



5-10-2016

The Enclosure of Eden: John Clare and the Politics of Place and Past

Amanda Labriola

Follow this and additional works at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Labriola, Amanda. (2016). The Enclosure of Eden: John Clare and the Politics of Place and Past. In *BSU Honors Program Theses and Projects*. Item 151. Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj/151
Copyright © 2016 Amanda Labriola

The Enclosure of Eden:
John Clare and the Politics of Place and Past

Amanda Labriola

Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

May 10, 2016

Dr. Elizabeth Veisz, Thesis Director
Dr. John Kucich, Committee Member
Prof. Bruce Machart, Committee Member



William Wordsworth, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley. Undeniably, the names alone of some of the most esteemed Romantic-era writers in the English language carry with them a remarkable weight of prestige. Until recently, the name of their contemporary, John Clare, drew few associations other than, perhaps, the image of a green and impoverished ‘peasant poet.’ Keats himself said of Clare’s work, “images from Nature are too much introduced without being called for by a particular Sentiment” (qtd. in Barrell 129). We may assume that Keats’ comment means to critique Clare’s penchant for copious doses of seemingly superficial description that, in Keats’s estimation, fail to illuminate an explicit feeling or idea. However, Clare’s rigorous rendering of image is never superfluous and to conclude as much is to misread the essence of his work. Clare’s representation of natural space is never just a poetic externalization of ‘a particular sentiment,’ but rather a firsthand, experiential and concrete representation of a location definite and *actual* rather than imagined. The intimacy he holds with his rural home of Helpston as conveyed through his work was genuine, and remained consistent until England’s Enclosure Acts reached Clare’s sequestered village and rent him from the land and lifestyle he so cherished.

At its core, nature is an idea that is ever-shifting and always under the influence of individual perspective. The work of John Clare is perhaps the quintessence of local representation that exemplifies a natural world molded chiefly by the optics of subjectivity. Myopic, however, he is not. The eye of this rusticated poet is one that never averts. For Clare, more so than the other Romantics, nature transcends ‘idea’ and makes its landing in image, it turns from concept to concrete, from abstract to actual. Clare was no bard, nor did he claim to be. And as such, the Muses were not sought after in nature because, for Clare, his patch of nature

was itself a muse. The predominately Romantic conception of 'Nature' presents an outlook complex and varied, but almost always promises to infuse a rendering of the natural world with a grappling of the enigmatic or sublime. Clare's nature is a different model entirely. Rather than calling forth the unfathomable or ineffable, Clare's countryside remained grounded for him as a place of organic, unmitigated knowledge. From landmarks that bordered Helpston on every point on the compass, to the most minute of the village's local flora and fauna, Clare's landscape epitomized an exhaustive understanding of *his* nature in the purest sense and, as such, his poetry caters to a conveyance of immersion rather than immensity, to substance rather than sublimity. The countryside for our rural poet is not a colossal object; there is no Mont Blanc to be contemplated in his Northamptonshire territory, nor does he stand above Tintern Abbey in silent meditation. Rather, Clare's vision of nature is within rather than without, always holistic and comprehensive. With it, the rusticated poet reveals a certain keenness of eye that is at once wonderfully distracted yet always discerning, never distanced, but instead working toward distillation. Clare's honed sight toggles effortlessly between eye-level angles that capture his environment's finest parts to all-embracing, seemingly aerial views that encapsulate the entire scene and the sentiments percolating just below its surface. Always nimbly constructed, Clare's loco-descriptive verse presents place without hierarchy and instead evaluates each aspect of the landscape, from the minutiae to the majestic, as equally vital to the whole. To read Clare's work is to be enlightened by all he extracts from his location and to share in an ecological intimacy that he alone seems to have the power of orchestrating. Nevertheless, as we will discover, it is this same environmental sensitivity and perceptual immediacy that locks his depiction of place in oscillation between a poetry that offers immersive involvement and ecological advocacy and that which adheres to pastoral conventions of nostalgia. Clare cannot help but indulge in a

simultaneous expression of each and, when the tone of nostalgia prevails, his voice is pulled out of its political cadence and drawn back into the very pastoral mode that his descriptive specificity works to undermine.

Despite his relative obscurity, recent scholarship has started to exhume Clare's work from the margins of Romantic literary criticism and many scholars are now finding the value of engaging with Clare's poetry through the lens of eco-critical analysis. With conceptions of nature resting at the core of the Romantic imagination, it is only appropriate that the poet most rooted in the pastoral locale should merit a place within that body of criticism. Ecological insight remains the signature of Clare's poetics and, as such, to understand his poetry is to understand the natural environment and the regional identity of the poet claimed by his biographer as "without question the greatest laboring-class poet England ever gave birth to" (Bate 545). As critical conversation grows around this unsung poet of place, this essay will contribute to the developing body of scholarship in an examination of the poet's intentions both flourishing and faltering in his use of the pastoral mode as an instrument for ecological protest.

Lush with natural images, Clare's acutely subjective perspective blends his provincial dialect with rich visuals and emotional texture, the result of which draws the reader into a world seemingly accessible to Clare alone. This meticulous observation is captured with a spontaneity, finesse, and precision that elevates Clare's accounts beyond the limitations of mere description. Informal yet ecologically and emotionally informed, where Clare lacks the pull of the sublime, he makes up for in specificity and urgency. The work of the rural poet provides an aesthetic and lyrical density similar in caliber, though different in spirit to the philosophically-driven impressions of nature associated with the Romantic canon. Still, it bears repeating, the points at which Clare's poetry strays from the traditional tenor of Romanticism do not serve as markers of

inferiority or incapacity. Instead, Clare's poetic angle offers a penetrating involvement with his locality in which the sheer intensity of depiction manifests a glimmering, natural genius. To read Clare's work is to be transported, to absorb and be absorbed by the very individualized place his poetry is able to rebuild. Thus, because the poet participates in an authentic site, the reader becomes equally participatory, granting a reading experience that is as remarkable as it is rare. However, despite Clare's illustrative qualities bringing a sense of realism to his work, his representations of rural scenes resist but do not entirely reject the idealistic interpretations of the countryside that define the pastoral mode. His nostalgia for the landscape of his youth often proves to be hard to disentangle from his nostalgia for youth itself, as it seems a sentiment forever enshrined in its native place. Thus, in an effort to preserve memories of boyhood within his portrayal of place, that literal place is, inevitably, channeled through the pastoral convention of the idyllic. Moreover, Clare's poetic tenor runs a spectrum from explicitly political to private, exclusive reminiscences. His account often becomes an entwinement of the two threads in which the personal and political strands of his work are subsumed within a single scope of place. In this way, by using the form of the pastoral as a vehicle for ecological awareness, his identification with and consciousness of his environment is what distinguishes and bolsters his poetic voice while also becoming a hindrance that, ironically, encloses him in the subjective and prohibits him from speaking objectively about his disappearing landscape.

John Clare was born on July 13, 1793 to illiterate mother, Ann Stimson and farming father, Parker Clare in the agrarian village of Helpston, Northamptonshire, a parish community that enjoyed the freedom of an open-field land system. Growing up in Helpston, Clare was provided an abundance of uninterrupted landscape teeming with wildlife, all to be explored

during the leisurely hours of a rustic and, at least through representation, idyllic childhood. This scene of the picturesque unsurprisingly instilled in Clare a poetic appreciation of the bucolic ideal that his village so significantly embodied for him. Helpston fostered a fond sense of community among neighbors and an attentiveness to the delicate equilibrium between man and nature. As a laboring-class poet, Clare was naturally afforded a physical and emotional proximity to his subjects that, while geographically distancing him from his urban contemporaries, differentiated him as a unique and native voice of his ecosystem. Thus, Clare was perhaps better versed in place than any of the other Romantics, most of whom would wander from their urban milieus only to seek a contemplative catalyst or 'Muse' in the solitude of nature. Rather than a visiting outsider, Clare was deeply embedded in the countryside that he so strikingly reproduces in his poetry, gaining a knowledge of rural ecology that enriches his verse with an accuracy unmatched by others. To read Clare's work is to be engrossed by a landscape and a lifestyle reinvigorated through language. As many scholars of Clare have asserted, the poet's ecological vision was one of unprecedented acuity. Both John Barrell and James McKusick argue Clare's position as the first specifically ecological poet in the English tradition. Merryn and Raymond Williams laud Clare's "rejection of natural-philosophical and pastoral poetry" in his determination to directly engage in the role of "the inhabitant, the self-locator," thus initiating a momentous change in English poetry in which his social alienation permits "a lively natural participation" (Williams 17).

Yet, as was previously stated, Clare's connection to his village and its land simultaneously enables and hems in his poetic progress. What ties Clare's work so closely to that of the Romantics is its fixation with the natural and an urgent sense of yearning for things lost, a sensibility that, for Clare, develops from the history of Helpston itself. By 1809, sixteen-year-old

Clare would become one of the many powerless onlookers as the British parliament inaugurated the Enclosure Acts that would steadily close off the land of Helpston and its neighboring parishes, marking Clare and his community trespassers on a once free space. Clare often represents his vanishing countryside in conjunction with his eroding youth. This then manifests as a confluent response to an intruded paradise of his childhood, producing a layered lamentation that reverberates on intensely personal and directly political levels. In many ways, Clare finds himself expelled from the temporal Eden of his childhood. In mourning the land, Clare's poems mourn something irretrievably lost within himself, as if the Enclosure Acts also fenced off of a part of his identity, one that the poet clings to despite its irreparability. As his biographer puts it best, Clare himself "lacked the gift of putting the past readily behind him" (Bate 11). Despite its alterations, that past remained encased in the physical layout of the land, always to recall that which could not be returned. Accordingly, Clare's poetry seeks to preserve, resurrect, or re-create a place of the past he can no longer occupy, both because his youth is literally, though not literarily, unsalvageable, and because the land that sheltered his treasured innocence has been irrevocably transformed. As critical discourse finally begins to shed light on Clare's "ecological consciousness" (McKusick 227), this biographical and socio-historical context of his work must also be a key element of our analysis.

It becomes quite clear that, to truly hear and understand the tenor of Clare's voice, we must acquaint ourselves with the land in which his poetry is so firmly rooted. Clare was born in the parish community of Helpston in the Soke of Peterborough, Northamptonshire. Housing approximately sixty families, Helpston operated under an open-field system in which individually owned swaths of land were interspersed among the parish's three central fields of

Lolham Bridge, Heath, and Woodcroft. Royce Wood and Oxey Wood then encircled these tracts of land, along with areas for common grazing reaching from Emmonsales Heath and beyond (Bate 45). Within this sphere were stretches of heathland and landmarks such as Langley Bush, Swordy Well, and Lee Close Oak, all of which Clare's reader becomes familiar with as points of sentimental significance for the poet. These lands and the surrounding parishes remained open fields for the better part of Clare's seemingly enchanted youth, places where Clare was welcome to rove and explore unimpeded by law or responsibility. These wild woodlands were checked only by the fields populated by livestock and farmers, and this juxtaposition of agrarian labor and uncultivated spaces established for Clare the necessary balance between the communal solidarity needed for village harmony and the solitude he seemed to need in the quiet comfort of the woods. In this space governed by communal land use and ancient customs, Clare's childhood flourished – that is, until the first of many Parliamentary enclosure acts is passed in 1809.

Clare's poetry gives the impression that enclosure represented no less than an exile from Eden, a postlapsarian time for the village and for Clare himself. While Helpston endured as an unenclosed region for an unusually late period, 1809 marked the passing of an act allowing for 'Inclosing Lands in the Parishes of Maxey with Deepingate, Northborough, Glington with Peakirk, and Helpstone in the County of Northampton' (Bate 46). By 1811, woodland clearings gave way to new public road construction, with even more private and minor roads mapped out by the following year. By 1816, bye-laws were drawn up exclusively for Helpston in which common rights of way were regulated in adherence to the new delineation of land possession. The final enclosure, the Award of 1820, itemized the ownership "of every acre, rood and perch, the position of every road, footway and public drain" (Bate 48). During this process, fences and walls were erected, 'No Trespassing' signs were scattered throughout woodland and field, trees

were felled, the flow of creeks halted, and furrows made straight. With these actions came the unavoidable relocation of farming families and the devastation of Helpston's intricate social framework that was hitherto founded on ancient customs and traditions secured in the land. For many villagers, the new property restrictions were experienced as instruments of social dislocation more than economic estrangement, the symbolic destruction "of an ancient birthright based on cooperation and common rights" (Bate 49). Festivities oriented around harvests and seasons had always been treated very much as sacrosanct celebrations in Helpston. In Clare's biography, Bate describes "festival days and their many attendant rituals" as signifying the "high points of a laborer's year" (Bate 49). Traditionally, Whit Sunday would have the village youth meeting at Eastwell Fountain "to drink sugared water as a good-luck charm," a custom that quickly dissolved when the spring became private property. Further, the annual holiday on Plough Monday, marking the start of the agricultural year, was abolished due to "the march towards more intensive production" (Bate 49). This alone speaks on the measure to which Clare's community was attached to the land, an investment reaching far beyond just crops. Thus, the violation of enclosure was deeply felt by the village as a disbanding of their way of life.

As Bate emphasizes, it is for all of these reasons that the impacts of enclosure regulations were felt "especially strongly in Helpston and by Clare" (49). The enclosures not only stripped farmers of ownership and what they saw as freedom by communal rights, but also alienated them from the landscape, turning agricultural work into something governed by profit, converting ecology to economy. The consequences these injustices had on Helpston were manifold, and were perceived and expressed by Clare with profound sensitivity in a collection of poems referred to by many scholars, including McKusick and Bate, as the poet's "enclosure elegies" (Bate 390). These transitions caused by enclosure and by encroaching adulthood give rise to

some of Clare's most remarkable work; work that responds to the disruption of a cherished, natural balance and reveals a voice confined by its nostalgia for times and places past.

Clare's location cannot be understood as anything less than the very fabric of his identity. As such, the enclosures did not simply upset the countryside's physical space, but instead worked to unravel the most influential filaments of our poet's self-recognition. Thus, Clare's internal tensions only grew as the common land continued to shrink. We see this in an early poem, "Helpstone," that highlights the rise of his characteristic pining. Appearing as the first entry in Clare's initial volume, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820), "Helpstone" is a loco-descriptive nature poem that hums with the tune of the rural melancholic tradition. Written between 1809 and 1813, a period that saw the swiftest expansion of enclosure actions within Clare's community, "Helpstone" was composed, in part, as an homage to Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* (1770), a poem that also condemns rural intrusion and land seizure by the wealthy. As a sixteen-year-old just then embarking on his poetic pursuits, this early poem exhibits all the gifts of ecological vision we come to expect from Clare. "Helpstone" stamps the start of a poetic reaction to enclosure in a narrative that interlaces earnestly personal, political, and emotional fibers. Typifying the elegized discourse of loss and disillusionment that pervades the bulk of Clare's early verse, it is in "Helpstone" that we begin to see McKusick's conception of the poet's "ecological consciousness" at work, the poem's contrasts of the past and present environment exhibiting a keen understanding "of the interrelatedness of all life-forms, and a sense of outrage" at its devastation (McKusick 226). Clare does not merely defend his liberty to meander through a landscape; he also pleads for the personified land's entitlement to remain in its natural state. Thus, both nature and visitor are victimized, and Clare expresses empathy with wild creatures, even, "Who find like me along their weary way / Each prospect

lessen and each hope decay / And like to me these victims of the blast / (Each foolish fruitless wish resign'd at last)" (41-4).

As Bate reminds us, "for Clare himself, enclosure infringed the right to roam, which had been one of the joys of his youth," making the acts an offence not only against community and custom, "but also [against] the land itself" (Bate 50). "Helpstone" in particular embodies the sentimental charge of Clare's poetry by entwining notions of boyhood, innocence, and freedom within his depiction of pre-enclosed Helpston. While the poem opens in the present landscape, this scene quickly changes in the third stanza to one existing only in the image of Clare's memory as it reaches back to a time before enclosure. The lengthy third stanza is dedicated to articulating an almost palpable ache of nostalgia, merging the loss of Clare's "past delights" in youth with the deprivation of the scene in which they took place (72). Conjuring up images of childhood in this "dear native spot which length of time endears / The sweet retreat of twenty lingering years," Clare assembles a mural of his boyhood, framed by the unenclosed past of the land (51-2). However, in recalling "those years of infancy the scene / Those dear delights where once they all have been / Those golden days long vanish'd from the plain," Clare's sorrow is bifurcated, if not confused, between the disappearance of the landmarks that "Griev'd me at the heart to witness their removes," and the diminishment of youth itself (53-5, 94). Thus, the central stanzas of "Helpstone" raise the important question of where the more severe and innermost pang of loss derives from for the poet: Is he mourning the violated landscape, or the memory of youth which the land may recall but cannot rekindle? The answer to this question seems to evade even Clare. What is made clear, however, is the poet's illustration of his childhood as being so imbedded in the landscape as to become part of it, so that when the freedom of the land recedes, so too do the freedoms he associates with the joys of youth. Simply, the essence of youth is

bound by the land and vice versa. As John Barrell argues, Clare's intention was "to twist these two strands of meaning into one" by communicating that the destruction of the landscape invariably leads to the eradication of the innocence that bloomed there (Barrell 112). This portrait of a 'golden' time in a pristine landscape harks back to the notion of an Edenic paradise that Clare was forced to vacate. In this sense, before the enclosure acts barred Clare from this world, his young self in Helpston was insulated, or pleasingly confined within that sanctuary. If Eden was a self-contained paradise, Clare was contained too, by an idyllic image that he was physically driven out of, but in which his poetry returns to, or rather, is enclosed by.

This relationship of a specific place to a specific time is a recurring thread in much of Clare's work. Clare's representation of the land when looking through the lens of youth differs in tone when compared to times when he comments on the land objectively as its own individual entity, separate from his identification with it. As "Helpstone" reaches the end of its third stanza, there is a turn in Clare's tenor as his elegy shifts from one anchored in childhood connection to one that simply laments the "vanish'd green" where once there "flourish'd many a bush and many a tree / Where once the brook for now the brook is gone" (73-5). With the arresting precision and evocative language that are the hallmarks of Clare's local vision, the poet goes on to re-create the scene that once was, an ecosystem with beetles' "jetty jackets glittering in the sun" and "Where golden kingcups open'd in to view / [...] / Where lowing oxen roamd to feed at large" (80,97,104). In this vignette, there are no longer traces of wistfulness for boyhood, but rather a very genuine regret for the alterations made to the land independently. It is here that Clare begins a more direct confrontation with the enclosures, bemoaning the sight of "the woodman's cruel axe employ'd / A tree beheaded or a bush destroy'd" (86-7). As Barrell similarly asserts, in this part of the poem, if there is a quality of personal nostalgia, it is

ascribable to “Clare’s very individual sense of place, of his particular attachment to Helpston as itself individual, as ‘local’ in the sense that its landscape is not seen by him as part of ‘nature’ in general” (114). Thus, Clare unhinges the very specific, concentrated patch of land that is the poet’s home from the romanticized idea of nature in general. Clare’s understanding of the land is partitioned by past and present. In this poem and most others, these two discrete impressions of place are amalgamated and work to reinforce the sense of loss felt by each. In both cases, however, the identity of Clare that was mapped onto the land has been irrevocably rearranged. As such, Clare exposes a certain inability, at least at this early stage of his career, to “to twist these two strands of meaning into one,” as his personal assimilation with the land often overshadows his attempt to speak from an objective position.

While the first stanzas reconstruct the idyllic image of what the land once was, that reflection is starkly juxtaposed with the diction of destruction and loss at the midpoint of the poem. The sixth stanza indicates a major tone shift in which Clare’s voice intensifies and his previous nostalgia is shaken by the realization that “now alas those scenes exist no more / The pride of life with thee (like mine) is oer” (115-16). At this point, the poet addresses and identifies with the land directly, acknowledging a shared sense of dispossession. The language of this stanza escalates to almost vitriolic and more overtly political, condemning the “Accursed wealth o’er bounding human laws / Of every evil thou remainst the cause,” and deploring that “As blooms those Edens by the poets sung / All laid waste by desolations hands / Whose cursed weapon levels half the land” (127-9,122-4). Clare begins to redirect his previous, very personal expression of regret to a bitter political indictment that speaks on behalf of the Helpston community as a whole. The pronouns of this stanza make a switch to “thine” and “thou” when addressing the force behind enclosure, the “accursed wealth,” that prompted the changes, while

using the collective "our" when referring to "our loss of labor and of bread" (132). Here, Clare amplifies his voice to encompass the communal aspects of village life and turns his focus on the breaking up of that shared space "Which once industry cherish'd in her arms" (136). That coexistence between man and nature has been ruptured, along with that "Peace and Plenty known but now to few" which was once "known to all" when "labor had his due / When mirth and toil companions thro' the day / Made labour light and pass'd the hours away" (137-40). Clare again defends the significance of the land not only for his own sentimental reasons, but because it was the underpinning of Helpston's rural functioning. As E.P. Thompson asserts in *Customs in Common*, "Clare may be described, without hindsight, as a poet of ecological protest: he was not writing about man here and nature there, but lamenting a threatened equilibrium in which both were involved" (Thompson 180). In these lines we see the fusion of man and nature in Clare's response to their severance. Ingrained in Clare's sorrow for the land is his repining of the way of village life, a network of exchange between land and man as well as between commoner and commoner. This idea of sharing, of access and temporary tenancy without possession has been cleared, and with it a community ethos is disassembled.

In this way, we witness Clare's attempt to interweave the personal with the political, refocusing his perspective from the fixed, subjective angle of the previous stanzas to a panoptic social view that captures the widespread influences of the land limits. As Raymond and Merryn Williams underscore, the concept of enclosure in Clare's verse "is a complex and shifting term" that becomes the "cry of his class and generation against their fundamental subordination, concentrated in an outcry against the most immediate and most visible phase of change" (Williams 15). As Clare again accuses the machine of profit as "the cause that levels every tree" where "woods bow down to clear a way for thee," the use of common land is superseded by an

unwarranted interference by economically-driven man. This disruption of nature is a disruption of that harmony that Clare and his community had previously maintained with their landscape without failure.

While the sixth stanza punctuates "Helpstone" with a brief but pointed social protest, the closing stanzas revert back to lamenting that "happy Eden of those golden years" and "those charms of youth" whose growth was synchronized with Helpston's simple prosperity. Again, introspection and retrospection merge and Clare's perception of the land slips into a bit of personal myopia. From this backward gaze that recalls the past throughout the poem, its closing stanzas turn their vision to a future time "when this vain world and I have nearly done / And Time's drain'd glass has little left to run," asking that then "Those charms of youth...I again may see" (167-8, 75). In a final poignant wish, Clare entreats, "May it be mine to meet my end in thee / And as reward for all my troubles past / Find one hope true to die at home at last" (176-8). More than despair, the last stanzas resound with an utter feeling of hopelessness and deprivation as the comforts of the past are irreversibly removed. That Clare envisions the land as the place where he will "meet (his) end" serves to reiterate Helpston and "the charms of youth" as a paradise on earth, an Eden that he may return to after death. This notion thus raises the question of what role nostalgia plays in how Clare paints the landscape of his childhood. These desires are somewhat utopic and present Clare's local Eden as a dream that is as unsustainable as the perpetuation of youth. While clinging to that bucolic ideal, it is this gilded image that proves impermanent, and it is that idea of impermanence that Clare remains permanently unable to overcome in his poetry.

In many ways, Clare's nostalgia for childhood is also a longing for a time before he saw himself as different from his fellow villagers, before his poetic ambitions developed in him a

sense of estrangement from his community. While “Helpstone” is largely written in reverence and adoration for the poet’s home village, the poem’s opening lines betray a conflicted relationship between Clare and his community. Beginning by hailing the “humble Helpstone where thy valies spread,” Clare then ascertains the village’s plebeian social position as “thy mean village” that remains “Unknown to grandeur and unknown to fame” (1-3). While, from a socioeconomic standing, there is an accuracy to Clare’s classifying his village as “mean,” the poet’s characterization of his home as “humble” goes beyond its economic boundaries. Clare pronounces the village an “Unletterd spot unheard in poets song / Where bustling labor drives the hours along / Where dawning genius never met the day / Where useless ign’rance slumbers life away” (5-8). There is a sense of ambivalence, even segregation that comes through these lines, where Clare’s developing desire to pursue poetry and nurture that “dawning genius” becomes incompatible with his rural location. Thus, Clare’s feeling of isolation within his own village is magnified in his presentation of Helpston’s isolation from a more literary-saturated environment. At this point, we begin to see the divergent associations of Clare’s status as ‘peasant poet’ and his struggle to reconcile one identity with the other.

As Merryn and Raymond Williams discuss in their critical introduction to Clare's *Selected Poetry and Prose*, there existed a dual, external perception of the ‘peasant’ lifestyle during Clare’s time. From one angle, the rural laborers were ascribed general qualities of insolence, “roughness, rudeness, earthiness; the familiar descriptions as uneducated and ignorant” (Williams 5). In another view, they were “simple, honest and natural; blessed by a sweet and direct sensibility of all living things; virtuous and wise in their intimacy with nature” (5). While these incongruities are assigned to the “external point of view, often specifically urban

or metropolitan” (5), it is evident that Clare himself, with his very internal vantage point, also discerns and renders these disparate characteristics in his poetry.

It is through these opposing sentiments of rural life as being both coarse or “uneducated” and “blessed” by a natural sensibility that we discover the richest connections between “Helpstone” and other poetic representations of rusticity, most notably Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.” While the young Clare would proclaim that James Thomson’s *The Seasons* and John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* established the bedrock of his poetic craft, Gray’s elegy was among the most venerated in the eighteenth century, and one that aired attitudes resonating deeply with the budding poet (Bate 101). Gray’s poem reveals a solitary speaker visiting a rural churchyard who, upon his observation of the graves, begins a long meditation on the lives and deaths of the villagers, reflecting on the mortality of humankind and eventually envisioning his own death.

The nucleus of Gray’s “Elegy” addresses the idea of potential never allowed to thrive, of great minds that could have been, had they been relocated and fostered outside of their limited, and therefore limiting, rural environment. This danger of an intellectually-stunted growth due to an environment lacking in literarily fertile turf is a fear plainly present in Clare and further underscored by Gray’s poem. Clare’s image of a “dawning genius” in Helpston that “never met the day” rings with the echo of Gray’s regretful recognition: “Full many a flow’r is born to blush unseen / And waste its sweetness on the desert air” (55-6). Similarly, where Gray indicates the villagers’ graves as “their lowly bed,” Clare opens his description of Helpston itself as a “mean village” that “lifts its lowly head” (Gray 20; Clare 3). This translation of Helpston’s “lowly head,” by paralleling Gray’s depiction of a cemetery, likens the village’s existence to a state of vapidness and “slumber” that resembles the grave, connoting two discordant impressions of

Clare's home as possessing the tranquility of repose and, at the same time, the "useless ign'rance" and listlessness of death (8). In viewing the graves, Gray remarks on their epitaphs as "uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture" with "their name, their years, spelt by th' unletter'd muse" (79,81). Clare recalls these lines in his account of Helpston as a place where there is "No minstrel boasting to advance thy name," but instead an "Unletterd spot unheard in poets song" (2-3). Nevertheless, in this statement it is Clare's own voice that participates in the theme of poetic immortalization, eternalizing not only his name in verse but also that of his native place. Clare also overturns the anonymity of place in "Elegy" by directly naming his village throughout the poem and in its title, distinguishing his community specifically rather than operating within a representational space as Gray does. This trope of anonymity in Gray's poem also reveals itself in its contemplation of an unknown villager whose genius perhaps rests forever unclaimed in the grave. Clare's poetry, then, signifies an effort to unfasten himself from that same fate of Gray's "mute inglorious Milton" (59).

Clare noticeably identifies with the tone of Gray's "Elegy," demonstrating a sense of kinship with the buried farmers, while also aligning himself with the pensive and secluded poet who looks on his community from an intellectual and literary distance. His allusions to "Elegy" are evidence of Clare's own awareness of his standing as a countrified genius who straddles both rural and literary spheres. Among the many tensions present in "Helpstone," its subtlest yet apparently most immitigable is Clare's inconsistent illustration of Helpston itself. In his portrayal, Clare is challenged by his attempt to balance an inclination to idealize his community with a temptation to lay bare its unenlightened circumscription. Much in the same way Clare communicates a contradictory relationship with Helpston, Gray's "Elegy" articulates a binary impression of village life. Acknowledging the villagers' "sober wishes" that "never learn'd to

stray” from their “noiseless tenor” and, therefore, were never heaped in “the shrine of Luxury or Pride,” Gray lauds the simple dignity and moral substance of the countryside (74,75,71). While Clare, too, esteems his community’s natural contentment and quiet comforts, there is also a prolonged expression of anxiety that his own voice is kept stifled and “noiseless” within the confines of his muted village, creating a desire to venture beyond that “cool sequester’d vale of life” (Gray 74). Clare’s “low genius” remains “unknown nor heeded” in its attempt to rise “above the vulgar and the vain” of Helpston, communicating a sense of alienation in which his wandering on the “doubtful road” of literary pursuit is met with “railing envy” and understood as a “vain wish” (9-10,12,16).

The schism between Helpston and a modern, literary world is concentrated in the paradoxical ‘peasant poet’ identity that surfaces within Clare’s work. As the Williams’ introduction reminds us, the conception of the peasant poet conveys with it “a sense of property...at its root: the property of being a peasant, the property of being a poet” (7). Clare’s position is at the intersecting area of these properties, and yet, because of his ambivalence, he remains partially removed from both, resulting in only a partial ownership of each. These two strands of identity tug in opposite directions but with equal force, and Clare’s poetry manifests the complications and complexities of this tension and his relationship to it. Despite Clare feeling as though Helpston’s rural seclusion keeps him disadvantaged and disconnected from a poetic currency, he also testifies with great vehemence against the obtrusion into his village from the outside culture. Somewhat futilely, Clare desired Helpston to operate as a sort of bucolic microcosm, a georgic ideal inviolable to the alterations of an increasingly capitalist modernity, yet still receptive to the sophistication of an educated class. However, this vision of a hybrid rural location was ultimately unrealizable. Part of the country’s agrestic charm rested in its

organic, unpolished naturalness. To refine a place and a people diversely unrefined is to change them utterly, and therefore Clare's association with the terms 'peasant' and 'poet' remained utterly disjointed.

While Clare's feelings toward his native place are conflicted in "Helpstone," his dissatisfaction is ultimately eclipsed by a much lengthier, tenderer testament of his sentimentality toward the village life and its landscape before enclosure, a picturesque image that enwraps an equally charmed depiction of his childhood. Thus, following its initial stanza's vein of discontent, the rest of "Helpstone" is inflected towards the past, and it is in this reminiscence that we trace Clare's tone braiding with that of Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*. Just as he does with Gray's "Elegy," Clare tailors this canonical work to fit the mold of his own experience. Published in 1770, Goldsmith's poem provides cultural commentary and social criticism that convicts the wealthy of a community's dismemberment and, like Clare, plaintively articulates a personal sense of loss and intrusion. While the poet addresses this village as "Sweet Auburn" in its opening line, that name is believed to be a fictional place, though Goldsmith's description is likely that of his actual home village of Lissoy, Ireland (Walsh 352). In the same manner that Clare differentiates his "Helpstone" from Gray's churchyard by specifying the actual village, Clare's account of place is also distinguished from Goldsmith's in its particularity. While the invented place of Auburn functions as a representational space for Goldsmith, "Helpstone" is a direct identification of Clare's native place. This designation of place is a step toward de-anonymizing and personalizing the space that holds the poet's experience, tethering his nostalgia to that spot with an exactitude absent from *Village*.

Between Goldsmith's and Clare's individual expressions of loss, there are notable and defining differences. There are, nevertheless, also sentiments voiced by Goldsmith that are surely

emulated in Clare's "Helpstone." The root of each poem is seated in nostalgia and a recollection of the "humble happiness" of "innocence and ease" before the experience of change fell upon the poets' particular homes (Goldsmith 5,8). This spirit of longing for things past grips *Village* from the beginning, a mood equally powerful in "Helpstone," with Clare's "dear, departed charms" recalling Goldsmith's sorrowful resignation that, from his "sweet smiling village...all these charms are fled" (Clare 119; Goldsmith 34-5). Moreover, "Helpstone," like *Village*, is propelled by a fallen image of the country side and a lament for the loss of interaction between the laborers and the land. The precious, finer points that ornamented Helpstone's scenes are "now all laid waste by Desolation's hand" just as Goldsmith's own bucolic image is dismantled by the wealthy "tyrant's hand" (Clare 107; Goldsmith 37). Accordingly, rather than adhering to traditional forms of pastoral poetry in which the rustic is romanticized, idealized, and softened, both Goldsmith and Clare reveal their rural settings, once "unmolested, unconfined," as being clearly vulnerable to the "ignorance of wealth," and as places now "trembling, shrinking from the spoiler's hand" (Goldsmith 49,63).

Through the use of vignettes, each poet conveys familiarity with rural rituals and activities, which ultimately makes the loss of a communal landscape more deeply felt. Goldsmith's speaker remembers "the mingling notes" that "the milk-maid sung" and Clare, the "shepherd's woolly charge / Whose constant calls thy echoing vallies cheer'd" (Goldsmith 116-17; Clare 106-7). However, where Goldsmith's memory cleaves to a previous scene animated principally by the villagers, Clare's account documents a loss of nature itself, almost entirely removed from human presence, aside from his own observations. While Goldsmith reminisces about "the village murmur" of "the playful children just let loose from school / The watch-dog's voice that bayed the whispering wind," or the "many a gambol" that "frolicked o'er the ground,"

Clare casts his mind back to the “golden kingcups,” the “silver dazies,” the “pale lilac...courting in vain each gazer’s heedless view / While cowlslaps...bow’d to shun the hand in vain”

(Goldsmith 114,120-21; Clare 97-8,101-4). Each poet mourns his home’s dismemberment and depopulation. Nonetheless, while Goldsmith laments a clearance of the people who enlivened Auburn, a withdrawal that causes “the sounds of population [to] fail,” Clare paints a disassembled scene comprised primarily of nature itself, defining Helpston’s beauty and losses by the complexities of its ecology.

Clearly, both poems present a vacant place that still abounds with memory. Goldsmith evokes Auburn’s vitality by recalling its villagers, with their “loud laugh” and “sweet confusion,” remembering the songs of the milk-maids, the school master, the village preacher “to all the country dear,” the “village statesmen [who] talked with looks profound,” the “farmer’s news, the barber’s tale / ...the woodman’s ballad,” or the smith’s “dusky brow” (122-3,141,223,243-5). Clare, too, memorializes the “shepherd’s woolly charge” and “those sports those pastimes” that remain integral features of his village fondness, but “Helpstone” is far more interested in and saturated by the poet’s solitary contact with his surrounding natural world. Clare mourns Helpston’s “vanish’d green” not because it has been bereft of its people, but because there once “flourish’d many a bush and many a tree” and where there was once a brook “now the brook is gone” (83-5). For Clare, then, the despoiling he grieves is that of the land itself, a denuding of the features that invigorated his patch of ‘Eden’ before the interference of enclosure, again emphasizing an ecological sensibility rivaled by few of his contemporaries.

A division of past and present perspectives arrange Goldsmith’s report of his evacuated village, an organization that occurs in Clare’s “Helpstone” as well. *Village* captures the changing rural life of Auburn through a perspectival movement, a panning from a retrospective vision of

the past village to one of its present state, eventually considering the lives of the villagers who emigrate to new lands. Goldsmith's townspeople have fled to "distant climes, a dreary scene, / Where half the convex world intrudes between." The speaker admits, "I still had hopes, my latest hours to crown, / Amidst these humble bowers to lay me down/ [...] / Here to return – and die at home at last" (85-6,96). These lines are directly invoked in Clare's final and most emotional lines where he, too, wishes to "Find one hope true to die at home at last" (178). However, where Goldsmith offers speculation of a new place to which the inhabitants of Auburn are presumably emigrating, no such alternative appears in Clare's account. As "Helpstone" winds down, the poet states in a few plangent lines, "May it be mine to meet my end in thee / [...] / And every wish that leaves the aching breast / Flies to the spot where all its wishes rest" (176,186-7). The present tense here is especially striking, as it expresses a perennial hope that the poet keeps of wanting to meet his end at home, differing from Goldsmith's phrasing in which he regards a similar desire in the past tense, remarking, "I *had* hopes" to return home, as though that prospect has been accepted as an impossibility. In the end, Clare does not, perhaps *cannot*, desert his village, physically or emotionally, even when its original state has been long since abandoned. It is Clare's immediate presence, his immovability from an evidently mutable environment that creates the emotional exigency throughout "Helpstone."

As an homage to *The Deserted Village*, the parallels between Clare's "Helpstone" and Goldsmith's original are numerous and clearly drawn. However, while the two poems share similar themes of remembrance and displacement, "Helpstone" is no replica. Clare's version, because of his lingering and literal fastening to Helpston, takes on a charge of immediacy and conveys a feeling of contiguity between poet and place. It is in his fresh and peculiar observations that Clare's imitation transcends its 18th century prototype. There is a vibrancy and

intricacy in Clare's landscape, as he notes the dammed brook that once "O'er pebbles dimpling sweet went whimpering on" and delights "To see the beetles their wild mazes run / With jetty jackets glittering in the sun" (76,79-80). This propinquity, the appreciation and sensitivity to minutiae translated from observation to verse, is where the poet deviates from a pastoral poetic tradition toward what the Williams' deem "country poetry" (11). Through instances of urgency and ecological responsiveness in "Helpstone," the peasant poet indicates signs of his early voice finding its own cadence and its ecological perspicacity within and also apart from previous literary motifs.

Clare's rendition of his native place in "Helpstone" is expressly washed in the hues of nostalgia and a longing for his own past in that place, an emotional urgency that nears palpability. A year after "Helpstone" appeared in his debut volume, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820), Clare produced his next body of work, *The Village Minstrel and Other Poems* (1821), which would continue to purify this voice of the past that was becoming increasingly identifiable as his. In "Childish Recollections," Clare again stops off at a familiar scene and once more, a powerful evocation of boyhood manifests itself in the landscape. However, unlike the scene in "Helpstone," the land is no template on which to mourn the topographical alterations made by enclosure, but rather to regret the emotional changes in the poet himself caused, simply, by the passing of time, the landscape in this case becoming the immutable backdrop that reinforces Clare's own transformation from youth to adulthood. The loss felt by our poet, then, is not so much mapped onto the physical setting itself as it is brought to the surface by memories of youth. A natural reciprocity once existed in the poet's interconnectedness with the land. Where in boyhood Clare held direct interaction with the "ivy

bound” tree, the brook, the winding dyke, in adulthood that degree of intimacy has waned. Despite everything “shining” around our poet “just as then” and although he holds in his sight “all my childish scenes,” Clare is now deemed an outsider, a visitor who observes but can never again be granted admittance to that scene in its previous animation, conceding, “Sad manhood marks me an intruder now” (25,39-40).

A sense of displacement arises in “Childish Recollections” with the same melancholy that is detected in “Helpstone.” Nonetheless, as aforementioned, the occasion of “Recollections” is not to evaluate the physical rearrangements made to the land. The barrier between poet and place in “Recollections” is not the fencing or hedging of enclosure, nor is it the felling of a tree, the stoppage of a rivulet, or a marked “No Trespassing” sign. There is clearly a hindrance that prevents Clare from experiencing the area as he would like to again, but the obstruction is subjective and emotional rather than physical. In each memory recalled, the certainty of youth’s erosion is pronounced and the pain of that awareness redoubled. The matured poet is now apart from the same space that he was once a part of, a disunion that breeds the central sense of alienation in the poem. This estrangement derives from a relationship between Clare and the landscape whereby the land’s identity is conditional on its being the site of Clare’s childhood and, accordingly, his childhood experiences are influenced and identified by their occurrence within the scope of that place. In this way, a fragment of Clare’s identity seems insulated in this setting, a part of him that he is able to locate through nostalgia, but, of course, cannot reclaim. The feeling of displacement, then, materializes as the poet looks in from the periphery onto a specific place and past that are indivisibly linked and forever out of reach. As previously discussed, the source of Clare’s melancholy in “Helpstone” is ambiguous; sometimes it emanates from the physical loss of space and at other times from the loss of youth, resulting in a confused

conflation of both. In “Recollections,” however, there is no such ambiguity. Writing as a bystander to the replaying of his own past, Clare makes apparent that this sentimentality emerges through a piercing recognition of his own impermanence. While much of Clare’s work is differentiated by the poet’s capacity to transcend observation and instead to participate and hold exchange with his natural surroundings, in “Recollections” we discover the poet withdrawn and incapable of achieving the same degree of participation he once knew. Time has not only deemed Clare “an intruder now,” but a spectator of these visions, almost apparition-like, that he may behold but can never again become.

“Childish Recollections” operates within a well-established poetic approach to youth in which an unchanging natural world serves as a framework within which the poet muses on his own temporality. This intact landscape unfolds for Clare a more conventional mode of contemplation in which the transience of youth is underscored through its contradistinction to a perennial natural world. As Barrell describes it, this “convention of the wanderer returning to the scenes of his childhood” is more traditionally used to communicate this “other theme” of youth’s brevity, as opposed to a straightforward description of landscape (112). This theme, one which Barrell points to in Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village* as well, is what the reader expects to come across in “Helpstone,” before Clare reveals his equal concern with the changed environment. “Childish Recollections,” however, exhibits an untouched scene, though “the cares of manhood now make it seem to Clare less than the Paradise it once was” (Barrell 112). Despite the setting surviving unbroken, the spirit that it once stirred to life in Clare has vacated that space. This position diverges from that of “Helpstone” in which the ephemerality of youth is paralleled by a similarly altered countryside, with each dimension of change serving to intensify the other and thus to intensify Clare’s grief. In “Helpstone,” by concurrently mourning the modifications of a

temporal and spatial setting, Clare binds his childhood with the landscape to a point whereby the deprivation of one impacts, and even coincides with that of the other. In other words, the destruction of the land damages or barricades the memories that reside there. The inverse occurs in "Recollections:" the land is still physically accessible, emotionally inaccessible for a mature, disenchanted Clare. By opposing the permanence of the place with his own impermanence, Clare's past and place remain overlapped, but the previous communion comes unclasped for the now-grown poet.

"Childish Recollections" reveals a speaker very much wrapped up in a melancholic memory, a reverie of reminiscence that calls forth contradictory emotions. For Clare, each recollection awakened by the landscape is at once "a pleasing toy / Which memory like a lover doats upon" and a reflection met with "tears and sighs" regretting "the things that [sic.] gone" (1-4). Clare finds the pleasure of remembrance is not only tinged, but overpowered by the pain in acknowledging these irremediable absences, two facets of his emotional response that remain in conflict throughout the work. Clare's stepping into this natural place also has him crossing out of an immediate reality and into a trance-like state where our poet "strolls" through the illusive images conjured by nostalgia (14). Clare's verse captures these images with his typical specificity and rich subjective vision. In witnessing "an old familiar spot," Clare enumerates each landmark and traces the particular memory it revives: "here winds the dyke where oft we jumpt across" (21); "On this same bank I bound my poseys up / And cull'd the sweetest blossoms one by one" (33-4); "Here runs the brook which I have damd and stopt" (41); "Here stands the tree wi clasping ivy bound / Which oft Ive clumb [sic.] to see the chaps at plough" (45-6). The reflections are lucid and personal, bound up in the individualized location that they once took place in, again braiding Clare's representation of place with his experience of the past.

The landscape is no portal to that past, however, but merely a window that allows Clare to temporarily review, even reconstruct his youth, but cruelly, never to relive it. In “Helpstone,” Clare enumerates features of the landscape that have been removed, listing in past tense “Where golden kingcups open’d in to view / Where silver dazies charm’d the raptur’d view” and so on (97-8). Conversely, Clare is spiritually dislodged from a place still very much present in “Recollections.” The poem itemizes aspects of the location that remain unmoved, but are nonetheless met without the frivolity of youth and thus, “all the feelings they inspir’d [sic.] are gone” (36).

The feeling of exclusion in Clare’s voice is unmistakable in “Childish Recollections.” As seen in many of his poems, Clare perceives this scene of boyhood as an Eden that *actually* existed, literalizing rather than conceptualizing the poetic archetype of a pastoral paradise. Echoing his final pleas in “Helpstone,” Clare again utters, “When can we witness bliss so sweet as then / Might I but have my choice of joy below / I’d only ask to be a boy agen” (66-8). Here is another conviction that regards the location of Clare’s youth as a segment of Eden, a realm that is only a paradise *because* of the unspoiled years of childhood spent there, creating an inseparable interdependence between the two. By the next line, Clare remarks, “Life owns no joy so pleasant as the past,” defining that past as a “banish’d pleasure rapt in memorys womb” (70). Indeed, Clare feels the agony of being “banish’d” from the unequalled raptures of boyhood. The poet’s dismissal from his own youth is relayed almost in spiritual terms through which the outgrowing of boyhood is construed by Clare as a personal falling from Eden, a passing through a threshold that is now irrevocably closed. Nevertheless, the phrasing of “memorys womb” gives rise to an image of figurative rebirth, a temporary resurrection of that past, though less than ideal, through the summoning of reminiscence that the land itself seems to demand. Whereas the demarcations

of enclosure physically expelled our poet from parts of his home, the sense of exile in “Recollections” is that which springs from the disillusionment of age, an eviction from the time that fostered Clare’s intimacy with that space, now only to be restored through recollections as childish and intangible as “castles in the air” (60).

As was briefly referenced to in the introduction, Clare’s work was often measured against other Romantics whose poetic forms were more firmly grounded in philosophical approaches to nature. Clare’s editor, John Taylor, also published early work of John Keats, whose opinions on the rural poet’s work were often communicated to Clare through the shared editor. Barrell calls our attention to is Keats’ remark that, with Clare’s style, “the Description too much prevailed over the Sentiment” (Barrell 129). Further, of Keats’ criticism, Taylor translates, “Images from Nature are too much introduced without being called for by a particular Sentiment...his remark is applicable only now and then when he feels as if the Description overlaid and stifled that which ought to be the prevailing Idea” (129). Keats was not alone in accusing Clare’s poetry of entrusting the whole of its substance to description, even as Taylor himself thought Clare capable of reaching beyond the tangible. There is indeed a propensity in our poet to rely heavily on observation, but not often is it with the sacrifice of a central ‘sentiment’ or ‘idea.’ “Childish Recollections” serves to demonstrate Clare’s awareness of more conventionally Romantic themes and reveals his capacity to transcend mere depiction and instead extract the sentiments of such observations. The poem is but one of many that confirms Clare’s reactivity to his environment on an emotional and psychological plane, breaking his preconceived limitations of description for description’s sake. Rather than overlaying or “stifling” the established theme of a poem, Clare’s description reproduces the particular place that forever encloses that very individualized sentiment. Therefore, as should always be expected of the poet’s work, the

“prevailing Idea,” in this case Clare’s consciousness of his own mortality as emblemized in the ever-verdant natural scene, does of course remain encapsulated in the description itself, never to eclipse nor be eclipsed by epistemological or metaphysical conceptions. Clare’s meditative voice, rather than elevating itself to philosophical heights typically expected of Romantics, and which many of his critics and readers still call for today, turns inward with an earnestly individual, instinctive tone. Thus, Clare’s illustration does not curb illumination. What the poet’s descriptions may fail to bring about in loftiness or grandeur, they counterbalance by his dexterity in magnifying the minutiae of both landscape and memory.

Needless to say, mourning the loss of one’s youth is far from innovative within the sphere of pastoral conventions and, as we have seen, Clare was anything but unversant with those poetic modes. However, what signifies the rural poet’s shade of nostalgia as unconventional lies in the fact that it is not a discrete, freestanding sentiment, but is instead irremovably moored in his particular countryside. The coexistence and inextricability of boyhood and the pre-enclosed landscape prohibits Clare from representing one independent of the other. Nostalgia does not materialize in his work without also making the reader picture the place that gave that past its material form. Conversely, Clare’s representation of and identification with location is never uncoupled from the idealized days of childhood embedded there. While this interlocking tends to obscure the political voice in much of Clare’s enclosure work, it also brings a valuable sense of ecological engagement to his verse, reproducing each scene and sentiment with experiential insight.

As we have seen, it is typical of Clare’s earlier work to find a speaker very much fixed in affection for places past. This preoccupation with nostalgia is not one that Clare’s poetry ever

seems to outgrow. One of the poet's better-known and most celebrated poems, "Remembrances" (1832), was written later in his career and published posthumously in 1908, yet still pulsates, more lyrically than ever, with the characteristic melancholy and severe sense of displacement we hear in his initial representations of enclosure. In keeping with his usual elegiac tenor, "Remembrances" demonstrates the same exceptional visualization as is to be looked for in all of Clare's work, though this time conveyed with a fluidity, rhythm, and romantic eloquence that marks a noticeable departure from his descriptive poetry and touches upon the lyrical. Indeed, "Remembrances" reveals our poet painting from the same pallet as that which makes his early poetry unique, but this time with refined and varied brushstrokes.

It is worth mentioning that "Remembrances" is written during a time of transition in Clare's life. By the spring of 1832, Clare and his family would relocate to a cottage in the fenland village of Northborough, three miles north-east of Helpston. As Clare's correspondence reveals, this move was received by Clare with confused feelings. Bate comments that the three-mile distance from his native home "might as well have been three hundred" as he was "going out of his knowledge, away from the parish" that cast "the very contours of his being." Where in Helpston Clare could look west and south to the undulant moor and woodland, in the "deep fen" of Northborough "everything seemed to point to the flatlands of the east" (Bate 387). Nonetheless, some of Clare's letters to John Taylor express an abated sense of anxiety regarding the move because, after all, Helpston itself seemed to be moving on from the place Clare once knew it to be:

I shall have fewer regrets to leave this old corner where I now write this letter, the place of all my hopes & ambitions for they have insulted my feelings latterly very much & cut

down the last Elm next the street & the old Plumb tree at the corner is blown down & all the old associations are going before me. (qtd. in Barrell 174)

In a few lines, the poet communicates a similar sense of forced resignation to the transformed landscape that comes through in his poetry. Nevertheless, as is in keeping with the poet's vacillating emotions, Clare's later reaction to the move would contradict his initial acceptance. As Barrell also cites from Clare's letters, the poet found himself again unsettled, disclosing to Taylor, "I have had some difficulties to leave the woods & heaths & favourite spots that have known me so long for the very molehills on the heath & the old trees in the hedges seem bidding me farewell" (*Letters* 258). That Clare refers to the different aspects of his home as sentient objects that have "known" him just as he has known them is significant in its reiteration of the reciprocity that the poet believed to have existed as part of his ecological connection to the land. The uneasiness that Clare indicates in this letter is indeed a cue for the imminent estrangement that the poet continues to contend with in the ensuing years. "Remembrances" is but one of three poems that Bate classifies as Clare's "most powerful poems of alienation," all produced in the immediate wake of the Northborough relocation (389). A work that showcases a fluency in the art of longing that was perhaps not entirely mastered by an early Clare, "Remembrances" acts on exactly what its title suggests; it remembers and in the process discovers the futility of memory alone when "words are poor receipts for what time hath stole away" (29).

Because of the biographical context within which "Remembrances" is seated, this poem becomes, perhaps more literally than others, a poem of removal. Now outside of Helpston, uprooted physically as much as psychologically from all he is most familiar with, Clare's melancholy takes on new substance. Throughout the poem, Clare again interknits notions of mortality and eternity by working within the poetic conceit in which the stages of human life

mirror the passing of the seasons. The beginning stanza has the speaker emotionally disoriented by time, appreciating, “Summer pleasures they are gone like to visions every one / And the cloudy days of autumn and of winter cometh on” (1-2). Though actively recalling his fondest pastimes in this place, those moments of enchantment and exaltation are “far away from heart and eye,” remaining enclosed in time as if “unbidden” by remembrance (3-4). Clare again presents the conception of his childhood, whose “raptures” he previously thought “all eternal,” in conjunction with the supposed perpetuity of the pre-enclosed landscape (6). Nevertheless, even the place that once contained those sentiments for the young Clare has been adulterated and has since met its “decay” (5).

What enchants most in “Remembrances” is the thoroughness of each reminiscence. An intensely personal quality is mapped onto the environment through the specificity and ‘localness’ of Clare’s knowledge where, as his aforementioned letter suggests, these spots have “known” him “so long” that now there seems to be a mutual valediction in which “the very molehills on the heath & the old trees in the hedges seem bidding me farewell” (*Letters* 258). Further, Clare’s precision leaves no room for abstraction. Each vignette is imbued with powerful subjectivity, invoking very particular activities in equally individualized spots: “When I used to lie and sing by old eastwells boiling spring / When I used to tie the willow boughs together for a ‘swing’ / And fish wish crooked pins and thread and never catch a thing” (11-3); “When beneath old lea close oak I the bottom branches broke / To make our harvest cart like so many working folk / And then to cut a straw at the brook to have a soak” (15-7). The accuracy of each location is only matched in particularity by the idiosyncrasy of his pastimes, where he would jump “time away on old cross berry way” and eat “awes like sugar plumbs,” or fill his pockets with peas that had been “stolen from the grain” (21-2,27). Each line exceeds image and instead becomes a snippet

of narrative straight from the script of Clare's boyhood. From Old Eastwell and Lea Close Oak to Swordy Well and Langley Bush, the frequent reader of Clare becomes as figuratively familiarized with each spot as the poet is so in reality. The depictions are concrete and work to transport the reader to each destination, a poetic feat that could not be achieved through conceptualization.

As is the case with Clare's most evocative poems, "Remembrances" creates a mosaic from the memory of childhood charms that have, in time, been petrified "like the fable into stone" (54). Each reflection is conjured up with an intonation almost incantatory in nature. The repetition of lines that begin with "When I used to..." is paralleled with the anaphoric lines that come later, portraying the present scene as "All leveled like the desert by the never weary plough / All vanished like the sun where that cloud is passing now / All settled here for ever on its brow" (48-50). Indeed, a cloud of lamentation passes over the vibrant reveries until they too have "vanished like the sun." The initial visions of boyhood seem to evaporate with the sullen realizations that close the poem, the places previously rendered so complete and picturesque seeming as much mirages as the scenes of youth they accommodated. Further, many of Clare's pastimes are often remembered in first person plural, with "we" and "our" instilling each scene with a feeling of companionship. Though his present roving is solitary, Clare reminisces with plurality of the spots where "We sought the hollow ash... / With our pockets full" and "Where we threw the pismire crumbs when we'd nothing else to do" (26-7,47). These images give way at the poem's turning point in which the wanderer acknowledges his solitude, conceding, "By Langley bush I roam but the bush hath left its hill / On cowper green I stray tis a desert strange and chill" (61-2). Much like Goldsmith's fictional Auburn is a village deserted, Clare's actual home seems to have left him alienated and alone to a point in which the very "bush hath left its

hill.” Places that once echoed the frolicsome strains of youth are also forsaken and “silence sitteth now on the wild heath as her own / Like a ruin of the past all alone” (9-10). This tension between companionship and separateness extends to the tension between boyhood and manhood, between pre-enclosure and post-enclosure. The juxtaposition of images from “then” and “now” are appropriately jarring, each sketch of boyhood disrupted by the present scene as quickly and cruelly as that of the landscape itself. The externalized Eden that once stood has literally been dismantled and with it, Clare’s idyllic youth collapsed. Thus, what individualizes Clare’s nostalgia rests in his illustration of the actual rather than the abstract, in the sentiments that exude from the place itself rather than that which the poet projects onto its space.

Rather than occupying a generalized place of anonymity, Clare demonstrates an almost compulsive need to name and assign an identity to each spot he passes, as though the speaker is physically touring from site to site, verbally gesturing to and charting each spot. Nevertheless, Clare admits that, in calling to mind these “pleasant names of places,” he is compelled to “leave a sigh behind,” as “Inclosure like a Buonaparte let not a thing remain” (36,67). As the topographical identity of the landscape shifts and is fragmented, so too is Clare’s self-identification within that place distorted. The physical changes of enclosure are painful confirmations of his own transformations, seemingly as unwelcomed as enclosure is to the land. Both Bate and Barrell refer to Clare’s familiarity with the landscape as his very precise ‘knowledge’ and, when he is relocated, both geographically and temporally, he is cut off from that knowledge. Similarly, the erasure of the original landscape also erases a part of Clare’s knowledge so much ingrained in the local. As Barrell asserts, “as long as he was in Helpston, the knowledge he had was valid, was knowledge” (121). To go outside of Helpston is to be riven

from a part of Clare's sense of selfhood, an identity that remains ensconced in a place equally estranged from its original state.

The speaker of "Remembrances" reaches a perspectival turning point as the poem approaches its midway mark, as visions of the past dissipate into the reality of the present. It is here that we discover Clare's expression strained between a subjective voice of nostalgia and an attempt to objectively protest the rural alterations made by enclosure. Still, as has been discussed, Clare's personal connection to that changed countryside is the source of his grievance. Thus, the personal dimensions of Clare's ecological representations always inform, and at times dominate the political dimensions of his work and, as a result, the two concerns cannot be conveyed exclusively. This intermeshing of themes is most apparent in the latter half of "Remembrances." No longer entranced by visions of retrospect, Clare turns his gaze to the immediate. A shared empathy between poet and place is captured in Clare's call upon pathetic fallacy where nature, like the wanderer, "hides her face... / And in silent murmuring complains" (39-40). The poet looks upon "the only aged willow that in all the field remains," an image of perfect isolation that too closely resembles the stance of Clare himself (38). Everywhere there seems an impression of the self in the site. Clare goes on to apply the same language used to describe the landscape in his plaintive response to adulthood, acknowledging the fading of his "pleasures past" as winter has "come at last" where "the fields were sudden bare and the sky got overcast / And boyhoods pleasing haunts like a blossom in the blast / Was shriveled to a withered weed and trampled down and done" (55-8). Eventually, the sorrowful speaker concedes, "winter fought her battle strife and won" (60). Certainly, Clare seems to suffer from a 'winter' on two fronts. The passing springtide of innocence is, of course, an unpreventable

process of 'withering,' but one that Clare struggles to come to terms with nonetheless. The dispossession of his native place, however, is a loss far less fated yet equally as devastating. The natural language used in these lines parallels the deprivation of boyhood with that of his home, the dual occasions of lament bleeding as one. The integration of the two, however, dilutes the separate strength of each. That is to say, because a scene of Clare's boyhood courses through each portrait of location, the presentation of landscape is personalized more than it is politicized within an ecological context. Paradoxically, it is this same integration, the synthesized eradication of innocence and of landscape, that causes Clare to feel the ache of loss twofold. Therefore, while the overlap becomes a restraint in Clare's attempt to comment on enclosure objectively, the compounded aspects of change are also what engender the complexities of his response to the two as one unified loss.

In its penultimate stanza, "Remembrances" does assume a vein of environmental protest that is both provocative and piercing, and yet it stands as but a brief moment within the poem as a whole. Looking upon each landmark as it now appears, Clare notes the decay of "lea close oak" that to "self interest fell a prey" and has "penned its will / To the axe of the spoiler" (63-4). By "cross berry way and old round oaks narrow lane" there remain "hollow trees like pulpits I shall never see again" and, although the brook carries on, "It runs a naked brook cold and chill" (64-5,70). In perhaps his most scathing statements, Clare finally describes the defaced landscape as the wreckage of tyranny where, "Inclosure like a Buonaparte let not a thing remain / It levelled every bush and tree and levelled every hill / And hung the moles for traitors" (67-9). Arguably the most commanding lines of the poem, the language used here serves to electrify the political charge that runs subtly through the stanza's surrounding images of enclosure. Nonetheless, while lines of ecological protest and political indictment punctuate places in

“Remembrances,” they are ultimately cushioned by the poem’s overarching narrative of private nostalgia. Thus, as is the condition of much of his work, Clare’s political strands are too much buried in personal reflection whereby the latter muddies the conviction of the former.

In actively reconstructing scenes of what used to be, Clare adopts his exclusive tone of nostalgia where the concrete images of childhood preside over the emotions they provoke and, as such, work as vestiges of sentiment rather than vessels. The only relics of youth Clare seems to find are in these elusive instances of remembrance, though even the words that attempt to retain each memory are “poor receipts for what time hath stole away” (29). With an inimitable, subjective eye, the speaker of “Remembrances” is wholly receptive and responsive to the feelings that already exist in the rural setting. Rather than casting a particular sentiment onto the space, the emotional charge of Clare’s poetry is not superimposed on the land. Instead of applying an abstracted or generalized natural environment as the backdrop on which to implant a certain sentiment, the place itself *becomes* the sentiment for Clare. In this case, the nostalgia that overwhelms the poet does not exist without the place that it is installed in. The strain that arises in Clare’s poetry, then, is this need to literalize and individualize the object, that being place, while the sentimental subject being communicated is wrought with pastoral tropes and, unavoidably, filtered through the romanticizing light of nostalgia.

John Clare had the scrupulous eye of a natural historian and, indeed, it was the documenting of his own history within that natural location that kept him ever-fascinated and often disoriented by the politics of the past. As a poet whose work is so much steeped in the local and thus informed by his regional identity, it is only appropriate to assume that changes to Clare’s environment would influence the complexion of his verse, especially when the bulk of

that verse is a direct response to such ecological alterations. Simply put, Clare's work makes clear just how deeply Helpston's landscape sculpted his poetic inscape. His Northamptonshire countryside was a microcosm of nature all his own and his vision of it was penetratingly globular. What makes Clare's rural poetry as complicated as it is intriguing is the multifaceted intentions subsumed in its representation of place. Whether private or political, subjective or objective, the significance behind the laboring poet's ecological voice springs from his profound interconnection with his native countryside. Each portrait of rural life is variegated and his natural visualization sifts endlessly through a continuum that embraces the plainly political as well as the exceedingly individualized. Clare's nostalgia does not surface dissociated from its place and, correspondingly, the reformed landscape is never looked upon by our poet without its own reiteration of personal loss. It is in the fusion of sentiment and statement, personal and political, that presents a blurred message coming through his poetry. To represent the land is to take on the subjective perspective, to lose political or ecological objectivity because of Clare's personal investment in that locale. However, while the braiding of these two themes often confuses and impairs his ecological critique when read in the frame of the picturesque, it also demonstrates just how indivisible Clare's conceptions of childhood security and the pre-enclosed land actually remained. Accordingly, the realization of Clare's pastoral paradise was conditional on the hinging of the two. His 'Eden' existed only so long as innocence and ecological freedom stayed coupled and thus, the two remain so in his poetic re-creation of it. The land may be enclosed, the days of youth may have vanished, but Clare's preoccupation and, more appropriately, affection for the two dimensions of his past proves ineradicable. Driven out of his envisioned Eden, he may have been, but what he reconstructs of that paradise endures with all its poignancy through the immortality of his verse.

Works Cited

- Barrell, John, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1972. Print.
- Bate, Jonathan. *John Clare: A Biography*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003. Print.
- Clare, John. *John Clare: Selected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Merryn Williams and Raymond Williams. London: Methuen, 1986. Print.
- Clare, John. *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*. London: Printed for Taylor and Hessey, 1820.
- Goldsmith, Oliver. *The Deserted Village, a Poem*. Dublin: Printed for Messrs. Price, Sleater, W. Watson, Whitestone, Chamberlaine, 1784. Print.
- Gray, Thomas. "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard". 1751. Web.
- Greenblatt, Stephen, and M. H. Abrams, eds. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Romantic Period*. D ed. Vol. 9. New York: W.W. Norton, 2012. Print.
- Mckusick, James. "'A Language That Is Ever Green': The Ecological Vision of John Clare." *University of Toronto Quarterly* Vol. 61. No.2 (1992): 226-49. Web.
- Thompson, E. P. *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*. New York: New, 1991. Print.