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John Clare and the End of Description

Ben Hickman

The central claim of this essay, that John Clare wrote stories, is simple: Clare’s poetry, I will argue, though essentially descriptive, presents the world he encounters in a way that is first and foremost in the medium of narrative. The subsidiary argument here, though, is that this is important for understanding Clare’s work, and that underlying the simplicity of my contention is something fundamental about Clare as a poet. The idea of narrative, that is, is important as we try to account for Clare’s recent pre-eminence, which has had something to do with the way in which his writing sets a different example of Romantic nature poetry; narrative is important in allowing us to see the scope and ambition of Clare’s originality in the context of Romantic and Claudian descriptive traditions; and through narrative, one can begin to construct a vocabulary that captures of Clare’s poetics beyond vague generalizations about ‘immediacy’. Clare heralds the end of a powerful conception of description, replacing it with a poetics of the story that we can use to explain his originality in the history of English poetry.

In his seminal study of 1960s American poetry, Enlarging the Temple, Charles Altieri makes a distinction between Wordsworthian ‘immanent’ and Coleridgean ‘symbolist’ modes of poetic thought. Altieri says that these two originally congenial aesthetics have, since the demise of certain Romantic concepts, diverged from each other to form, today, two distinct poetics. A poetics of immanence differs from symbolism, Altieri says, because it ‘need not depend on formal structures seen as interpretive patterns’:

When poets conceive of their work as presenting the action of disclosure rather than of creating order, the formal elements work somewhat differently. In a poetic of immanence, aesthetic elements have primarily epistemological rather than interpretive functions.¹

With a symbolist poetics, on the other hand, ‘what matters is not what there is in immediate experience but what the mind can make
Perceptual and axiological structures'. Wordsworth's poetics can, then, be distinguished from Coleridgean harmonising by its belief in the 'inscrutable workmanship' of the world and a faith that merely being in it is already enough to 'reconcile / Discordant elements'. In Altieri's words, an immanent poetics works by 'the insistence that the moment immediately and intensely experienced can restore one to harmony with the world and provide ethical and psychological renewal.'

The argument is that we are increasingly, as a society, embracing immanence over symbolism. We have chosen Wordsworth. What creates a tension in this ancestry, however, is the religious foundation of Romantic 'immanent value':

Where humanist cultural ideals were, some form of immediate contact with natural energies must be restored. But this restoration cannot follow even the example of romantic nature poetry, for romantic views of a purposive and numinous force immanent in nature are derived from a renewal and reinterpretation of Christianity. Now the challenge is to imagine non-Christian sources of immanent value.

For us, thinking about Clare, the problem with all Romantic poetry is that, because of the quasi-theological justification always made to underlie all its encounters with nature, even 'immanence' is drawn toward the synthesising categories of symbolism. Wordsworth's Prelude may speak of how the simple love of nature can be morally edifying, but in practice the poem operates on the assumption that there is a presence outside the world giving it significance, making Wordsworth sound all too 'axiological' to modern ears. My contention here will be that Clare, unlike the poets of Romanticism proper, sets a different example of immanent nature poetry insofar as he elides all forms of symbolism thoroughly.

Insofar as Clare's encounter with the world is mediated by story rather than meditation, he avoids the classic Romantic trope of the poet as analogous to God, as outlined in Coleridge's vision of the poet in which, because 'Nature is God's Art' and poetry is Nature's Art, symbolism can both represent the spirit of Nature, and mirror analogically the process of creation itself. Clare, that is, the pure practitioner to the Romantic philosopher-poet, not only eschews a theological apparatus, he also neglects to seek a justification for his disclosure of natural processes—his impulse is to narrate, not imagine and compare. Hence, to finesse the title of the present essay, we are partly talking about the end of the end (or external purpose) of description.

The distinctions being outlined here, of course, divide Clare criticism. The first camp, headed by John Barrell, insists on Clare as a poet of particularity, intimate with the local, making 'no connection between an abstract, presumed structure of landscape and the landscape at hand'. This approach has been subject to attack and often misreading in recent times by proponents of a more knowing Clare, aware of the broader functions of language as a mediating force; this criticism paints Clare as a poet of categories, challenging traditional notions of his 'immediacy'. I may as well say at the outset that my sympathies are firmly in the Barrell camp: writers of the 'knowing' Clare like Paul Chirico and Kelsey Thornton have principally, it seems to me, turned Clare into a Romantic poet, and made him much the less interesting for it. To say that Clare is aware of the transformative power of language is probably not to say much—and it certainly fails to say anything about Clare's originality, or why we read him. The grafting of crude poststructuralist notions of language onto Clare is particularly problematic: Chirico, for instance, speaks of Clare's desire to 'escape with comparative perception', propelled by a 'desire to gaze straight at the face of divine truth', which is surely wide of the mark. Barrell needs to make no such claim for his particularizing Clare: indeed, it seems the purpose of immediacy in Barrell's Clare is precisely to deny abstractions like God.

Clearly, we must resist naturalising Clare and returning to the notions of innocence and primitivism Clare has suffered from ever since they were first promulgated by his publisher John Taylor in 1820. Rejecting primitivism does not mean, however, that we need to normalize Clare by turning him into a Kantian, manifold experience consciously siting through the mind's categories like other Romantics. Clare's poetry is not an unmediated transference of experience, and nor does Clare believe it to be: I hope to show that the mediation of narrative is different from the mediation of what the Romantics called 'Imagination' and what we might now call meditation. Both are, of course, forms of artifice: my contention will be that the latter is in at least one sense more 'immediate' than the hypostatizing tendency of other Romantics because it can disclose the progress of time.

We can introduce these claims in outline by looking at Clare's famous sonnet upon a mouse's nest. The few discussions of...
narrative in Clare have treated it as a separate issue within Clare's poetry, focusing on poems specifically narrative in genre: John Goodridge, who has done most of the work in the area, seeks to explain Clare's narrative style in the context of what 'story-telling always is'. Clare's descriptive poems, however, are also narrative at base, forcing us to reconsider the very question of what 'story-telling always is'. Here is the poem:

I found a ball of grass among the hay
& proged it as I passed & went away
& when I looked I fancied something stirred
& turned agen & hoped to catch the bird
When out an old mouse bolted in the wheat
With all her young ones hanging at her teats
She looked so odd & so grotesque to me
I ran & wondered what the thing could be
& pushed the knapweed bunches where I stood
When the mouse hurried from the crawling brood
The young ones squeaked and when I went away
She found her nest again among the hay
The water oer the pebbles scarce could run
& broad old sexpools glittered in the sun

[John Clare, Middle Period, V, p. 246]

though many of Clare's other sonnets of the mid-1830s, like 'The ploughman hurrys up by crow of cock' (Middle Period, V, p. 245) are more easily identifiable as stories for their ballad-like rhythms and characters, this ostensibly descriptive poem nonetheless has an equally narrative structure. The American poet John Ashbery, speaking of the poem, calls Clare 'an instrument of telling'. Resisting imposing patterns of interpretation, then, the poem sets up what we can initially think of as a rhetoric of telling. There is no Thomsonian stasis in this perspective 'flitting' (one of Clare's favourite words), and no time for Romantic contemplation as the miniature events tumble out, one line after another. Clare's immersion is not in his subject, however: he looks up from the mouse's nest, abandoning it in that final couplet. Though these last two lines have been read in terms of an Eliotic 'objective correlative', expressing some kind of dejection at maternal neglect, there is a much simpler explanation: Clare looks away. Thematic decorum and unity, that is, are abandoned for the thing that makes the poem a narrative: the story of Clare's perceptions as they occur one after another. If a glittering cesspool catches Clare's eye and attention before his fourteen lines are up, then this is the image that ends the poem. Clare's poetic approach is open to 'external' phenomena, like the mouse, he abandons the 'crawling brood', 'bolting' his focus elsewhere, and it is this openness that forms the logic of the narrative. The immanence for Clare is in observation itself rather than phenomena per se (this explains John Middleton Murry's curious but suggestive comment that Clare's vision does not 'pass beyond itself'). This immanent focus, though, is not the subjectivism of Romantic 'acts of synthesis', to use Kant's term, but a narrative that, because of its disciplined attention to sequence, precludes certain levels of conceptualisation. Coleridge, for whom 'all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead', generally seeks an atemporal space for contemplation, as in the timeless, midnight hour of the sitting room in 'Frost at Midnight', a scene that makes no demands of attentive vigilance on the poet to keep up with a changing landscape. Clare wants the changing landscape, however, and narration is his method for having it.

The question is, of course, what is so important about this distinction? Let us backtrack a little. Firstly, we need to decide how Clare gets into this position. The nature of description is a central question for Clare because the descriptive poetry he writes is contemporaneous with both the rise and crisis of description in European literature generally. In the work of James Thomson and his followers throughout Europe description seems to lose an external purpose, thereby occasioning much anxiety among eighteenth-century aesthetic thinkers. Description in its widest sense, up until the early eighteenth century, is always auxiliary to another end: the guide, the encyclopaedia, geographical description for military use, or the catalogue. In The Seasons, however, description claims to become exclusively representational, for its own sake. The post-Claudian backlash of the mid-eighteenth century, headed by G. E. Lessing's Laocoön (1776), objects to poetry's assumed function under a descriptive art that, according to Lessing, presents mimetically but ultimately superfluously something which I can look out of my window to see. The eighteenth century's ut pictura poesis debate echoes into Romanticism in the thought of Edmund Burke, Coleridge and George Henry Lewes. Description under Romanticism is not the job of poetry—at least not for its own sake, in the sense of reproducing objects (witness, for example, the Platonism of Shelley). Burke states this ban an 'mere' description most explicitly, introducing Kant's call for art to provide an 'understanding' to compensate for the loss of the
thing-in-itself. Burke, that is, demands that poetry ‘affect rather by sympathy than imitation; to display rather the effect of things on the mind of the speaker, or of others, than to present a clear idea of the things themselves’. What Burke attempts in the Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful is the inclusion of description into poetry, but only insofar as it serves another purpose—in this case, to give us an account of an inner state. Burke replaces a poetics of mere description with one where description itself is secondary, required to arouse ‘strong and lively feelings’:

We yield to sympathy what we refuse to description. The truth is, all verbal description, merely as naked description, though never so exact, conveys so poor and insufficient an idea of the thing described, that it could scarcely have the smallest effect, if the speaker did not call in to his aid those modes of speech that mark a strong and lively feeling in himself.

I do not wish to argue that Clare read Lessing and Burke. He did, however, feel the pressure of the new anti-descriptive trend. John Taylor urging him to ‘Speak of the Appearances of Nature... more philosophically’, or Keats’s suggestion that his ‘Images from Nature are too much introduced without being called for by a particular sentiment’, are echoed constantly by close friends and critics alike. Clare’s work, however, constantly tends towards the descriptive per se, and his subject matter mostly gives the impression of being arbitrary—justified, often explicitly, by the simplest sentiment of all: ‘I love to see...’. Romantic ideas of description as a vehicle for abstraction (‘strong and lively feelings’) were something, as P. M. S. Dawson has pointed out, that Clare was fully aware of as opposed to his own work of ‘naked description’.

Conventional modern ideas of description can be summed up in Paul Valery’s words:

The invasion of Literature by description was parallel to that of painting by landscape. A description is composed of sentences whose order can generally reverse: I can describe this room by a series of clauses whose order is not important.

The allusion to an ‘invasion’ here is not to Claudian landscape poetry (though it would apply to this too), but rather to the proliferation of description in realist fiction. Here is Flaubert:

He had his hair cut in bangs, like a cantor in the village church, and he had a gentle, timid look. He wasn’t broad in the shoulders, but his jacket with its black buttons seemed tight under the arms; and through the vents of his cuffs we could see red wrists that were clearly accustomed to being covered. His yellowish breeches were hiked up by his suspenders, and from them emerged a pair of blue-stockinged legs. He wore heavy shoes, hobnailed and badly shined.

The details here are reversible and static, as Valery’s conception demands, and ordered to a logic that is arbitrarily spatial (it runs from top to bottom). Though it shares the Clarean trope of precision, Flaubert’s description differs from Clare’s work fundamentally. For in Clare, in spite of the landscape subject matter, scenes are such that any pictorial rendering is quickly seen to be impossible. This much is clear in ‘Emmonsails Heath in Winter’:

I love to see the old heaths withered brake
Mingle its crimpled leaves with furze and ling
While the old Heron from the lonely lake
Starts slow and flaps his melancholly wing
And oddling crow in idle motions swing
On the half rotten ash trees topmost twig
Beside whose trunk the gipsey makes his bed
Up flies the bouncing wood cock from the brig
Where a black quagmire quakes beneath the tread
The field fare chatters in the whistling thorn
And for the awe round fields and closen rove
And coy bumbarrels twenty in a drove
Flit down the hedgerows in the frozen plain
And hang on little twigs and start again

(Middle Period, IV, p. 286)

Though Clare is often seen as a poet of disconnection, his work is in fact radically connected: here, the brake ‘mingle’ with the furze, the heron sympathises with the ‘lonely lake’ with his own ‘melancholly wing’, the gypsy is physically linked to the crow via the tree that draws Clare’s attention to him, there is a ‘drove’ of filially connected bumbarrels, and so on. These things
are connected in such a way that the perception of the one causes the perception of the other. They are evidently perceptions and descriptions occurring in time. It is not that Clare loves to see this and this and this in a parataxis of impressions; rather, he loves to see them in precisely this order: this is what Heaney refers to when noting ‘the inexorable one-thing-after-anotherness of the world’ in Clare’s vision. The movement should be seen as a narrative of perception; as Blackwood’s Magazine discerned at the time, Clare presents ‘a series of images all naturally arising, as it were, out of each other’. This narrative can be causal [as in the crow and the gypsy] or simply a subplot related to the wider story of Clare’s wandering, as in the bumbarels.

Clare’s guide in the matter of combining narrative and description is, as we might expect, something close to home: the ballad. The notion of what is close to home is a troubled one for Clare commentators following the recent attempts to de-marginalize the poet; the idea of John Clare and the Folk Tradition, to take the title of George Deacon’s 1983 book, has raised concerns for many critics claiming a canonical place for Clare within the context of ‘English Poetry’ above and beyond self-taught, peasant or working-class traditions. However, the reclaiming of Clare as a universal figure has had an unnecessary tendency to judge Clare’s importance based on its conformity with those other ‘important’ poets, the Romantics, and to revert to a Clare based on the ‘huge Wordsworthian shadow’ Harold Bloom thought he observed hanging over the poet in 1961. Too frequently the upshot of this tendency is to throw the baby out with the bathwater, denying the class roots of Clare’s poetry along with exaggerated claims of his innocence as if they were two sides of the same coin. We need to ask not just whether Clare finds something valuable within folk traditions, but whether it is folk traditions that allow us even to think about Clare as a canonical poet in the first place. Folk traditions will marginalize Clare only if we let them, by ourselves marginalizing folk traditions.

Tim Chilcott points out, simply speaking biographically, that ‘poetry for the young Clare embodied two central features: it began both as story and as sound’—that is, as balladry. Clare’s illiterate mother, as Clare also later would, had a collection of ballads, while his father’s prodigious ballad-singing talents (he could apparently recite over a hundred by heart) were, Clare asserts, his first exposure to poetry. George Deacon has shown just how immersed in musical folk traditions Clare was. We hardly need biography to tell us the importance of the ballad to Clare as a member of a community as well as a poet, though: Clare is insistent on it himself, throughout his early work. The long poem at the centre of Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery, ‘The Village Minstrel’, places the telling of stories both at the centre of communal traditions and the poet’s own early artistic growth. The question is whether Clare eventually rejects this homespun ballad tradition for more sophisticated poetic forms or, as I will claim, radically extends its scope.

Stylistically, Clare’s very early work is indebted to folk and ballad traditions in ways that are, on the whole, simple enough. This is ‘My Last Shilling’, probably one of Clare's earliest poems:

O dismal disaster! O troublesome lot!  
What a heart rending theme for my musing I've got  
Then pray what's the matter? O friend I'm not willing  
The thought grieves me sore  
Now I'm drove to the shore  
And must I then spend the last shilling the shilling  
And must I then spend the last shilling

[Early Poems, I, p. 52]

It is fair to say we do not recognise Clare’s most interesting poetry in these lines. It is only a minor step before we do, however, as in a ‘Hunting Song’ from Clare’s first volume, ‘To day the Fox must dye’:

The cock awakes the rosey morn  
& tells approaching day  
While Reynold sneaks along the lawn  
Belated with his prey  
—O never think to find thy home  
But for thy safety fly;  
The Sportsman’s long proclaim’d thy doom—  
‘To-day a Fox shall dye’

The bugle blows the sporting train  
Swift mount the snorting steed  
Each fence defiance bids in vain  
Their progress to impede—  
The cover broke, they drive along,  
& Raise a jovial cry  
Each dog barks chorus to my song  
‘To day a fox shall dye’

Like lightning oer the hills they sweep
The readiest roads they go
The Five 'bar'd gate with ease they leap!
Hark forward tally ho
The mist hangs on & scents him strong
The moisture makes it lye
The Woods re echo to my song
'This day the Fox must dye' (Early Poems, I, pp. 400-1)

The poem is not so different from the lyric verse in the volume, such as ‘Rural Morning’. Quoting this poem at length, we can see how narrative has become inseparable from landscape description:

Now straying beams from days unclosing eye
In copper colourd patches flush the sky
And from nights prison strugglingly encroach
To bring the summons of warm days approach
Till slowly mounting oer the ridge of clouds
That yet half shows his face and half enshrouds
Th' unfetter'd sun takes his unbounded reign
And wakes all life to noise and toil again
And while his opening mellows oer the scenes
Of wood and field their many mingling greens
Industrys bustling din once more devours
The soothing peace of mornings early hours
The grunt of hogs freed from their nightly dens
And constant cacklings of new laying hens
And ducks and geese that clamorous joys repeat
The splashing comforts of the pond to meet
And chirping sparrows dropping from the eaves
For offal kernels that the poultry leaves
Oft signal calls of danger chittering high
At skulking cats and dogs approaching nigh
And lowing steers that hollow echoes wake
Around the yard their nightly fast to break
As from each barn the lumping flail rebounds
In mingling consert with the rural sounds,
While oer the distant fields more faintly creep
The murmuring beatings of unfolding sheep
And ploughmen's callings that more hoarse proceed
Where tuff industry urges labours speed
The bellowing of cows with udders full
The welcome halloo of the maids ‘cum mull’
And rumbling waggons deafen now again
Rousing the dust along the narrow lane
And cracking whips and shepherd's hooting cries

From woodland echoes urging sharp replies
Hodge in his waggon marks the wonderous tongue
And talks with echo as he drives along,
Still cracks his whip bawls every horses name
And echo still as ready bawls the same
The puzzling myster eye he would gladly cheat
And fain would utter what it can't repeat
Till speedless trials prove the doubted elf
As skilld in noise and sounds as hodge himself
And quite convinc’d with the proofs it gives
The boy drives on and fancys echo lives
Like some wood-fiend that frights benightened men
The troubling spirit of a robbers den

The determining force in this descriptive passage is not, as Burke would have wanted, an underlying expression of Clare’s innermost feelings, but a more immediate pleasure in getting everything down, or at least remembering and composing it, as it happens as a narrative, one thing after another. In this poem Clare tells the whole story of the unfolding of morning as its sister poem ‘Rural Evening’ does of evening, beginning with Hodge the horse-boy rising ‘Ere yet the sun unveils his smiles to view’ to when ‘Last on the road the cowboy careless swings’. The scene of morning is on the move, and the medium of the story must chart this movement.

In this sense, the hunting song has a particular importance in the trajectory of Clare’s career. Donna Landry has read the Romantic impulse to walk as a displacement of the impulse to hunt, which was coming under pressure in its traditional forms at the end of the eighteenth century with the development of an increasingly commodified sporting culture for a rural elite. The quarry for Romantics generally becomes ‘picturesque views’ and ‘sublime experiences’, but for Clare, who unlike many other Romantics directly felt the decline of ‘Countrey Contentments’, the two experiences are far more literally entwined. That Clare’s descriptions are often told from the point of the view of a walker is nothing unique in the context of Romanticism, but the nature of his walking is very distinctive indeed. If Thomson represents static landscapes from a distance and Coleridge steps back into a meditational sphere of frozen time, it is distance in both these senses that Clare, throughout his career, makes a conscious attempt to resist. Such distancing affects his ability to move, to change angles, to observe other things nearby and to notice new
things happening. The hunting song is the prototype for Clare’s descriptive poetry because it foregrounds his descriptions as the relation of adventures in discovery—the search, the finding, the closing in, the surprise. ‘The Nightingales Nest’ works in just this way:

Her joys are evergreen, her world is wide
—Hark there she is as usual lets be hush
For in this black thorn clump if rightly guest
Her curious house is hidden—part aside
These hazel branches in a gentle way
& stoop right cautious near the rustling boughs
[Middle Period, III, p. 458]

The poem struggles to keep up with its subject, and the literal involvement of the reader reinforces this urgency, as the pressing communications of a more practical nature interrupt the small talk of abstraction. Talk of the nightingale’s ‘joys’ is suddenly interrupted, by the most perfect expression of Clare’s priorities: ‘Hark there she is’. Soon, however, Clare (and his reader) scare the nightingale away:

there put that bramble bye
Nay trample on its branches & get near
—How subtle is the bird she started out
& raised a plaintive note of danger nigh
Ere we were past the brambles & now near
Her nest she sudden stops [Middle Period, III, p. 460]

This flight is no problem for Clare, who, as Hugh Haughton puts it, ‘prefers two birds in the bush to any number in the hand’.27 Again, it is not the bird itself that is primarily of interest to Clare, but rather the unfolding story of its partial discovery, the thrill of the chase.

This embedded narrative sense is equally true in Clare’s more ‘static’ work. Even poems purely descriptive in their aims, where nothing ‘happens’ in any conventional sense that the ballad would recognise, are unmistakably narration. Here is ‘Hares at Play’:

The birds are gone to bed the cows are still
And sheep lie panting on each old mole hill
And underneath the willows grey-green bough
Like toil a resting—lies the fallow plough
The timid hares throw daylights fears away

On the lanes road to dust and dance and play
Then dabble in the grain by nought deterred
To lick the dewfall from the barleys beard
Then out they sturt again and round the hill
Like happy thoughts—dance—squat—and loiter still
Till milking maidens in the early morn
Gingle their yokes and sturt them in the corn
Through well known beaten paths each nimbling hare
Sturts quick as fear—and seeks its hidden lair
[ Middle Period, IV, p. 233]

The time framework here, as in so much of Clare’s poetry, is the day: the narrative progresses insofar as it nears its end, the coming of a new morning. After a brief tableau setting the poem’s starting time, the poem narrates the habits of the hare over the course of the night. The narration takes its cue from ballad conventions: it is a strictly sequential, third-person and – by virtue of its heavy rhyming – musical story. Most interesting is the way in which the story pressures and transforms its description, or its own telling. Because Clare is forced to relate a period of time in the sonnet, the details of necessity become sketchy. This sketchiness effects an impression of Clare trying to keep up: ‘dance — squat—and loiter still’.

We may appeal here to Michel Beaujour’s distinction between two types of description. Beaujour discusses the essential difference between descriptive tableau (often seen as the only type of description) and description of a more dynamic type:

while gardens are static and made up of simultaneous events, the working of a mechanism is motion, transfer of energy, a chain of causes and effects. In short, one would expect the description of a garden to be quite a different linguistic procedure from relating how a lawn mower works.28

‘Hares at Play’, albeit beautifully and ambiguously, is a natural historian’s account of the nocturnal behaviour of hares (the beauty lying precisely in its presentation as a story). But the poem is also a mechanical account of this phenomenon. It is not a description of a landscape per se (if it were, the style of the first four lines would continue for the whole poem) but rather a description of how hares work—or, at least, how they play. Clare merges narrative with description, not in the conventional sense of combining
atmosphere with action (which rather keeps them separate) but in what is essentially a form of chronography, a description of time. ‘Hares at Play’ is as much an account of Clare’s experience of the night and its mechanics as it is about what a hare ‘is’ in the natural historian’s terms.

Beaujour’s metaphor of how something works is suggestive in a more specific way as well, though. The belated but now intense interest in Clare as a poet of labour has rightly focused on the political content of Clare’s thinking about the issue, but it is worth making the point that not only is the medium of Clarean labour the story, but that the medium of Clare’s natural description is often the story of labour. Describing a place, Clare so regularly reverts to describing its people instead that a poem like the famous ‘The Lament of Swordy Well’, in which the personified old quarry speaks the poem, is not so surprising after all.

The rhythm of labour is most memorably presented in The Shepherd’s Calendar. Building on earlier poems like ‘The Woodman’ and ‘The Harvest Morning’, in which the working day frames and measures the natural world, The Shepherd’s Calendar essentially makes time the sovereign of place. Returning to the Thomson landscape tradition of The Seasons, we can see the originality of Clare’s pastoral as a pastoral including labour and movement. Here are the beginnings of Thomson’s winter (right), and Clare’s in The Shepherd’s Calendar (left):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Thomson:} & \quad \text{Withering and keen the winter comes} \\
& \quad \text{The bankrupt lists or price of grain} \\
\text{Clare:} & \quad \text{See, Winter comes to rule the varied year,} \\
& \quad \text{Sullen and sad, with all his rising train—} \\
& \quad \text{Vapours, and clouds, and storms. Be these my theme,} \\
& \quad \text{These, that exalt the soul to solemn thought,} \\
& \quad \text{And heavenly musing, Welcome, kindred glooms!} \\
& \quad \text{Congenial horrors, hail! With frequent foot,} \\
& \quad \text{And sung of Nature with unceasing joy,} \\
& \quad \text{When nursed by careless solitude I lived} \\
& \quad \text{And treading through your rough domain;} \\
& \quad \text{Trod the pure-virgin-snows, myself as pure.}\end{align*}
\]

Again, images come out of each other: but more specifically here, all the characters – owl, mice, boys, horse – enter a scene that the thresher has set in motion, in what is perhaps the miniature archetype of all Clarean landscapes.

Thomson’s picturesque landscapes, Coleridge’s ‘fixed and dead’ objects, and Lessing’s anxieties about the ‘physical object com[ing] into collision with the consecutiveness of speech’ all form the context of Clare’s writing. Clare does not simply fail to see this fixed character of the world, however—it is a gesture of defiance on his part to deny such fixity, whether in the shape of enclosure, taxonomy, punctuation, or bourgeois, urban conceptions of ideal (but constructed) landscape. A poem called ‘The Trespass’ is illustrative of Clare’s whole landscaping aesthetic, for Clare is always trespassing the picturesque landscape, the enclosed land masquerading as natural landscape; always invading the apparently natural, static appearances of ‘nature’ with the dynamic actions of

is a vehicle, Clare is interested only in following the ‘changing scene’. Clare’s vision of the pastoral in the present tense, going against the traditionally timeless form where it is always spring, the lovers always young, and the world always ahistorical, provides a vision of the countryside in flux, constantly changing with the months and seasons, and contingent on historical circumstance even to the ‘price of grain’. Clare’s poem, giving equal space to each time of year, relates the varying degrees of happiness, fruitfulness and labour that they bring.

Everything moves in The Shepherd’s Calendar. Even frozen brooks are in ‘chill delay’ rather than stasis, and though in winter time passes slowly and without much work, motion remains at the centre of everything:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The thresher first thro darkness deep} \\
& \quad \text{Awakes the mornings winter sleep} \\
& \quad \text{Scaring the owlet from her prey} \\
& \quad \text{Long before she dreams of day} \\
& \quad \text{That blinks above head on the snow} \\
& \quad \text{Watching the mice that squeaks below} \\
& \quad \text{And foddering boys sojourn again} \\
& \quad \text{By rhyme hung hedge and frozen plain} \\
& \quad \text{Shuffling thro the sinking snows} \\
& \quad \text{Blowing his fingers as he goes} \\
& \quad \text{To where the stock in bellowings hoarse} \\
& \quad \text{Call for their meals in dreary close [pp. 2-3]\end{align*}
\]
birds, the plot of land with a story and personality, and constantly encroaching on the idealised prospect with narrative accounts of hard labour and exploitation. This is what Clare meant by ‘dirty reality’, and why so many commentators have found the idea of enclosure so suggestive as a metaphor for all that is anathema to Clare’s poetics.

It is the way in which Clare transforms description into story that enables such a poetics. Whether challenging static, idealised conceptions of the pastoral, questioning the viability or denying himself the meditational space that would belie the true nature of experiencing landscape, Clare’s originality, for all his own professions of simplicity, lies in the complex welding of two hitherto separate and even incompatible forms—narrative and description—into a poetics of place that is also an expression of time.

NOTES

2 Ibid., p. 36.
3 Ibid., p. 78.
4 Ibid., p. 79.
8 Chirico, John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader, p. 141.
12 Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, A78/B103.
14 See G. E. Lessing, Laocoon, trans. Robert Phillimore [London: Routledge, 1874]; Lessing also objects to the illusory shortcoming of descriptive poetry, mainly on the grounds that it takes longer to read a description than to look at the object described.
15 Lesses criticises poetry that is merely ‘an animated catalogue of things’ (‘Hegel’s Philosophy of Art’, British and Foreign Review, vol. 13 [1842]). Coleridge lamented poems in which ‘the reader naturally asks why words, and not painting, are used?’ (Coleridge, Shakespearean Criticism, ed. T. M. Rayson, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1930: II, 134).
17 Ibid., p. 160.
18 Letter to Clare, 4 March 1826, Critical Heritage, p. 263.
22 Heaney, p. 137.
27 Hugh Haughton, ‘Progress and Rhyme’, in Haughton, p. 58.
31 Lessing, Laocoon, p. 74.