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Enclosures and Dichotomies: Coexistence vs. Distance in the Poems of John Clare

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Enclosures and Dichotomies: Coexistence vs. Distance in the Poems of John Clare

by

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Enclosures and Dichotomies: Coexistence vs. Distance in the Poems of John Clare

When Raymond Williams wrote his influential text *The Country and the City* he positioned in its center the chapter “The Green Language,” a “green language” defined by Williams where, “It is not now the will that is to transform nature; it is the lonely creative imagination; the man driven back from the cold world and in his own natural perception and language seeking to find and recreate man. This is the ‘green language’ of the new poetry” (132). Williams establishes the origin of poetic “green language” in British Romanticism and indicates a shift from prior periods of environmental aesthetics when pastoral poetry’s practitioners were once agricultural laborers linked to rural scenes through their annual cultivation of the scenery they depicted. *The Country and the City* delineates how the development of pastoral poetics beginning in Virgil’s *Georgics* and leading up to English Augustan poetry promoted an aesthetics that pushed out the perspectives of laborers living in rural environments,¹ Williams claiming that pastoral poetry was no longer derived from the viewpoints of plowmen and shepherds but urbanites and aesthetes who *visited* the country rather than *lived* in it. He writes that with the rising popularity of pastoral poetry in the Renaissance period, “Its most serious element was a renewed intensity of attention to natural beauty, but this is now the nature of observation, of the scientist or the tourist, rather than of the working countryman” (*Country*, 20). The usurpation of pastoral poetics gradually rendered rural environments as a setting for vacationing city-dwellers to project ideals and fantasies, rather than the realities of those residing near woods and farms, “So that even in these developments, of classical pastoral and other rural literature, which inaugurates tones and images of an ideal kind, there is almost invariably a

¹Raymond. *The Country and the City*. 20.

tension with other kinds of experience: summer with winter; pleasure with loss; harvest with labour; singing with a journey; past or future with the present” (*Country*, 18). Slowly, the environment, or “nature,” became a way to establish an antithesis to the moral corruption of the urban life these poets set out to escape – the aesthetics of nature had been transformed into an aristocratic aesthetics of the “natural.”

This word “natural” or “nature” is a dubious placeholder for something intended to denote an inherent order, but is a multifaceted and nebulous signification. Williams writes in *Keywords* that, “Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the [English] language” (164). The problem in the implementation of “nature” is its function as an ideological tool signifying “normal,”² a word contingent on culture’s fickle sense of what “normal” entails.³ Ann Bermingham relates how a seemingly innocuous signifier like “nature” functions ideologically in her appropriately named *Landscape and Ideology*. She relates how “picturesque” aesthetics seen in landscaping and painting purposefully associates the gentry with nature, writing that with the portrayal of these associations, “a natural landscape became the prerogative of the estate, allowing for a conveniently ambiguous signification, so that nature was the sign of property and property the sign of nature” (14). These naturalizing depictions ground the bourgeoisie and their property as dominant not because of their ability to lead or govern – this would leave them vulnerable to appearing fallible – but because they are superior in their possession of an untainted “nature.” Bermingham continues by clarifying that the aesthetics of naturalizing, that is making things appear natural, ensconces a dominant class’s position through a naturalization of

² “In the Enlightenment, nature became a way of establishing racial and sexual identity, and science became the privileged way of demonstrating it. The normal was set up as different from the pathological along the coordinates of the *natural* and the *unnatural*,” Morton, *Ecology without Nature*. 16.

³ “Any full history of the uses of nature would be a history of a large part of human thought,” Williams, *Keywords*. 166.

bourgeois individuals as superior: “Consequently, the individual appears to be the creation of nature alone, not the recent product of historical and economic circumstances” (30). The bourgeoisie’s attraction to signifying what is natural and what is not via aesthetic associations obfuscates the reality of historical materialism’s machinations, rendering pastoral aesthetics in the period before “green language” as an ideological tool that complicates understanding such dynamics.⁴

Williams’ green language identifies an aesthetic turn in Romanticism’s renewed interest in the role of the rural native and the objects composing that environment, a return to an aesthetics once found in the bucolic poetry of the ancient Greeks.⁵ This new emphasis on rural natives and the objects of the environment is exemplified in John Clare, the first and most detailed example Williams cites after introducing green language.⁶ But Williams does not credit himself for coining this “green language,” locating in Clare’s poem “Pastoral Poesy” the first mention of “A language that is ever green / That feelings unto all impart” (13-14). Unpacking green language helps us further grasp an aesthetics in which “The laborer now merged with his landscape, a figure within the general figure of nature, is seen from a distance, in which the affirmation of Nature is intended as the essential affirmation of Man” (*Country*, 132), and that in identifying green language’s relationship with the environment, “[I]t was a new kind of poet, as it was a new kind of nature, that was now being formed” (133).

Clare’s poems engender this new kind of nature by avoiding aestheticizing the environment as a signifier of property and authority and suggest Keats’s “negative capability” by

⁴ “I propose that there is an ideology of landscape and that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a class view of landscape embodied a set of socially and finally, economically determined values to which the painted image gave cultural expression. Rustic landscape painting is ideological in that it presents an illusionary account of the real landscape while alluding to the actual conditions existing in it,” Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*. 3.

⁵ Williams, *The Country and the City*. 14.

⁶ *Country*. 132.

emphasizing language's failure to accurately depict what the poet perceives. Clare writes in "The Meadow Grass," "Theres something more to fill the mind / Then words can paint to ears and eyes" (65-66). Clare refrains from looking at the environment as a cool observer and engages so deeply with the environment that he renders as immersive, such that, when properly depicted, there is a failure to achieve signification between language and the environment. The depiction of the environment in Clare's work is not an aesthetics which naturalizes but one that defies naturalizing all together, a key aspect that theorist Timothy Morton extols in the poet, saying that, "Clare gives us the feeling of environment as open mind" (*Ecology*, 200). This "new kind of nature" is not a nature at all for Clare, but an environment without nature, a point that Morton expands upon in his work *Ecology without Nature*.

When Williams writes on the distancing between an observing subject and the environment that landscape aesthetics promotes— "The very idea of landscape implies separation and observation" (120)—Morton echoes these same beliefs thirty-five years later – "If we could not merely figure out but actually *experience* the fact that we were embedded in our world, then we would be less likely to destroy it" (*Ecology*, 64). This exploration of Clare's body of work applies the theories of Williams and Morton but privileges Morton's theoretical approach for three reasons: his dismissal of describing the environment as "natural," his prioritizing of objects rather than subjects, and his preference for phenomenological readings rather than aesthetic ones. Morton's statement above reads as a continuation of Williams's theories, but in applying the framework of his environmental criticism, requires defining three key terms of his critical lens: *ecomimesis*, *ambient poetics*, and *ambience*.

Morton defines the phrase *ecomimesis* simply as "nature writing" (54) and writes that, "Ecological writing wants to undo habitual distinctions between nature and ourselves. It is

supposed not just to describe, but also to provide a working model for a dissolving of the difference between subject and object, a dualism seen as the fundamental philosophical reason for human beings' destruction of the environment" (63-64). The second term is *ambient poetics*, defined by Morton as "a materialistic way of reading texts with a view to how they encode the literal space of their inscription – if there is such a thing – the spaces between the words, the margins of the page, the physical and social environment of the reader" (3). Ambient poetics is the lens of this project, just as feminist literary theory engages with the role of women in texts and Marxist literary theory emphasizes class relations. Ambient poetics is a materialist reading of how a text operates as an object within the environment and the way it stimulates the reader's sense of environment *while reading*, "an intertwining of what is sensed with the one who is sensing" (69). Ambient poetics examine how an *ecomimetic* text engages the space around a character or reader. This space is the third definition, *ambience*, described here: "Ambience denotes a sense of a circumambient, or surrounding, *world*. It suggests something material and physical, though somewhat intangible, as if space itself had a material aspect" (33).⁷ The dilemmas Williams and Bermingham previously stressed in conflating aesthetics with naturalizing appear in Morton's own theory, in which he asks plainly, "If ecology is about collapsing distances (between human and animal, society and natural environment, subject and object), then how much sense does it make to rely on a strategy of reading that keeps reestablishing (aesthetic) distance?" (*Ecology*, 154). Morton's warning regards Clare's work as an ideal source for applying ambient poetics. Combining Morton's approach to Clare as a writer of environment – and not a writer of aesthetics – while also involving Williams's natural/native

⁷ "I choose the word *ambience* in part to make strange the idea of environment, which is all too often associated with a particular view of nature," Morton. *Ecology without Nature*. 34.

dichotomy closes the gap between subjects and the environment perpetuated by ideological naturalizing.

The attempt of this project is threefold, with one larger endeavor linking the three. These three are: to relate Morton's and Williams's interpretations of how literature encourages an identification between the self and the environment, to read Clare as an *ecomimetic* writer through an application of ambient poetics, and to expand on the parliamentary acts of enclosure into an additional three spheres of ontological, linguistic, and phenomenological dichotomizing. Together, these three goals schematize Clare's "enclosure" as a broader *enclosure* of subjects within historical, ontological, linguistic, and phenomenological spheres. Using the word *enclosure* means to extend originally understood parliamentary enclosure, that is, a utilitarian reorganization or privatizing of environment, into other spheres. This enriches the consideration of Clare's historical enclosure as more applicable to contemporary ecological theory.

Enlarging this sense of enclosure beyond its historical sense maintains its original signification, identifies the sources of enclosure's positivist popularity, and tracks the taproot where enclosure's propensity for objectification originates. Assessing Clare with these four dichotomies establishes on one hand a dominate force linked to enclosure which ratiocinates a distancing between subjects and the environment, and a secondary force which endorses an identification between the subject's sense of self and their environment, fostering peaceful coexistence between subjects and environmental space.

This distancing and identification between the subject and the environment takes place at four levels in the four previously mentioned spheres: the historical, the ontological, the linguistic, and the phenomenological. Following Morton's lead, each established dichotomy undermines

these dualities without relying on the panacea of monism,⁸ acknowledging each dichotomy as an ineluctable principle stymied or suspended only through art and environment. Like the general duality of object and subject, structuring this project in dualities reminds us that “ambient poetics will *never* actually dissolve the difference between the inside and the outside” (*Ecology*, 52). Framing these relationships as constitutive dualities accepts *and* resists the presence of a dominating enclosure of subjects, objects, and environment.

The first section entitled **Natural vs. Native** will contextualize Clare’s position as a victim of the enclosure acts, his depiction of gypsies, and the dichotomy of the native and the non-native’s naturalizing aesthetics in poems like “Helpstone,” “The Gipsy Camp,” and “The Woodman.” Next, the dichotomy between the human and the nonhuman in the section **Anthropocene vs. the Nonhuman** discusses Clare’s use of prosopopoeia in poems such as “The Lament of Swordy Well” and “The Lamentations of Round-Oak Waters.” These poems demonstrate the conferred subjecthood Clare endows on the nonhuman and espouses these animals and objects with a new ontological precedence. The following section **Logocentrism vs. Arche-writing**, explicates the role language plays in Clare’s poems, a subject of interest due to Clare’s fraught consideration of language, presenting examples of language failing to communicate feeling⁹ or used for asserting the gains of the dominant gentry.¹⁰ This third section will refer to Derrida’s arche-writing as the way of reconciling the way experience is mishandled through language, framing it as a complement rather than a contrast to experiencing the environment in Clare’s poetry. In addition, Derrida’s “re-mark,” a device that Morton writes, “differentiates between *space* and *place*...between *objective* (space) and *subjective* (place)

⁸ “There is a Buddhist saying that reality is ‘not one, and not two.’ Dualistic interpretations are highly dubious. But so are monist ones – there is no single, independent, lasting ‘thing’ underneath the dualist concept,” *Ecology*. 48.

⁹ Clare, ‘A Scene,’ *Major Works*. 11.

¹⁰ ‘To A Fallen Elm,’ *Works*. 97.

phenomena” (*Ecology*, 49), will facilitate my segue into the final phenomenological section, validating Clare’s language as an affirmation of external phenomena, much like Williams’s green language. This leads to the final section on environmental ambience, the crux in relating Clare to Morton’s ecomimesis. This section titled **Dualities vs. Ambient Immersion**, detects Clare’s identification with the environment through ambient poetics’ materialist reading of poetry where textual and environmental immersion are seen to be identical, both dissolving the subject-object binary which generates an environmental harmony in the consciousness of the reader.

These four sections collapse the assumption that dualities are rigid, understanding that in Clare’s poems a movement inward is actually a movement outward and that a deep engagement with a text resembles a deep engagement with the trees, muck, and wind these texts signify. In or out of the text, the subject’s sense of environment is a sense of self; Morton clarifies: “Subjectivity is not simply an individual, and certainly not just an individualist, phenomenon. It is a collective one. Environmental writing is a way of registering the feeling of being surrounded by others, or more abstractly, by an otherness, something that is not the self” (*Ecology*, 17). Ergo, this reading of Clare’s corpus as ecomimetic finds Clare’s subjectivity fundamental in accessing the objects of environment and that in attempting to access objective environments we need to dive into the self and paradoxically become objects ourselves.

Natural vs. Native – “His native scenes! O sweet endearing sound”

The centrality of the “native” undergirds Williams’s articulation of how green language circumvented the trappings of previous poetics. He writes: “It is also, for any particular man, the loss of a specifically human and historical landscape, in which the source of feeling is not really

that it is ‘natural’ but that it is ‘native’” (*Country*, 138). He adduces *The Village Minstrel* to corroborate his point, establishing that the writing of these and other poems in his teenage years¹¹ associates the loss of his halcyon youth as coinciding with parliamentary enclosure’s reorganization of place. Williams explains:

A way of seeing has been connected with a lost phase of living, and the association of happiness with childhood has been developed into a whole convention, in which not only innocence and security but peace and plenty have been imprinted, indelibly, first on a particular landscape, and then, in a powerful extension, on a particular period of the rural past, which is now connected with a lost identity, lost relations and lost certainties, in the memory of what is called, against a present consciousness, Nature. (*Country*, 138-189)

Williams traced pastoral poetry’s transformation from the reflections of agricultural laborers *living* in the countryside to poets *visiting* the countryside, and the focus motions towards the difference between native representation of environment and non-native representations of environment. The non-native often relies on the word “natural” to validate a romanticizing of rural environments as an Arcadia to cleanse authors’ palettes of the city. The use of the word “natural” for urban society’s command over signification locates in the environment a normalcy not governed by those that live there, but by those that visit there, romanticizing and thereby neutering the self-determination of the inhabitants in such rural spaces. The disenfranchisement of this laboring class paved the way for the reforms of enclosure that galvanized Clare to defend his “native” Helpston.

¹¹ Williams, *The Country and the City*. 138.

This section examines Clare's responses to the historical enclosure of rural England. First is Clare's position as a victim of enclosure places him on the side of the "native," a byword for a local figure linked to an environment by virtue of that environment's associations to their upbringing. His poem "Helpstone" articulates Clare's victimhood as a native resistant to the non-native's enclosure. Second, are the presence of the gypsies, the most harried characters in his oeuvre, in the example "The Gipsy Camp." Lastly, the eponymous figure in "The Woodman" distinguishes a robust characterization of the native, differentiated from the distancing behind "nature."

"Helpstone" was chosen as the opening poem to Clare's first collection and claimed by Jonathan Bate to be its most important poetic work.¹² The act of recording the specificity of home motivated much of Clare's desire to write poetry, especially when considering its production in Clare's adolescence¹³ where Williams delineates how the loss of one's familiar surroundings paralleled with his loss of adolescence. The dichotomy between the native and the non-native's naturalizing aesthetic is clear in "Helpstone's" final lines: "And every wish that leaves the aching breast / Flies to the spot where all its wishes rest" (185-186). Here, all desire is a desire for "the home which night denies to find" (184). John Barrell seconds this point in *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, and describes how when the poem "Remembrances" recalls the impact of enclosure on a Helpston temporally distant from Clare, "enclosure has now become for Clare in some way an emblem for whatever it is that takes away the joys of childhood and so takes away too the pleasant associations we used to have with places" (175). Clare does not mince words as to what robbed him of his connection to native lands, naming a

¹² "For Clare, the most important poem in his first book was the opening one, 'Helpstone,' which he had written during the years when the parish was being enclosed," Bate, *John Clare: A Biography*. 153.

¹³ *Biography*. 153.

thirst for wealth that corrupted not only Helpston the village, but Helpston the memory, writing heatedly:

Accursed wealth o'er bounding human laws
 Of every evil thou remainst the cause
 Victims of want those wretches such as me
 Too truly lay their wretchedness to thee
 Thou art the bar that keeps from being fed
 And thine our loss of labour and of bread
 Thou art the cause that levels every tree
 And woods bow down to clear a way for thee (127-134)

The excerpt above identifies greed as the source of the lost idylls mentioned throughout the poem, and as if woken from a reverie, he attacks “wealth” as the prime suspect that robs the native of their right to work and their attachment to place. This dichotomy of the native and enclosure is enforced further in the first-person plural “our” that contrasts with the native’s collective unity with enclosure’s aggrandizing interests.

Clare’s mention of “Eden” in “Helpstone,” a place usually ascribed to a land inaccessibly distant, is within reach to the speaker: “Oh happy Eden of those golden years / Which mem’ry cherishes and use endears” (163-164). His evocation of a sylvan paradise isn’t a place described to him by someone else, accessible through the signification of the gentry, but connects Clare through his own experiences. Just as the “natural” is an abstract signification, and the “native” is an experienced kinship with one’s upbringing; Clare’s “Eden” is an Eden of memory – not a Biblical paradise. This dual treatment of enclosure as a symbolic removal from childhood and a disruption of native practices is vital in considering the psychological disruption Clare associates

with enclosure and youth, a disruption mended by the language of poetic artifice. In addition to justifying Clare's use of poetry to draw things together rather than to distance them, Clare's poems close the temporal distance between a memory and the present.

Though Clare never explicitly blames enclosure in "Helpstone," a similar pattern occurs in a poem like "To a Fallen Elm" where Clare speaks fondly of native scenes until a sudden accusation of a force disrupts native patterns in the poem: "wealth" in the case of "Helpstone" and "freedom" in the case of "To a Fallen Elm." In Clare's "To a Fallen Elm" the titular Elm represents an organic figure standing up to enclosure with the speaker listening to the Elm's "language by which hearts are stirred / Deeper than by the attribute of words" (34) and "Speaks home to truth and shows it what they are" (36). What the Elm communicates beside an environmental language of coexistence is a speaking of "home to truth," a tautology of the native for the native's sake resisting the abstract rhetoric behind enclosure's exploitive phrasing of "freedom" and "self-interest" that unfairly depicts natives opposed to enclosure as selfish. The intimate relationship that the Elm has to the cottage pairs the environmental quality of the Elm to the cottagers and by extension, native humanity.¹⁴ This relationship by virtue of being interconnected can only be seen as a native one rather than an abstractedly naturalizing one.

Yet perhaps Clare is just as reprehensible for perpetuating a naturalizing of romantic figures like the gypsy. In a poem like "Langley Bush" Clare ostensibly does just that, associating that tract of forest to the intrigue of the gypsy – "Both swains and gipseys seem to love thy name / Thy spot a favourite wi the smutty crew / And soon thou must depend on gipsey fame" ("Langley Bush," 13-15). But Clare's overlap between the gypsy and nature strongly emphasizes that the human is just as at risk as the nonhuman objects of the environment; indeed, the gypsy

¹⁴ Clare, "To A Fallen Elm," *Major Works*. 1-14.

figures as a metaphor for a human precarity that exploited nonhuman, native objects like Clare's Langley Bush are less equipped to survive.

"The Gipsy Camp," "The Gipsies Evening Blaze," and "The Gipseys Camp" each emphasize human coexistence with the environment but also societal ostracization. Each of these poems ambivalently treats this freedom and exclusion as interchangeable. Clare develops this depiction of the itinerant gypsy from early poems where the gypsy is mythic—"And now the swarthy sybil kneels reclin'd / With progging stick she still renews the blaze"¹⁵—to his asylum years where Clare perfects the balance between Romantic and tragic tones, "'Tis thus they live — a picture to the place / A quiet, pilfering, unprotected race."¹⁶ The gypsy, framed in motifs of privation, darkness, and cold appears as a sylvan divinity removed from society. "The Gipsy Camp" follows a gypsy boy's movement from the serene yet freezing woods to the "squalid camp" as a movement between two reference points with liminality as a principle theme in the poem. Like the "half-roasted" dog that moves away from the fire, the gypsy boy fails to find the golden mean between the polarity of nature and society, of independence and security. The movement of the poem takes us from the tranquility of a meditative environment to the "stinking mutton" of the camp where the community becomes an unstable balance between security and freedom, comfort distantly unattainable. A "half-roasted dog" is a half-dead dog, and the dog's role in the poem is to compare its relationship to the camp to the camp's relationship to society. Whatever it is the dog is experiencing in its starvation is happening to the camp when one considers its marginalized state within England. Like the movement of the boy who disappears in the poem's center when the dog appears, we relate ourselves to the dog as we relate to the boy. In the case of the dog, it is heat that is too strong while heat motivates the boy's return to the

¹⁵Clare, "The Gipsies Evening Blaze," *Major Works*. 9-10.

¹⁶Clare, "The Gipsy Camp," *Major Works*. 13-14.

camp. The sense of restless movement, a discomfort no matter the location, speaks to the movement of gypsies at the hands of enclosure.¹⁷ This inverse between the dog and the boy reinforces a sense of displacement; both animal and human are reliant on the fire but incapable of finding a proper position with readily available comfort.

However, we shouldn't see the existence of the gypsies as pure pain. They are often signifiers of rural coexistence, of alienation but also a template for our own potential to be liberated. Sarah Houghton-Walker describes Clare's portrayal of gypsies:

For Clare, then, the gypsy is a particularly useful figure through which to express anxieties about Enclosure because he can simultaneously celebrate the wildness and freedom the gypsies represent... As a figure, the gypsy thus allows Clare to have it both ways at once: he can criticize the Enclosure and depict an alternative possibility at the same time. (97)

Clare represents gypsies as complements to an idealistic rendering of freedom, their restricted mobility a restriction spoiling their model as native humans resisting enclosure's appropriation of space.¹⁸ However, the poet does not shy away from the realities of such scenes and links their suffering to the exclusionary practices of English society via the hunger and scarcity indicated above. Yet such hardship is not limited to gypsies, and Clare uses laboring class figures like the Woodman to shore up his argument that native perspectives provide us with an aesthetic that is environmental not because it shows nature but because it depicts the perceptions of those engaged with it.

¹⁷“The effect of [enclosure] on the Gypsies was dramatic...the pressure to move on from the rural police and local authority officials was consistent and tiring in its effect,” Mayall, *Gypsy-Travellers 1500-2000*. 20.

¹⁸ Houghton-Walker, *Representations of the Gypsy in the Romantic Period*. 97.

Clare's study of the Woodman is a lionization of the native immersed in an environment felt as pain and pleasure, where "Banks stile and flowers and skyes no longer charm" (60), but also where the rhythm of the lines indicate a sensuality to the Woodman's perceptions of the setting. Indeed, the beauty and lifelessness of the scenery exists like some form of cognitive dissonance, but with the result not of discomfort but perspicacity. "Winters frowns" coexist with memories of "when buds blossom and the warm sun smiles" (58). The waking "agen" (2) at the poem's start prefigures the end of the poem where we can assume the poem begins on another winter morning. The Woodman's first view is of a "ryhmey featherd pane" (4) and it stresses how Clare's language imbeds the scene (poetic rhyme) with the harsh reality of the Woodman (environmental rime), a point I'd like to prefigure now and return to in the linguistic dichotomy of Derrida's arche-writing. The mood of a terrible winter is constant, but these asperities never transfer into the Woodman, a figure who calmly accepts a cold debilitating even to the birds.¹⁹ Indeed, the Woodman "shrugs" (5) while a fox "is loath to gin a long patrol" (48). The movement of the Woodman never gestures towards violence, frustration, or even an opportune potshot at a shivering hare. He is immersed in his task and after nine stanzas where he reaches the site of his labor, we read four stanzas of social commentary, one stanza of the Woodman's generosity towards a robin (compare with the starving gypsy dog in "The Gypsy Camp"), and suddenly the day is over and the Woodman watches the sun descend. While the Woodman labors, we feel our perspective rove around the area, time suspended as it does when immersed in a rhythmic chore. In this way, the Woodman operates like a natural object, a figure enacting their role in a rural economy in the same way that a lactating cow, or a purling brook operates with the sense of environmental ambience.

¹⁹ Clare, "The Woodman," *Major Works*. 38-40.

Clare's presentation of the Woodman speaks to Alan Vardy's thought that "Clare believed that the conversion of nature into the self, by poetic means, or through the self-interest of enclosure, or his landlord making 'use' of his favourite elms, exploited the objects of nature by converting their intrinsic value into purely human value" (21). Vardy's "objects of nature" can extend to the human figures who operate as objects as well. Typically aestheticized by most poets, Clare renders the population objectively and without "character." This "lack of character" is, as Barrell claims, justified because Clare represents what people do, not what they are.²⁰ The lack of human content in Clare's poems is a reexamination of what it means to be human more than it is dismissive misanthropy: "if the poems have content, they still have no human content – the people we meet in Clare's poems have no character, no reality" (Barrell 172). This isn't to say that people are husks stripped of their humanity (maybe human-ness). Rather, Clare enables his human subjects to appear in objective narration, as objects unhindered by naturalizing aesthetics or our judgmental eyes.²¹

Where we do find character, however, is in poems like "The Lament of Swordy Well" which contains much more "character" than human-driven poems. The quarry named Swordy Well enumerates the gypsies, insects, and animals it protects until "vile enclosure came and made / A parish slave of me" (183-184), representing an environment facilitating freedom for humans and nonhumans alike. And it is this focus on land or environment's connection to genuine freedom, rather than ideology or institutions, that draws Clare to the animals and landmarks that make the environment relatable, and in turn, the human environmental.

²⁰ "The people Clare writes about are what they do: if they were anything else – if they had, somehow, *more* character – then the sense of place they help create in Clare's poems would change, and would have engaged in some compromise with what it is designed to exclude – the spirit and values of agrarian capitalism," Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*. 173.

²¹ "The human rustics like Simon Lee 'grubbing up his root', were attacked as absurd caricatures and examples of Wordsworth's unevenness: what Coleridge called his 'inconstancy.' Clare defended these natural objects and humble figures as inherently valuable, and the source of natural beauty," Vardy, *John Clare, Politics and Poetry*. 15.

Anthropocene vs. The Nonhuman – “Of shad bereav’d”

The anthropocene privileges subjectivity and limits its definition of the subject to the human, encouraging a domination of nonhuman subjects and objects in conceptualizing place.²² Clare’s experiments with imbuing nonhuman entities with ontological subjecthood render nonhuman objects as vibrant. This, in turn, reminds the reader of their own objecthood and facilitates their immersion into the environment, what Morton calls ambience.

By suspending anthropocentrism’s demarcation between the human and nonhuman, Clare purposefully obfuscates the ontological understanding of subjecthood as human and extends it to include bees, birds, and prolix rocks and streams, depicting a world much more responsive and sensitive to change than his readers would assume. Morton points out the anthropocentrism behind Kant’s correlationism which defines subjecthood’s correlationism as exclusively human.²³ Morton writes that, “Correlationism is true, but disastrous if restricted to humans only....We should merely *release the anthropocentric copyright control on correlationism*” (18). Morton borrows Quentin Meillassoux’s definition of correlationism in the work *After Finitude*: “By ‘correlation’ we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other. We will henceforth call *correlationism* any current of thought which maintains the unsurpassable character of the correlation so defined” (5). Meillassoux and by extension Morton redefine the ontology of the subject to contain organic life capable of acting based on their sense of the environment, freeing up the nonhuman from enclosure by recognizing their subjecthood. This reading of Clare pursues this inclusive ontology and rejects the anthropocene’s exclusive

²² “But don’t class distinctions depend, as Cary Wolfe has argued on a deeper *speciesism* that separates the human from the nonhuman, the better to oppress the nonhuman?” Morton, *Dark Ecology*. 73.

²³ “Kant grounded Hume’s argument in synthetic judgments a priori in a transcendental subject (not “little me,” the one I can see and touch). Only a correlator such as a (human) subject makes reality real,” *Dark Ecology*. 17.

ontology of intersubjectivity as merely a human matrix. Clare's poetry takes up this challenge in careful personifications of native, nonhuman entities.

Sara Guyer opens her chapter "Can the Poet Speak?" in her book *Reading with John Clare: Biopoetics, Sovereignty, Romanticism* by mentioning the relevancy of such personifying in the form of Clare's prosopopoeia, that is, the literary device where "the mute, dead, or absent are made to live and speak" (46), Guyer going so far as to formulate Clare's poetry as a prosopopoeia in itself in its resistance to grammar and orthodoxy.²⁴ Prosopopoeia exercises a dislocation from the commanding human self and generates sympathy through a radical presentation of nonhuman objects endowed with subjectivity. Prosopopoeia complements Morton's duality of subject-object relations but only when it privileges the marginalized other - in Morton's case, subjects privileging objects, and in Clare's, humans privileging the nonhuman.

Morton's interest in the animal locates (like the liminality of marginalized gypsies), the ontological barrier defining animals on one side of subjecthood and humans on the other. Morton writes that, "The question of animals – sometimes I wonder whether it is *the* question – radically disrupts any idea of a single, independent, solid environment. Each animal, perhaps, has its own environment" (*Ecology*, 98-99), and later, "The beings known as animals hover at the corner of the separation of inside and outside generated by the idea of world as a self-contained system" (99). Morton positions animals as agents that complicate human dichotomies of inside and outside, animals doing a much better job at ontologically *being* than humans busy dichotomizing to their own detriment. When Clare positions us in the faculties of perceptive animals, he

²⁴ "Clare's poetry operates like a rhetorical figure – a prosopopoeia, or fictional apostrophe – that returns the possibility of poetic production and of the writing self," Guyer, *Reading with John Clare: Biopoetics, Sovereignty, Romanticism*. 40.

compromises the ontology of subjecthood between humans and animals, and simultaneously depicts organisms as deeply involved with the environments around them.

“The Nightingales Nest” makes for an ideal example for transitioning to an examination of the nonhuman. It follows a human speaker sensitive to natural objects and projects his heightened acuity to the personified environment around him: the leaves are personified as “listening” (32), the flowers bowing to the bird’s song (70-73). The quest for the bird’s eggs are the poem’s McGuffin and the speaker stays as unobtrusive as possible, remaining underfoot while reading the environment in order to access the beauty of the nightingale’s nest: “it is a likely nook / In such like spots and often on the ground / They’ll build where rude boys never think to look” (50-52). But the fact that a nearby thrush is described as “emulating” (34) the nightingale indicates that subjecthood is expressed in the thrush as well, capable of mimesis in its emulation of the nightingale “[pouring] its luscious strain” (33). The speaker locates the eggs by reading the bird’s relationship to a personified cuckoo which blushes (74-75) and compares its home to a human dwelling (76-85). Anything that can access the song of the nightingale seems to be worthy of its animating song as its melody is imbued on the harebells (71), a key example of intersubjectivity witnessed by a human subject. Clare intends the nightingale’s song to represent the forest’s ambience, and the organisms in this space orient themselves to its song – a song much like the sonically present quality of Morton’s ambience, “as if space itself had a material aspect” (*Ecology*, 33). This is not the pastoral poetics of the tourist or scientist, but a native keenly interested in his neighbors.

“To the Snipe” penetrates an environment humans are precluded from accessing, the narration hovering close to the ground, the earth and water coalescing into “quagmire overgrown” (2), a liminality between liquid and solid unnavigable by man. We read where we

cannot be, the snipe treading lightly over grass which “Quakes from the human foot / Nor bears the weight of man to let him pass” (6-7). While avoiding an avian first-person tense, Clare retains the anxiety between the mute creature and its environment, and reminds the reader of their own human limitations by taking us to a land mysteriously inaccessible yet within walking distance of Clare’s Northborough. The speaker and reader learn from this wading bird that overlooked and/or inhospitable territory may not fit into agrarian capitalism but that such environments possess an ecological function. The speaker’s observations of the snipe represent a solace that these areas are representative of what the human dismisses as ugly or impractical. “Hanging out in the distance may be the surest way of relating to the nonhuman” (*Ecology*, 205), Morton writes, valuing the nonhuman without glib identification. Though what Clare does in “To the Snipe” is an attempt at dirtying ourselves in this nonhuman realm.

But the inanimate objects of these realms are also capable of participating in environmental dynamics just like the animals Clare imbues with subjecthood. Jane Bennett explores the concept of interobjectivity in her book *Vibrant Matter*, celebrating the animating effects of seemingly lifeless matter. While not a member of the OOO cadre, Bennett regards the activity of objects as possible in their interactions with each other, just as humans are an aggregation of inanimate “materials” interacting with each other.²⁵ She calls this “*Thing-Power*: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (2439). Not only should we regard objects as more than linguistic constructs, but as possessing an electrifying element that takes place when subjective agents interact with them. In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett describes detritus above a sewer drain that she reads as objectively present and not as merely linguistically present; writing how noticing one object leads her to notice other

²⁵ “human individuals are themselves composed of vital materials, [such] that our powers are thing-power,” Bennett, 2443.

objects in proximity to each other (2437). There is something anthropocentric in seeing the world composed solely of signs, and Bennett stirs us awake from these readings. The nightingale's animating of the woods regardless of the human subject's presence, is a perfect example of this idea. The "listening leaves" of the woods in "The Nightingales Nest" asserts the vibrant inanimate objects Bennett identifies. Clare reproduces the animacy of the inert in personifications of "mute" objects, doing away with what Bennett calls "the fetishization of the subject, the image, the word" (2450). Clare sidelines human perception in favor of the birds' correlationisms to each other and the leaves' interaction with the nightingale's song.

In "The Lament of Swordy Well" a nonhuman speaker, an ancient quarry built by the Romans named Swordy Well, has a far richer "character" than say the Woodman, the boy from "The Gipsy Camp," or even the first-person speakers in many of Clare's naturalistic tableaux. Swordy Well speaks with imagistic metaphors, has a speedy cadence that belies its immobility, and accepts its plundering with a passivity complementary to green language and ecomimesis's phenomenological underpinnings. The traditional rhyme scheme and eight-line stanzas reflect the grounded nature of Swordy Well, a patterned and balanced presence even after its stones are carted off to build "the town below" (71). Part of what makes Swordy Well so enduring (and endearing) is that its dispossession permits it to be free of being possessed by possessions. Swordy Well eschews mendicancy when it comes to visitors, "For passers bye I never pin / No troubles to my breast" (17-18), unlike the agency of a possessive human, who, "stooping for a single pin / Will stick it on his sleeve" (15-16). This *genius loci* spurns possessions, embodying a *tabula rasa* that humans can project onto in the same way humans make objective space into subjective place.

Elizabeth Helsinger adopts Williams's line of thinking in her essay "The Peasant Poet," theorizing that objects like Swordy Well reveal to humans their own losses. She writes, "For Swordy Well, as for the laborers whose position is articulated in the land's lament, this loss is the loss of self" (519). She writes later on that using this metaphor, "[b]y forcing us to see how the words put in the mouth of the land describe equally well the condition of the laborer, Clare offers a different understanding of the relationship between the two. The subject of the lament is dispossession – a change in the status of both land and laborer, as of the relations between them, that for Clare is epitomized in enclosure" (519). Swordy Well as an analogue for native loss fortifies the function that objects have in animating each other and themselves. For instance, this comparison provides the environment in the form of Swordy Well the teeming activity of dispossessed laborers, and the dispossessed natives are provided a connection to environment that Swordy Well represents.

Helsinger also bifurcates "possession" into two types: "to own" and "to keep." Instead of seeing all possession as capitalist, Swordy Well tries to "keep" what can be taken, the loss of which, exacerbates more theft as Swordy Well becomes less attractive and less likely to be protected as there is less to be shared:

But since I fell upon the town
 They pass me with a sigh
 Ive scarce the room to say sit down
 And so they wander bye (157-160)

The environment necessitates a retention of its attributes through "keeping" the components that maintain its ecological equilibrium, while "owning" is capitalist. Reading the above excerpt through the concept of green language, the exploitation of Swordy Well is so great that subjects

are restricted from the environment, incapable of preserving the landmark because of lost “room.” The environment does not seek possessions but maintains its homeostasis through “keeping,” requiring that it keep “many a butterfly” (110) and “rabbits that find my hills turned oer” (85). When bees flying round in feeble rings (81), clovers (89), dust and sand (105-106), and even humans in the form of a gypsy camp are lost (181), the environment is no longer open as green language reads it, but closed, inaccessible thanks to commodification’s dismantling of place.

Clare’s poem (via the personified quarry) is then an attempt to “imagine a language of relation that transcends the limitations of a middle-class poetics of the rural scene” (Helsing 520). The effect of Swordy Well’s “lament” within Clare’s corpus amplifies the character of Swordy Well because of the lack of character elsewhere. It forces us to rethink what “character” or “personality” even means if we mean it to signify some form of social individuality. The fact that we suspend our disbelief at a kvetching quarry shows that the gap between the human and nonhuman is not as wide as we think, and that poetic language is suited to the task of fusing this dichotomy.

Clare implements *prosopopoeia* again in “The Lamentations of Round-Oak Waters” a stream fed by a natural spring outside Helpston (Bate 106). In this case, we’re presented with a framing narrative through a woebegone human speaker who facilitates the reader’s identification with the articulate stream’s narration. Regardless of whether we read the numinous stream as the reverie of the speaker (existential), or a mystical voice emanating like the voice from Moses’s burning bush (essential) the result is a sense of interconnectedness that perceives the Waters as a subject, imagined or not. The stream indicates that the speaker is a “shun’d Son of Poverty” (38) and that this human represents the Waters own impoverishment, granting the stream its own

centrality and the speaker-cum-object a representation of the stream for the stream. The same can be said for the reciprocation of the speaker who sees the stream as a symbol of the speaker's poverty. The Waters's nakedness refers to its banks denuded of the foliage that once graced its shores, first mentioned by the speaker, "The naked stream of shade bereav'd" (35) and expressed later by the stream, this time, referring to a larger nakedness—"Dire nakedness oer all prevails" (97)—as the loss of shade does not just affect the stream but anything that accesses its waters. Round-Oak Waters's understanding of loss is more accurate because it recognizes that this loss ripples through the ecosystem to include much more than just the individual speaker or stream.

But the benefit of this nakedness is its recognition of systems like enclosure that allow and intensify such losses, an idea Morton explores in his *Dark Ecology* where he writes that subjects become aware of a preexisting system when it fails to operate smoothly.²⁶ The two subjects in the poem become aware that a system of enclosure exists because it has impoverished the speaker of a healthy standard of living and the Waters of the shade that comforted them, their nakedness disconnects them from the environment. The sorrow, rather than being greater in the case of the stream, is claimed to be commensurate, and the stream – not nature or the environment – is simply another object comprising the scene much like the speaker who is mute for the remaining three quarters of the poem.²⁷ The stream relates that while melancholy may be a negative experience, it weeds out the fair-weather friends uninterested in selflessness:

Distress and sorrow quickly proves

The friend sincere and true

Soon as our happiness removes

²⁶ "The theory of malfunctioning points out that when things smoothly function, when they just happen, they withdraw from access," Morton, *Dark Ecology*. 79.

²⁷ Clare, "The Lamentations of Round-Oak Waters," *Major Works*. 40-43.

Pretenders bids adieu (49-52)

These lines imply that a tolerance for suffering enables the connections between objects and their occasional loss. If one cannot tolerate grief, their lack of sadness at something's loss indicates that the feeling could not have been that strong. The reader knows from the poem's opening that the speaker has such emotional capacities as he describes himself as being, "Oppress'd wi' grief a double share" (1). The recognition of lost shade becomes a recognition of the subtleties of environmental loss, and this sensitivity to loss resembles the sensitivity to grief that introduces the speaker. The affirmation of despondency or pessimism is indispensable for Morton's environmental theory.

Negativity does not induce defeatism. The ability to sympathize with another's loss accepts rather than ignores it, and an openness to negative emotions and feelings requires this negativity to exist in the subject. Morton writes of the pain inherent to ecomimesis, stating: "Isn't this lingering with something painful, disgusting, grief-striking, exactly what we need right now, ecologically speaking?" (197). The abject and morose arises in Clare whenever the environment appears inaccessible or conveys a loss inflicted upon it. Admitting this loss requires a negativity not concerned with survival but with grieving. Being caught up in the Waters's bereavement of the lost shade is also a bereavement of the environment. Morton argues, "if we get rid of the grief too fast, we eject the very nature we are trying to save" (*Ecology*, 185). The loss of shade reflects the lost vegetation growing on the Waters, and the shadows indirectly relate to the trees just as the lingering trace of the trees are conjured by the Waters. The recognition of the loss shade as a metaphor for lost environment requires a correlationism not like Immanuel Kant's but Jacques Derrida's – not as a correlation between subjects and things-in-themselves, but between subjects and arche-writing.

Logocentrism vs. Arche-Writing – “The snows and rhyme lodge every where”

If the goal of this thesis is to reach the ambient poetics of ecomimesis via Williams’s green language, emphasizing subjects recognizing the self in objects,²⁸ we have to realize how these objects have the capacity to be treated as subjects as seen in the previous section, or at the very least, components of a complex interobjectivity. While it’s arguable that Williams’s green language shapes subjects through their identification with objects and their environment, Morton rejects the primacy of human aesthetics and reads Clare as presenting a displaced self with the environment pouring through him like Ralph Waldo Emerson’s translucent eyeball.²⁹ An important facet of Clare disregarded by Williams is the poet’s dismissal of what is now called *logocentric* authority – Clare doubts language as a legitimate avenue for accessing things-in-themselves. But while Clare’s seemingly logophobic attitude permeates his corpus, there is significant evidence that Clare reconciles the relationship between phenomena and expression through an acknowledgement of how writing is embedded in objects and the environment, closely resembling Derrida’s arche-writing which theorizes that writing is only possible because it already exists in the environment as will be shown. Because Clare regards language as inferior to the immediacy of phenomena yet performs within a linguistic medium, he justifies his poetry as a mediation between objects and subjects, humans and their environment.

Green language and ecomimesis operate within boundaries of class and anthropocentrism, but to register more fully the scope of enclosure’s link to semiotics requires assessing the grammatology of Clare that approaches language as weapon and salve. To do so,

²⁸ “[T]he more closely the object is described [in green language], the more directly, in a newly working language and rhythm, a feeling of the observer’s life is seen and known, and the bird *is* the feeling, in the created poem,” Williams, *The Country and the City*. 133.

²⁹ “[E]ven from the point of view of the supposed self-contained, organic, feudal village, Clare was writing poetry *for another*....[E]ven when he was writing without a view to publication, Clare’s work was displaced *from the inside* by an awareness of the other,” Morton, *Ecology without Nature*. 199.

this section is divided into three: the first referring to Williams's notion of mediating literature, the second referring to the parallels between Derrida's arche-writing and Morton's ecomimesis, and the third referring to Derrida's "re-mark" which distinguishes language from objects and regards language as dependent on the material realm rather than the abstraction of platonic ideals.

Clare's critical view of language arises in poems like "To a Fallen Elm" where a word such as "freedom" justifies greater liberties for capitalists, but only with the caveat that modifies previous considerations of that language. The distortion of the word "freedom" that enclosure brought with it is a case in point. The Elm is excluded from this promised prosperity, gesturing towards the tree's diminished freedom and the loss of environmental integrity. Clare limns the utilitarian figure here: "With axe at root he felled thee to the ground / And barked of freedom – O I hate that sound" (49-50). The result "was thy ruin music making Elm / The rights of freedom was to injure thine" (65-66) and freedom, as it turns out, signifies not emancipation, but the freedom of the bourgeois to extract resources in the name of a short-sighted utility. The ideology behind enclosure dictates meaning without regard for the material reality it depends on, moralizing that this definition of freedom is incorrectly an objective reflection of a reality that elevates the logocentrism of the word, "freedom without mediation." Enclosure's obfuscation of language's relationship to the material world is what Clare critiques.³⁰ We see it again in "Recollections after a Ramble"³¹ and "The Fate of Genius"³² when glyptic words carved into stone are blanketed in a palimpsest of moss and weeds, in "A Scene"³³ and "The Meadow

³⁰ "[Reflection] succeeds in suppressing the actual work on material – in a final sense the material social process – which is the making of any art work," Williams, *Marxism and Literature*. 97.

³¹ Clare, *Major Works*. 29-32.

³² "While the stones verses hid by summers weed / Which strangers eager trample down to read," *Works*. 122-123.

³³ "All these with hundreds more far off and hear / Approach my sight – and please to such excess / That Language fails the pleasure to express," *Works*. 12-14.

Grass”³⁴ where language fails to live up to sensory experience, and in “The Lamentation of Round-Oak Waters” where the nonhuman is excluded because it lacks vocal self-representation, “Thy silence speaks that Misery / Which Language cant impart” (139-140). Indeed, this last reference frames Clare as an emissary of his environment and a skeptic of language, speaking on the environment’s behalf in presentations of prosopopoeia against the aesthetics of naturalizing.

Morton’s application of the gap between a subject and environment arises in Williams as well, Williams positing in *Marxism and Literature* that art which *mediates* rather than *reflects* relationships between words and things resists ideological use of language. Williams argues, “Language is then, positively, a distinctively human opening of and opening to the world: not a distinguishable or instrumental but a constitutive faculty” (*Marxism*, 24). Williams frames language as ideological when it neglects to account for the dynamics of the historical materialism governing social processes.³⁵ The language of literature disavows ideology by exposing the mechanisms that exploit materials (environmental objects) for ideological domination, a move that Williams identifies when art *mediates* rather than *reflects*.³⁶ The difference in *mediation* is that “‘Mediation’ is intended to describe an active process (97), or is “a concept of reconciliation between opposites, within a totality” (97-98). Mediation takes on a dialectical role that *reflection* is loathe to acknowledge. The use of a word like “freedom” in “To a Fallen Elm” or the aestheticizing of images to represent nature are reflective rather than mediatory because they espouse objects to definitions rather than explore the gap between an object and the way it is

³⁴ “Theres something more to fill the mind / Then words can paint to ears and eyes,” *Works*. 65-66

³⁵ “‘Ideology’ became a polemical nickname for kinds of thinking which neglected or ignored the material social process of which ‘consciousness’ was always a part,” Williams, *Marxism and Literature*. 58.

³⁶ “The most damaging consequence of any theory of art as reflection is that, through its persuasive physical metaphor (in which a reflection simply occurs, within the physical properties of light, when an object or movement is brought into relation with a reflective surface = the mirror and then the mind), it succeeds in suppressing the actual work on material – in a final sense, the material social process – which is the making of any art work,” Williams, *Marxism and Literature*. 97.

perceived. This understanding of mediation makes *reflection* closed to interpretation and *mediation* open to interpretation. If environment is “open mind” as Morton says, then Clare’s ability to mediate the relationship between subjects and their environment realizes this potential. When Clare resorts to language as a way to preserve his environment through mediation, he mobilizes language as an object mediating the material environment, subverting *reflective* representations of place. We see mediation every time Clare challenges his patrons and editors in mentioning enclosure or “Accursed Wealth” (Vardy 71-72), but this example addresses the less obvious attention Clare places on how words and things are linked. The grief at losing access to these things through his limited freedoms in the Asylum uses poetry to reclaim them, inadvertently acknowledging that their recollection through writing is a recollection of their objective presence.

Williams’s view that language is constitutive parallels Derrida’s theory of arche-writing, defined as “the opening of the first exteriority in general, the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside...which must be thought before the opposition of nature and culture, animality and humanity, whether inscribed, or not, in a sensible and spatial element called ‘exterior’” (70). Morton builds on this idea, saying, “‘Writing’ isn’t just scratching marks on surfaces. It’s the way a differential play, the tricky play of nothingness, is in operation everywhere, producing and dissolving distinctions. Such distinctions aren’t only epistemological, having to do with language and thought, but also ontological, having to do with what Derrida forcefully calls ‘flesh and blood’” (*Dark Ecology*, 80). The interminable deferring and temporal disconnect between the subject and perception due to the *trace* understands language as incapable of penetrating the world of objects, because it is *a priori*, ingrained in the world of objects, described by Derrida in *Dissemination*: “There has never been anything but writing;

there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the ‘real’ supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc.” (159).

Derrida concludes that we have no way to experience reality but through language.

Clare’s “Decay: A Ballad” exemplifies a speaker showing how things contain this arche-writing, insisting that with the deterioration of poesy (language), the world of objects disintegrates with it. The first few lines of the poem record the twined decay:

O poesy is on the waine
 For fancys visions all unfitting
 I hardly know her face again
 Nature herself seems on the flitting
 The fields grow old and common things
 The grass the sky the winds a blowing
 And spots where still a beauty clings
 Are sighing ‘going all a going’ (1-8)

Arche-writing and the excerpt above involve Derrida’s mantra: “*There is nothing outside of the text*” (*Grammatology*, 158) by blurring the distinction between things and writing. Clare’s “going all a going” reminds us of Derrida’s trace, the fleeting sign/object (arche-writing) that logocentrism promotes as contained by its sign. Arche-writing, unlike logocentrism, reads objects as coded with signs from the beginning, reducing our perception of them as sign-in-object, reconciling this binary that logocentrism denies. The way that Clare’s “fancys visions” and “fields” fade from view corroborates how the subjectivity of visions and the objectivity of fields are tied like a double helix. The fact that these two rise and fall simultaneously is proof

enough that the signs and objects of arche-writing are joined at the hip. Experience and a record of that experience are more similar than different. Writing reflects the arche-writing of phenomenological experience and compensates for the gap between subjects and objects that imagines an environment. It would not be too bold to claim ecomimesis is simply an environmentally conscious rendering of Derrida's arche-writing.

And if "Decay: A Ballad" shows how the environment and language are inseparable, Morton says the same is true for ecomimesis, that in eschewing the *aesthetic* for *perception* the writer sloughs off facile projections: "[Romantic poets] turn the anti-aesthetic of ecomimesis around on itself. This is only possible because of the intrinsic playfulness and reversibility of language, and because of the inherent qualities of the perception dimension that, as we shall discover, makes *perception* diverge from the *aesthetic* (too often its analogue)" (*Ecology*, 142-143). This diverging from the aesthetic³⁷ is essential to Clare's gravitation to *mediation* rather than *reflection*, and its antagonism with positivism, optimism, and progress in recognizing a Kantian gap between things and ourselves, negating logocentric argument.³⁸

Morton's analysis of "The Mouse's Nest" demonstrates the treatment of aesthetics in the poem as an aesthetics of doubt, anti-aesthetic in its self-referral. When the speaker mistakes a mouse's nest for a simple ball of grass, he can't help but look away even though "she looked so odd and so grotesque" (7). He nears the nest, recognizes it, and watches the mice scurry away, concluding the poem with a couplet of more unprepossessing imagery: "The water oer the pebbles scarce could run / And broad old cesspools glittered in the sun" (13-14). The poem is a poem of failed recognition, and it is the curiosity of this misrecognition that leads to *perception*

³⁷ Vardy, *John Clare, Politics and Poetry*. 31.

³⁸ "Ecology wants to go from dualism to monism, but not so fast! Rather than seeking some false oneness, acknowledging the gap is a paradoxical way of having greater fidelity to things," *Ecology*. 142.

rather than *aesthetics*.³⁹ The speaker pulls the reader along a metonymic progression from green grass to cesspool, validating that which is ecological (an ignored aggregate of pollution is the most ecological for Morton because it has no place in “nature” or “society”), revealing a lurid reality passed over by most poets. Morton’s reading⁴⁰ recognizes waste and registers the limitations of knowledge that result in unintentional violence towards the environment. In this way, the cesspool resembles the forgotten signs in the environment that don’t fit into taste or aesthetics, things the speaker notices just as Bennett notices a series of objects because of having noticed an initial object. The plaintive poems of Clare accept the environment for what it is – an acceptance typifying Morton’s “dark ecology”: “a perverse, melancholy ethics that refuses to digest the object into an ideal form” (*Ecology*, 195). Ecomimesis and arche-writing account for perceiving these things without “aesthetic” baggage.

The problem in such “digesting” is that there is nothing to digest but the trace called arche-writing. This is where Derrida’s “re-mark” comes in. The re-mark as read by Morton is the gap between dualities, Morton suggesting “that subjectivity and objectivity are just a hair’s breadth (if that) away from each other” (*Ecology*, 49). The microscopic space of the re-mark allows for something at any given time to be either a subjective shape in the mind or an objective thing in space, yet paradoxically (and frustratingly) not both because of an indivisible connection to subjectivity. Using a metaphor of quantum mechanics that all things can be seen as a wave or a particle, that “we [can] measure things one way or another; never as an amalgam of the two simultaneously” (50). Morton defines the re-mark here, writing:

³⁹ “Clare’s refusal to recuperate the objects of nature into the aesthetic construction of the self cannot be read simply as a sign of a naïve poetics,” Vardy, *John Clare, Politics and Poetry*. 18.

⁴⁰ “The existential ‘thisness’ of the glittering cesspools is surely an environmental analogue for the anti-aesthetic grotesqueness of the close up view of the mouse and her young, which surprises the narrator and defeats trite ecological sentimentality,” Morton, “John Clare’s Dark Ecology,” 192.

The re-mark is the fundamental property of ambience, its basic gesture. The re-mark is a kind of echo. It is a special mark (or a series of them) that makes us aware that we are in the presence of (significant) marks. How do you discriminate between the letters on this page and random patches of dirt, or patches of paint and “extraneous” matter on the canvas?...A re-mark differentiates between *space* and *place*. In modern life this distinction is between *objective* (space) and *subjective* (place) phenomena. (48-49)

The re-mark differentiates between foregrounded signs and background. When background is brought into the foreground it becomes Morton’s ambience. And if arche-writing is the way writing preexists in the environment, then Clare’s reading of the environment is his recognition of writing that he lifts out of the environment, ecomimetic because of his attention to objects as perceived and aestheticized. This concentration on raw perception keeps him one step closer to arche-writing than his Romantic contemporaries.

Language and writing are contingent on objects, a point made by Williams thirty years before *Ecology without Nature*: “Moreover, [language] is material: the ‘agitated layers of air, sounds’, which are produced by the physical body” (*Marxism*, 29). Morton continues this thought when he writes, “writing depends on paper, which depends on trees and water, which depend on sunlight and comets, which depend on... if we keep going, we soon discover what I have elsewhere called *the mesh*: a sprawling network of interconnection without center or edge” (*Dark Ecology*, 81). By choosing this mesh, we find that the language of Clare isn’t in opposition with the environment, but becomes the environment itself, ecomimesis itself the system of continued connection in writing.

As the final section on the environmental dichotomy of inside and outside will show, Clare takes up this challenge in his literary techniques, his use of grammar, syntax, perspective, metaphor, and metonymy to compensate for language's inability to resist logocentrism's refusal to prioritize objects. Those techniques create an aesthetic approach based on an ecomimetic aesthetic instead.

Dualities vs. Ambient Immersion – “While fairy visions intervene”

John Barrell's reading of Clare explicates the poet's depiction of landscape as disorderly and multiplicitous and when “added together, must have tended twice as much towards an idea of landscape as formless and unruly” (152).⁴¹ Barrell then elicits the foil of James Thomson's pastoral poetics to juxtapose the technical difference between Clare's chaotically ordered environment with Thomson's “picturesque” renderings of scenery: “The movement of Thomson's eye, placing the objects in the landscape and seeking to make them, precisely, *subordinate* to the design and to the action of the main verb, was acted out as we say, by the pattern of the syntax” (Barrell, 154). This comparison of Clare and his antecedents depends on tracking grammatical mechanics and patterns more than theme or voice. For example, Simon Kövesi's essay “John Clare & ... & ... & ... Deleuze and Guattari's Rhizome” links the rhizome to Clare and continues Barrell's method of explicating grammar. Kövesi underscores Clare's use of the ampersand and helps clarify Barrell's earlier commentary: “at the grammatical level Barrell tracks a resistant to syntactical subordination, enabling Clare to deliver a scene all at once, with no element necessarily taking precedence” (79). Similarly, the ampersand rejects the

⁴¹ “It seems that Clare felt that if his sense of the particularity of things in a landscape was a disorderly one, and if his sense of their multiplicity was the same, then the two of them, added together, must have tended twice as much towards an idea of landscape as formless and unruly,” Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*. 152.

temporality of narrative and spatial *being*, representing “not the bodies, but the links between” (87). Reminiscent of Derrida’s arche-writing and its accompanying trace, these ampersands stand in as rhizomatic extensions of the environment, expanding into space to engender a paratactic series without design or hierarchy.⁴² Yet most important for the evaluation of Clare’s unique ecomimesis, is the aversion to aesthetic ordering Barrell and Kövesi detect in poets like Thomson, avowing that Clare is acted *on* by the environment before depicting it. Clare’s speakers in these instances become a subject-cum-object.

The aporetic conflation of subject and object (and also subjectivity and objectivity) defines the *ambient rhetoric* of ecomimesis.⁴³ Critics like Alan Bewell note the derivation of poetic materials from the environment and not as intended improvements of objects, writing: “Clare rarely spoke of his poetry in terms of individual poetic creation, but instead he argued that the songs and words were already there; he was not attempting to represent a nature that existed outside of language, but instead one that was already embedded in it” (Bewell 573). Bewell’s allusions to the environment as composed of innate signification reads like an obvious nod to Derrida, but it recalls the panoply of theorists previously discussed and the saliency of environmental objects in the creation of the subject – Barrell’s “open-field” complementing Morton’s “open mind,” Derrida’s ineluctable linguistics with Williams’s poetic projections. The “open mind” that Morton speaks of is exactly what Clare’s after – the spontaneity of what’s perceived is ordered by objects. Objects and environment precede the structuring of Clare’s environment, meaning Clare mimics the passivity of objects and becomes immersed in the

⁴² “Unlike the tree, the rhizome is not the object of reproduction neither external reproduction as image-tree nor internal reproduction as tree-structure....In contrast to centered (even polycentric) systems with hierarchical modes of communication and preestablished paths, the rhizome is a centered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states,” Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. 23.

⁴³ “Ecological writing shuffles subject and object back and forth so that we may think they have dissolved into each other, though what we usually end up with is a blur this book calls *ambience*,” Morton, *Ecology without Nature*. 15.

rhythm of perception, dismissive of an aesthetic that refines environment from a disorderly and natural one into a more seemly and aesthetic one. It is the environment, not the poet, that shepherds his descriptions.

Clare reimagines aesthetics by making it contingent on objects in the environment, a central component of ecomimesis (*Ecology*, 142), and prefers a poetics emphasizing the apprehension of things rather than an aesthetics which can't help but isolate an object in objectifying it for the pleasure of aestheticization. But where Morton diverges from previous readings of Clare is the inside/outside distinction that puts him at loggerheads with Deleuze.⁴⁴ This distinction is most notable in the act of writing/reading as an environmental registering of signs. The re-mark foregrounds signs that we find in environment or in art, both of which can be recognized by a perceiving subject. We are absorbed in the environment when we read poems or circumambient space, a universal signification that the concept of arche-writing indicates whether in Clare's bucolic environs or the physical text of these environs we read in office buildings and living spaces. The antinomies of a foregrounded and ecomimetic text with the backgrounded ambience that surrounds the reader utilizes strategies that bridge the subject with their environment and the text to its immediate space.

Writing and reading *are* especially environmental because they do not carry the baggage of presuppositions of what we generally consider environmental.⁴⁵ Poems like "Pleasant Places," "On Taste," "A Vision," and "Decay: A Ballad" contain references to poetic composition which compare environmental experience to the experience of writing or reading. These references to

⁴⁴ "If" the function of rhizome is to join and therefore to differentiate, then how can it do it in a 'better way' than a binary play of difference, without collapsing difference into identity? If sound *b* grows 'rhizomically' out of sound *a*, then is it the same sound, or a different sound?" *Ecology*. 53.

⁴⁵ "Nature loses its nature when we look at it head on. We can only glimpse it anamorphically – as a distortion, as a shapeless thing or as the way in which other things lose their shape. This 'shapeless thing' is the very *form* of ecological writing," *Ecology*. 63.

the reader's immediate environment are examples of the re-mark and signal to the reader that the reading taking place is an environmental one, reminding the reader that the space they occupy is textual just as their encounter with the text is spatial. Morton cites Thoreau's *The Maine Woods* which poses the question "Where are we?" at the end of a rhapsodic address to the audience, which is an example of Morton's re-mark. The italicized *Where*, "[announces] a heightened tone, inviting the reader to imagine his or her vocal muscles tightening. They put our body into the text, which has been gliding along of its own accord for almost a hundred pages. This far into *The Maine Woods*, we are embedded in the 'contact' of a text, and here we are made to wonder at how far in we have gone" (*Ecology*, 63). In Thoreau, as in Clare, "Textual pressure renders an environmental one" (*Ecology*, 63).

In the sonnet "Pleasant Places," the speaker enumerates a list of seemingly random objects within view of the speaker: "stone pits" (1), "a rail and plank" (3), a broken tree" (9), "a steeple peeping" through a break in the trees (6). These objects, some quotidian, others conventionally natural, are composed not by the speaker but by the unsteady hand of the wind: "In rich confusion mingles every green / Waving her sketchy pencil in her hand / That tints the moving scene" (12-14). "On Taste" refers to "pages of lanscape [sic] tree and flower and brook / Like bare blank leaves," another re-mark that brings to mind the environmental experience of reading, Clare driving the tactile sense of turning the page, the wordplay of pages or leaves indicated in the poem's final reference to turning away: "like bare blank leaves he turn unheeded bye" (14). The homonym of "bye" also refers to the departure of the speaker and the reader, a sense of movement and concurrent connection between text and reader. "A Vision" refers to the act of writing overcoming the speaker to such a degree that he "wrote 'till earth was but a name" (12). This line is the re-mark of the poem and refers to a modality of language given materiality

that is an earth unto itself. The speaker writes in the tone of a prisoner and writes himself into the freedom of the Earth's stratosphere accessing a world of signs as objects. "Decay: A Ballad" conflates the signs of poetry with the signs of the environment, reminding the audience of the reflexivity of the two in the variations of a refrain: "O poesy is on its wain / I hardly know her face again" (9-10). Clare reinforces this feeling of decay or environmental entropy in the mutability of using "wain" and "wane" interchangeably, and in the last line of the stanza where the speaker repeats, "I hardly know her face again" (10) as if losing track of his train of thought in the production of the poem we read in that very instant. When "Nature herself seems on the flitting" (4), it is because language is on the flitting, relaying to readers that the space around the text is composed of the arche-writing contained in objects.

Yet a significant impetus in Morton's work is to *turn* from Derrida's linguistic turn and comprehend that these objects are not solely constructs but objective things. Ecomimesis contains this recognition of things implicit in Derrida's theory that the world can be read linguistically and in Bennett's that it can be read materially. Ambient poetics regards the simultaneity of these diametrically opposed theories by suspending the difference between foreground and background, or art and the space around the art. The experience of art is always foregrounded – it dominates our attention while the background of planes buzzing overhead and people conversing in the next room takes place. Ambient poetics dissolves this difference in the mechanics and references to space within and beyond the text. Barrell evokes dimensions in Clare, "Each place exists as a manifold of things seen, heard, smelled, and for Clare each thing exists only as foreground; he does not detach himself from the landscape as Cowper does, or post himself on a 'commanding height', but describes only what is immediately around him" (Barrell 166). Barrell reads Clare as bringing the foreground to him while Clare occupies both at the

same time. Ecomimesis and ambience lures the reader into the environment of objects by referring to the medium being perceived as an object, demonstrating a subject's reliance on objects.⁴⁶ Other academics like Vardy second a less anthropocentric view in prioritizing environment over aesthetics, writing that "[Clare] does not convert the objects of nature into the grandeur of the self. He is not Wordsworth or Coleridge, and, frankly, he does not share their aesthetic" (28). Rather than pursuing a mastery over objects, Clare relies on an intuition propelled by the validity of objects, the aesthetic following the object, rather than vice versa.

Morton's ambient poetics or ambient rhetoric prioritizes the merging of binaries inescapably essential to subjects (inside/outside, subject/object, monism/dualism) which acknowledges yet challenges the dualities that promote destructive attitudes to other objects and subjects.⁴⁷ Ambient poetics localizes the merging of foreground and background, immersing the reader in the ambience of art as environment or environment as art.⁴⁸ Morton writes,

On the one hand ambient rhetoric provokes thought about fundamental metaphysical categories, such as inside and outside. On the other hand, if ambience becomes a resting place, a better version of the aesthetic dimension then it has abandoned its liberating potential. If we find no resting place in ambience, no new religion or territory upon which to pin our flag, then ambience has helped to liberate radical thinking. (*Ecology*, 142)

⁴⁶ "Ambience, that which surrounds on both sides, can refer to the margins of a page, the silence before and after music, the frame and walls around a picture, the decorative spaces of a building (*parergon*), including niches of sculpture," *Ecology*. 32.

⁴⁷ "If we turn all of nature into subject then we lose its otherness. If we turn it into object then we lose its nonreified quality. If we say nature is 'subject plus object' then we mix the unmixable and relapse into the original dualism. And if we say it is neither, then we fall into nihilism," *Ecology*. 179.

⁴⁸ "In general, ambient poetics seeks to undermine the normal distinction between background and foreground," *Ecology*. 38.

Between Clare's sidelong glance at *logocentrism* and aesthetic systematizing, the attraction to the desultory nature of ambience is essential in employing the poet to bolster and/or illuminate Morton's theory. For instance, Clare's early poem "Evening" takes place in the hazy gloaming around Helpston, where visibility only seems to take place with the departure of the sun's luminescence.⁴⁹ With the insects' "fear" of light having dissipated, the scene opens in the failing daylight with the speaker's hearing sharpened in the dimming landscape and echoes become more noticeable with the reduction of sight. The speaker muses on how this limit in perception conduces "fairy visions" (61) that apprehend objects but "Creat[e] dread surprise / From distant objects dimly seen / That catch the doubtful eyes" (62-24). Evening is the time where labor ends and occasions for "meditations thinking powers / At freedom fills the mind" (55-56), but evening is also a movement away from practicalities and brute comprehension, and the speaker is acutely tuned in to the darkness to navigate the crepuscular tableau. The paratactic progression in this poem establishes a sense of the poem's mood with its reliance on sound and imagination rendering things "real" in the growing dark. As the poem progresses with the senses slowly failing to ascertain objects, the speaker's sensory encounters resemble the act of reading, imagination compensating for the gap between objects and their representative signs. As the echoes of the poem carom into silence and night increasingly fogs perception, the poem represents the speaker's distorted apprehension of objects. This *contact*⁵⁰ with hazy objects brings us closer to the ecomimetic quality of a poem by referring simultaneously to the indirect relationship that the speaker has with their coded environment, and the reader's relationship to indirect signifiers and the things they represent.

⁴⁹ Clare, "Evening," *Major Works*. 1-4.

⁵⁰ "Contact becomes *content*. Ecomimesis interrupts the flow of an argument or a sequence of narrative events, thus making us aware of the atmosphere 'around' the action or the environment in which or about which the philosopher is writing," Morton, *Ecology without Nature*. 37-38.

Clare conflates the experience of his environment with the reading of signifiers and produces a re-mark in Morton's sense. In "The Fate of Genius" and "Recollections After a Ramble," inscribed messages are *read* in rocks rather than on paper. The "stone verses hid by summers weed" (123) in "The Fate of Genius" are read from a tombstone, demonstrating the futility of the idea of reading as comprehension. The carved words are an unconscious reading of a material arche-writing that strangers are eager to "trample down to read" (124). In "Recollections," the narrator can't read the rocks because of the moss growing over them, ostensibly reading a green arche-writing. Cows wade into a stream to drink, and the rings from cows disrupt the water's surface: "And the rings went wirling round / Till they toucht the flaggy bank" (27-28). The juxtaposition of a speaker reading moss in the foreground and cows forming concentric rings in the background supports the argument that Clare represents objects not as static but as connected, dynamic things overflowing the perceptions of his speaker, separate and concurrent.

Clare's ecomimesis dissolves the gap separating text from the environment and in doing so brings to the forefront of our mind a marginalized background or environment that accesses Morton's ambience. Clare's motifs of nonidentity, his dismissal of aestheticizing the environment, and his insistence on signification originating in objects rather than linguistics fuses his and our dichotomized world into an immersive totality of poetic and environmental absorption. If environmental theory fails to marry background – the ambience of environment – with the self, how else will we continue to love as Clare's speaker does in "I Am:" "And een the dearest – that I love the best - / Are strange – nay, stranger than the rest" ("I Am," 11-12). It is Clare's love for unfamiliar environments that future ecocriticism should mimic, not a naturalizing aesthetics reliant on humanity's logocentrism and Cartesian dualism. The unfamiliar

is made amorous for Clare because it makes subjecthood unfamiliar and objecthood identifiable
– the self a stranger, and the strange the self.

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