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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.<sup>1</sup>

With a symbolist poetics, on the other hand, 'what matters is not what there is in immediate experience but what the mind can make

of it... transform[ing] the flux of human experience into coherent perceptual and axiological structures'.<sup>2</sup> 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.'<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> 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'.<sup>6</sup> 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'.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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 sifting 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'.<sup>9</sup> 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

(*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'.<sup>10</sup> 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'<sup>11</sup>). This immanent focus, though, is not the subjectivism of Romantic 'acts of synthesis',<sup>12</sup> 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',<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> The eighteenth century's *ut pictura poesis* debate echoes into Romanticism in the thought of Edmund Burke, Coleridge and George Henry Lewes.<sup>15</sup> 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'.<sup>16</sup> What Burke attempts in the *Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* is the inclusion of description into a poetic, 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> 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'.<sup>19</sup>

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 one can generally *reverse*: I can describe this room by a series of clauses whose order is not important.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup>

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 crimped 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 gipsy 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 'mingles' 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.<sup>22</sup> 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'.<sup>23</sup> 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 bumarrels.

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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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 Ive got  
 Then pray whats 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 saftey 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 colour'd 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 consort with the rural sounds;  
 While oer the distant fields more faintly creep  
 The murmuring bleatings 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 replys  
 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 mysterey 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 fancies echo lives  
 Like some wood-fiend that frights benighted men  
 The troubling spirit of a robbers den  
 (*Early Poems*, II, pp. 614-5)

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.<sup>26</sup> 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'.<sup>27</sup> 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 daylight's 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* (or a *gardener*) works.<sup>28</sup>

'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,<sup>29</sup> 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):

<p>Withering and keen the winter comes While comfort flies to close shut rooms And sees the snow in feathers pass Winnowing by the window glass And unfelt tempests howl and beat Above his head in corner seat And musing oer the changing scene Farmers behind the tavern scene Sit—or wi elbow idly prest On hob reclines the corners guest Reading the news to mark again The bankrupt lists or price of grain</p>	<p>See, Winter comes to rule the varied year, Sullen and sad, with all his rising train— Vapours, and clouds, and storms. Be these my theme; These, that exhalt the soul to solemn thought, And heavenly musing. Welcome, kindred glooms! Congenial horrors, hail! With frequent foot, Pleased have I, in my cheerful morn of life, When nursed by careless solitude I lived And sung of Nature with unceasing joy, Pleased have I wandered through your rough domain, Trode the pure-virgin-snows, myself as pure.<sup>30</sup></p>
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It is obvious that Clare's poem gets going straight away with an abruptness completely absent from Thomson's, but the real contrast here is in the swift and dynamic precision of Clare's description versus the static, generalising rhetoric of Thomson. Thomson has a theme of 'purity' for which his entire introduction

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:

The thresher first thro darkness deep  
Awakes the mornings winter sleep  
Scaring the owlet from her prey  
Long before she dreams of day  
That blinks above head on the snow  
Watching the mice that squeaks below  
And foddering boys sojourn again  
By rhyme hung hedge and frozen plain  
Shuffling thro the sinking snows  
Blowing his fingers as he goes  
To where the stock in bellowings hoarse  
Call for their meals in dreary close (pp. 2-3)

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.<sup>31</sup> 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

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

- 1 Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry During the 1960s* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1980), p. 24.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- 5 See Mary Rahme, 'Coleridge's Concept of Symbolism', *Studies in English Literature*, 9:4 (Autumn 1969), 619-32.
- 6 John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840: an Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 161.
- 7 For other influential examples of the former see also the work of Tom Paulin and Seamus Heaney on Clare, as well as John Lucas, *John Clare* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994) and David Constantine, 'Outside Eden: John Clare's Descriptive Poetry', in *An Infinite Complexity: Essays in Romanticism*, ed. by J. R. Watson (Edinburgh University Press, 1983), pp. 181-201. For the latter see especially: Kelsey Thornton, 'The Complexity of John Clare', in *John Clare: A Bicentenary Celebration*, ed. Richard Foulkes (Northampton: University of Leicester, 1994), pp. 41-56; Paul Chirico, *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Margaret Russett, 'Like "Wedding Gowns or Money from the Mint": Clare's Borrowed Inheritance', *Romantic Circles Praxis Series: 'Romanticism and the Law'* (March 1999), <www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/law/russett/mruss.htm>.
- 8 Chirico, *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader*, p. 141.
- 9 John Goodridge, 'Telling Stories: Clare, Folk Culture, and Narrative Techniques', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 29: 3 (1998), 164-7.
- 10 John Ashbery, *Other Traditions: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 16.
- 11 John Middleton Murry, *John Clare and Other Studies* (London: Peter Nevill, 1950), pp. 19-20.
- 12 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A78/B103.
- 13 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. George Watson (London: J. M. Dent, 1975), vol. I, p. 304.
- 14 See G. E. Lessing, *Laocoön*, 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 Lewes 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. Raysor, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1930: II, 134).
- 16 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), ed. by Adam Phillips (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 157.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 160.
- 18 Letter to Clare, 4 March 1826, *Critical Heritage*, p. 263.
- 19 P. M. S. Dawson, 'Of Birds and Bards: Clare and His Romantic Contemporaries', in *John Clare: New Approaches*, ed. by John Goodridge and Simon Kövesi (Helpston: John Clare Society, 2000).
- 20 Paul Valery, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), vol. 2, pp. 1219-20 (his italics).
- 21 Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Francis Steegmuller (New York: Modern Library, 1957), p. 4.
- 22 Heaney, p. 137.
- 23 Quoted in *Critical Heritage*, p. 229.
- 24 Harold Bloom, 'John Clare: The Wordsworthian Shadow', in *The Visionary Company* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), pp. 434-45.
- 25 Tim Chilcott, 'A real world @ doubting mind': a critical study of the poetry of John Clare (Hull University Press, 1985).
- 26 Donna Landry, *The Invention of the Countryside: Hunting, Walking, and Ecology in English Literature, 1671-1831* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 218-21.
- 27 Hugh Haughton, 'Progress and Rhyme', in *Haughton*, p. 58.
- 28 Michel Beaujour, 'Some Paradoxes of Description', *Yale French Studies*, 61 (1981), 28.
- 29 See especially, Sarah Houghton, 'John Clare and Festivity', *JCSJ*, 23 (2004), 21-43; and Stephen Colclough, "'Labour and Luxury": Clare's Lost Pastoral and the Importance of the Voice of Labour in the Early Poems', in *John Clare: New Approaches*, ed. by John Goodridge and Simon Kövesi (Helpston: The John Clare Society, 2000), pp. 77-91.
- 30 John Clare, *The Shepherd's Calendar*, ed. Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield, (Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 1; James Thomson, *The Seasons and The Castle of Indolence*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 129.
- 31 Lessing, *Laocoön*, p. 74.