there are marked discontinuities between it and the earlier material; in particular, interest in the specificity of place is vastly reduced. On the other hand, the seeds of those characteristics commonly identified in the later period are certainly discernible in early work: the 'visionary' poems of the asylum period rework a quality of attention and a kind of intensity which is already strikingly present in the sublime

suspension of 'Noon' (EP I 404–7); the 1841 biblical paraphrases build on a tradition of biblical knowledge evident both in paraphrase and allusion throughout Clare's writing; the emphasis of many later poems on questions of identity and being only expands on a preoccupation clearly pressing (if sometimes unoriginally rendered) in his earliest work.

Some of Clare's writing is specifically and directly political, often angrily so. *The Parish* draws its vigour from Clare's disgust at a social system based in class and wealth, rather than taste, intelligence, and honour. He also drew more metaphorical inspiration from the political structures whose reflections he found in the natural world. 'The Ants' (EP II 56) is a good example of Clare's combining political allegory with precise, natural-historical observation. Often, the parallels are even more implicit. Critics who have been attentive to Clare's political attitudes, then, necessarily have drawn on works from across the spectrum of his poetry, and Clare's writing has lent a perspective on political history which is often overlooked. Clare's political stance is not consistent, or always easy to ascertain: his opinions change across time and according to audience. However, regardless of this difficulty in pinning Clare down, the way in which his political ideas find their outworking in verse has consistently rewarded critical attention.

In the personal as in the political, Clare's recorded attitudes fluctuate significantly. For example, his prose autobiographical fragments support the idea of a man who liked looking at, being near, and the physical intimacy of his relationships with, the opposite sex. He paid the price for this pleasure in terms of physical disease and mental anguish, and he could be caustic about women. Yet he reveals profound sympathy with many women in his writing, and a vast collection of love poems, directed at specific figures and none, also exists; these are tonally and structurally various. At the core of the collection of songs, sonnets, lyrical celebrations, and vitriolic denunciations addressed to or about women runs the thread of Clare's first love, Mary Joyce. Mary, or rather the *idea* of Mary, consistently haunts Clare's poetry. Despite his long marriage to Patty Turner, Mary's figure is woven through the fabric of Clare's verse along with his deep and persistent preoccupation with the idea of a more perfect past.

This latter idea is not a simple nostalgia; it takes many forms, some directly or indirectly biblical, some inflected by other literature, and some more mundane. Relatedly, Clare often reflects on childhood as a more perfect state, and this in turn is connected to his attitude towards the historical reality of enclosure (the process by which formerly common land is appropriated and becomes private property). The effects of the 1809 Act of Parliament for the enclosure of Helpston upon the environs of Clare's native village, and their impact on what John Barrell describes as Clare's 'open field

sense of space',[6] deeply mark Clare's work. As Tim Fulford's essay in this volume demonstrates, Clare's feeling with and for the land is articulated in a range of voices and takes a range of forms, from explicit invective in 'The Mores' (MP II 347–50), to the abdication of the possibility of expression to the landscape itself in 'The Lament of Swordy Well' (MP V 105–14) and 'The Lamentations of Round-Oak Waters' (EP I 228–34) (Chapter 14).

In 1832, with financial support provided by local landowner the Earl Fitzwilliam, Clare moved with his family to a cottage in Northborough, a short distance from his native home in Helpston, near Peterborough. Clare had travelled before, on visits to London and in pursuit of employment. However, a long critical tradition has argued that the 1832 move affected Clare more profoundly; from this point, his work expresses a homesickness and, increasingly, a more general sense of desolation: 'There is a cruelty in all', he claims, in the first line of one of the powerful sonnets he wrote in Northborough (MP V 62). It is important to resist the temptations of cod-psychology: Clare was ill before this relocation was ever contemplated. Nonetheless, his mental health deteriorated, and in 1837 he entered High Beach Asylum in Essex as a voluntary patient.

In 1841, Clare produced a large quantity of verse testifying to his interest at this point in specifically religious ideas. In the same year, he composed *Child Harold* and *Don Juan*, though whether Clare's assertion that he was Byron (or any of the other personae he claimed to be) was the product of a genuine delusion, or simply a posture, can only be conjectured. In July that year, Clare walked away from High Beach and continued, hungry, footsore, and unsheltered, until he reached home, eighty miles away. In December, he was admitted to Northampton General Lunatic Asylum, where he remained until his death in 1864. Throughout this time, Clare continued to write, though if his writing was always inconsistent (in quality, subject matter, and form alike), it is even more demonstrably so once he had been removed to these institutions. Derivative, formulaic 'songs' are commonplace. Many poems address specific women (Clare may have been writing some of these to order for hopeful suitors); some adopt the Scottish voice which was part of Clare's heritage. Other works witness Clare's becoming increasingly confident in his use and adaptation of standard poetic forms, and the middle of the nineteenth century saw the production of some of his most brilliant and powerful verse, including 'I Am' (LP I 396–7), and 'The Gipsy Camp' (LP I 29). This latter poem returns to a subject Clare had visited many times before, but whilst its focus is on isolation rather than the wandering community explored in similar, earlier pieces, the sonnet reveals a poet utterly and dazzlingly in command of his form and his craft.

The temptations of biography have always proved irresistible for critics of Clare's work. Identities abound: the boy born into poverty who got into print despite the odds; the thwarted lover, longing for Mary Joyce to the end of his days; the ecological poet born before his time; the disorientated, homesick figure so much of his 'place' that he was unable to settle just a few miles away from his birthplace; the madman who escaped from one institution only to spend the final portion of his life in another asylum. These snapshots have provided a framework which has supported much critical work even when it hasn't drawn its focus. All of them depend upon representations (sometimes self-representations) of Clare which are sometimes partial or false, yet their prevalence behind the critical corpus means that they continue to demand attention. The representation of Clare has caused editorial controversy, too: some of the early attention to the desirability or otherwise of retaining Clare's 'provincialisms' in published works (a term which we might understand to incorporate both particular language uses and the employment of a wider range of cultural artefacts: stories; myths; names; values) has extended into modern editorial praxis. Debate regarding the difference between an idiosyncratic use of language which best represents what Clare wanted to say, and simple error which he might have hoped to see corrected, has led to legal wrangling.[7] As Mark Storey's essay in this volume points out (Chapter 10), Clare like most poets expected and often welcomed editorial intervention, though like most poets, he was at times frustrated by it. Many of Clare's outbursts against grammatical pedantry manifest a sense of frustration at his own limits, as much as being the political statements they have sometimes been held to be. Nonetheless, there are those who argue that Clare's writing should be presented as far as possible without any editorial intervention, as so-called primitive texts. Others advocate a 'light touch' edition. Still others favour the presentation of Clare in a way more in line with standard practice, suggesting that preserving Clare's earliest attempts unfairly privileges clumsy or awkward moments above polished, later versions. Whichever we believe to be appropriate, this peculiarity of presentation means that encountering Clare is often a different type of experience to reading his contemporaries and can lend a particular (arguably contestable) sense of 'Clare'. More troubling still is the possibility that the largely unpunctuated 'primitive' text might deter prospective readers. Yet even in the 'primitive' texts, Clare's own versification and momentum tend to render his work remarkably accessible.

Despite the fascinations of his biography and publishing history, attention to the originality and brilliance of Clare's poetry offers the most valuable rewards to critics. To demonstrate this, I want to turn now to Clare's 'Walcott Hall and Surrounding Scenery', a poem dating from the early

1820s. Like many of Clare's poems, 'Walcott Hall' participates in various literary traditions. It is highly aware of the conventions of eighteenth-century loco-descriptive poetry; it begins with a standard, personal poetic address; its iambic couplets cleave to a familiar form, and its phraseology of romance, ruins, and reflection on the past place it squarely within the picturesque tradition:

> I love thee in thy mouldering trance
> Old Walcott like a wild romance
> Thy memory meets the strangers gaze
> Ruins that speak of better days
> . . .
> I love thy scenes too wild & free
> For scenes more wild there cannot be
> I love to climb till out of breath
> The uneven surface of thy heath
> In rabbit tracks that streak wi brown
> Steep hill & hollow hurrying down
> Or sidling round the hedges free
> Of pleasant sloping cavity
>
> (MP 11 35–40, ll. 1–4; ll. 7–14)

Amongst the customary picturesque vocabulary here is the word 'wild', which (it turns out) is repeated several times across the 168 lines of the poem. Wildness is associated in line 2 with the specifically literary idea of 'romance'. However, by line 7, Clare is already separating it from that literariness and reclaiming it for the natural scene, a use reasserted in a further repetition of the word in line 8. These superlatively wild scenes are described from within a tradition of 'prospect' poetry, in which the poet conventionally climbs upwards to gain a commanding height. Yet Clare abandons the controlling dignity usually conferred by the privileged, lofty position thus achieved: he is breathless, at risk in an almost Marvellian way of stumbling on rough ground, and awkwardly 'sidling round the hedges' (which sonically recalls that they are liminal *edges*). The lines also contain an idiosyncratic confusion, an enriching rather than a problematic effect, regarding which adjectives, verbs, and nouns belong together. 'Hurrying' is a good example: it attaches semantically to the rabbit tracks, the hilly terrain becoming rabbit-like itself (in its streaking, hurrying movements, its colouring, and the physical and rhymic suggestion of a burrow, in 'hollow'). Yet surely it is Clare who is hurrying? Either way, the reader's eye is dizzyingly dragged up a hill, and then down it again, before moving laterally around whatever it is the hedges encircle. The sense of order usually conferred by the

commanding eye of the prospect poet is displaced, as we cannot be certain about the poem's subject, or the direction or focus of our own gaze. The wildness Clare reiterates seems to be mirrored in the apparently unstructured way in which the landscape is encountered.

Yet the poem redeems this wildness. As it runs on, Clare pulls away from convention. Most significantly, nature, not the poet, is responsible for the scene's visual splendour: *nature* 'sprinkles oer them passing bye / Her witching tints of varied dye' (ll. 71–2). This couplet is part of a longer section in which Clare describes the processes of nature's artistry. The poem persistently declares its self-conscious play with aesthetic categories as it flirts with images of natural creativity and recasts Clare's conviction that the true picturesque is an assertion of nature's *own* order and skill. In his attitude towards wildness, Clare decisively departs from eighteenth-century literary traditions in which the 'dressing' of nature is paralleled with the capacities of language to be 'the dress of thought'.[8] Clare critiques such 'dressing up' explicitly, in a letter to the landscape painter Peter De Wint:

> many Painters look upon nature as a Beau on his person & fancies her nothing unless in full dress – now nature to me is very different & appears best in her every day disabille in fact she is a Lady that never needed sunday or holiday cloaths tho most painters & poets also have & still do consider that she does need little touches of their fancies & vagaries to make her beautiful which I consider deformities (*Letters*, p. 488)

Here, the best artist is the one who can best record natural scenes, not the one who can most imaginatively 'dress' and transform them. In the picturesque literary tradition, greatness is conventionally measured by the ability of the artist to interfere: as William Gilpin, one of its most influential theorists, put it, 'I am so attached to my picturesque rules, that if nature gets wrong, I cannot help putting her right'.[9] Yet it is *nature's* adornment, these 'tints of varied dye', which Clare finds 'witching': the poet-observer is bewitched – overcome – by nature's artistry. Such a sense of being overwhelmed by the scene that nature has presented is the very opposite of the heartless, selective coldness of the picturesque attitude: as Clare is bewitched, analysis is abandoned; the artistry of nature induces the renunciation of selfhood, and Clare's picturesque tips towards the sublime.

According to Clare, the ability to be counted as a poet resides in a capacity for noticing, for observation, as much as creation. In this sense, Clare is not straightforwardly 'Romantic'. But his verse consistently returns us to a sense of emotional response (most acutely experienced as sublimity). Far from being 'merely' or 'purely' descriptive, Clare's writing is always simultaneously an intimate expression of personal reaction (three of the first nine