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1
Clare's 'Minorness'

In order to understand how Clare came to be considered a 'minor' poet in the Romantic canon, it is necessary to investigate the aesthetic assumptions that form the bases of such judgements. In part, Clare's status is a continuation of assumptions concerning his class identity. The social and political nuances of the earliest aesthetic claims made for and against Clare[1] and his poetry persist. This troubling persistence of the original terms of the critical debate demands that we examine what we mean by Romantic poetry, and what we mean when we identify Clare's poetry as a 'minor' variant. Attitudes towards class have changed sufficiently that Clare can be admitted as a poet without any special pleading on class grounds, yet the view of him as a naïve rustic, simple-mindedly in love with the objects of the natural world, continues to have currency. David Simpson provocatively addresses this puzzle in his essay, 'Is the Academy Ready for John Clare?'.[2] Simpson puts the problem in succinct historical terms:

> We would not expect to see much of Clare in the pages of M. H. Abrams's *The Mirror and the Lamp* or *Natural Supernaturalism*, for these were at the forefront of the 'old' Romanticism of complex high philosophic consciousness whose avowed displacement has been the task of so much recent criticism. But neither does Clare figure (except in two brief mentions) in Marilyn Butler's *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*, the book that best represents the 'new' Romanticism's commitment to placing its writers in forgotten social and historical environments; and he is completely absent from Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology*, which has received even more attention than Butler's book for its claim to set right the theorization of the Romantic period and its legacies. (p. 70)

Simpson suggests several reasons for this critical omission. The reason may be as simple as a lack of space in anthologies for all the new poetic voices that could be included. But why omit Clare? Simpson makes a trenchant observation when he points out that Clare's class position as a rural labourer 'is in the constellation of received classes no class at all' (p. 73). In the 'identity politics' that underwrites so much current critical discourse, Clare simply has no constituency (p. 73). He is not subject to traditional Marxist definitions focusing on an industrial 'working class', and the class to which he did belong has all but vanished. Whatever the causes of Clare's relative neglect in the 'new' Romanticism, the purpose of this chapter is to make clear the ways in which he challenges the 'old' Romanticism, and thus to establish beyond all doubt 'the potential of Clare's work for articulating the preoccupations of the contemporary critical moment' (p. 77).

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As we have seen, the eighteenth-century taste for pastoral poetry, exemplified by Hugh Blair in his lecture on the subject, provided the reading public with a critical guide to reading Clare that was simplistic and inaccurate. The more complex version of a rural poetics offered by Wordsworth, and critiqued by Jeffreys, Coleridge and others, slowly displaced that older taste in establishing a critical idiom in which to assess Clare's poetry. It is this later historical development in critical attitudes that needs to be addressed if the puzzle of Clare's designation as 'minor' is to be unravelled. The cause of this pervasive judgement can be summarised, in James McKusick's phrase, as 'the normative use of Wordsworthian categories'.[3] Chapter 2 demonstrates how the ideas on which these categories are based were already present in the critical debate via Taylor's introduction, and the various critical controversies raging at the time. In order to see how current critical evaluations of Clare derive from the critical edifices of Wordsworthian and Coleridgean aesthetics, and, further, to understand how these critical assumptions are ill suited to the task of reading Clare, this chapter pursues three tacks. The first section looks at Clare's attitude towards Wordsworth's poetry through examining his correspondence and journal. By understanding how Clare read Wordsworth, and other poets, we can begin to differentiate his poetics from those typically employed by critics in reading him. The second section provides a detailed comparison of Clare's aesthetic beliefs in relation to Wordsworth's by producing close readings of several of their poems. In the past, critics have employed such comparisons to

define Clare's 'minorness'. The final section of the chapter resituates Clare inside the critical debate concerning Romantic aesthetics by using his poetics as the means to construct a new critical vantage point from which to view the conflict between Coleridge and Wordsworth over the legitimacy of the use of 'low' rural subjects and diction. The many nuances of that debate create the most complex version of the Romantic aesthetic that has traditionally defined the field, the 'old Romanticism', and which has come under so much fire from historicists, feminists and others in the past fifteen years.[4] Clare's marginal position, paradoxically, provides an excellent vantage point to evaluate these unfolding critical debates.

Clare's reading

A sonnet composed between 1837 and 1841 captured Clare's attitude towards Wordsworth, in brief.[5] This homage described the poetic values that Clare found in Wordsworth's poetry:

> Wordsworth I love, his books are like the fields,
>   Not filled with flowers, but works of human kind;
> The pleasant weed a fragrant pleasure yields,
>   The briar and broomwood shaken by the wind,
> The thorn and bramble o'er the water shoot
>   A finer flower than gardens e'er gave birth,
> The aged huntsman grubbing up the root—
>   I love them all as tenants of the earth:
> Where genius is, there often die the seeds;
>   What critics throw away I love the more;
> I love to stoop and look among the weeds,
>   To find a flower I never knew before;
> Wordsworth, go on—a greater poet be;
>   Merit will live, though parties disagree![6]

No mention was given to the presumably crucial poetic value of reflection. The growth of the poet's philosophic mind appears not to have interested Clare. Instead, Wordsworth was admired for his careful delineation of the natural world and its human inhabitants. The flowers to be admired were not cultivated, but fragrant weeds entangled in 'briar', 'thorn and bramble'. The emphasis on the humbleness and the inextricability of the plants and the human inhabitants from their environment dominated the poem. These sturdy, tenacious 'tenants of the earth'

were precisely the parts of Wordsworth that critics disparaged. Coleridge went to great length in admonishing Wordsworth for his use of 'low' subjects. The humble rustics like Simon Lee 'grubbing up his root', were attacked as absurd caricatures and examples of Wordsworth's unevenness: what Coleridge called his 'inconstancy'.[7] Clare defended these natural objects and humble figures as inherently valuable, and the source of natural beauty. His use of the word 'tenants' was telling in its self-consciousness of the class rhetoric embedded in attacks on Wordsworth. Clare loved what critics threw away, and argued for a minute examination of the seeds of beauty in the common weeds. New poetic knowledge was found in the discovery of the beauties hidden from everyday view.

From his earliest readings of Wordsworth's poetry Clare valued not only the quality and variety of natural description, but also the apparent spontaneity of the verse. In a letter to Markam Sherwill of 12 July 1820, Clare wrote asking if he had met Coleridge and Wordsworth, and for Sherwill's opinion of Wordsworth's sonnet on 'Westminster Bridge'. Clare's extravagant praise of the sonnet was based on its power of description, and he made his point by way of a comparison to Milton (and against critical opinion):

> I think it (& woud say it to the teeth of the critic in spite of his rule & compass) that it [the sonnet] owns no equal in the English language Miltons I reckon little of keeping the 'Paradise lost' in view—one might have expected far better but he sat down to write to the rul[es of][8] art in the Sonnet just as a architect sets about a building while wordsworth defies all art & in all the lunatic Enthuseism of nature he negligently sets down his thoughts from the tongue of his inspirer[9]

Clare vehemently defended Wordsworth against the formal enclosure of 'rules of art'. In a witty turn, Milton's 'Paradise Lost' was lost when he composed his sonnets because it was displaced from his mind by superficial formal concerns. Wordsworth's greatness was his spontaneous composition in the moment of inspiration. Clare's language insisted both on the intensity of that moment; the 'tongue of his inspirer' suggested a physical transport, and its escape from the confines of formal concerns. The act of poetic composition was 'negligent', and nature herself, as a source inspiration, was uncontrollable, a 'lunatic Enthuseism'. Clare's vocabulary dramatised the issues of formal and critical enclosure that I will discuss in Chapter 2, and emphasised the essential spontaneity of Wordsworth's art. And, furthermore, the passage excluded philosophical

reflection as a source of poetic value. The conclusion of the letter made it clear that Clare understood the crucial divide in Wordsworthian poetics, a divide that contributed to the reception of his own poetry: '...dont think I favour his affected fooleries in some of his longer pieces theres some past all bearing'.[10] For Clare, reflection was equated with affectation, and marked the loss of poetic inspiration in pursuit of the extraneous; it indicated the failure 'of keeping the "Paradise lost" in view'.

Clare defended Wordsworth against himself. In resisting the move to reflection, he hoped to preserve the moment and force of inspiration, its 'negligent' freedom, and also hoped to preserve the objects of nature from displacement by poetic self-creation, the 'growth of the poet's mind' as Wordsworth famously called it. The stakes for Clare, as Chapter 2 indicates, were enormous. He needed to resist calls to purify his language of its 'real defects', and hoped in the process to develop an aesthetic practice that represented the natural beauties of the landscape for their own sake.

Clare's poetic taste for unaffected representations of nature developed through his reading of poetry in general, and led to a general theory of poetic value quite against the grain of most of his contemporary critics. In one of the earliest entries to his 1824 journal Clare stated his belief in the intrinsic value of the landscape, and his antipathy to affectation, in his appreciation of Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler*:

> what a delightful book it is the best English Pastoral that can be written the descriptions are nature unsullied by fashionable tastes of the time they are simply true and like the Pastoral Ballads of Bloomfield breath of the common air and the grass and the sky one may almost hear the water of the river Lea ripple along and the grass and flags grow and rustle in the pages that speak of it[11]

The 'best' pastoral poetry was that freest of 'fashionable' affectations, and that closest to the ideal of representing the natural world as it was. According to Clare, the poet should strive to come as close as possible to the thing itself, to 'almost' recreate the experience of that thing for the reader. In this aim, the poet, of necessity, must disappear in order for the landscape to emerge 'unsullied'. Clare's observation of this poetic value in Walton and Bloomfield does not surprise, but the predominance of it as a poetic principle becomes clear in a journal entry a few weeks later. This time Clare discussed his aesthetic responses to Milton, and after praising the sublime grandeur of the beginning and ending of 'Paradise Lost' he stated his reading preferences:

'Comus' and 'Allegro' and 'Penserose' are those I take up Oftenest what a beautiful description at the shut of evening is this

'—What time the labourd ox
'In his loose traces from the furrow came
'And the swinkt hedger at his supper sat'[12]

Again, Clare valued the accuracy and trueness of the description above all else. The adjective 'swinkt', used to describe the physical weariness of the farm labourer, is the precise dialect word. This is exactly the kind of diction that reviewers of Clare's poems objected to as 'low' or vulgar, yet here it is in Milton. Wordsworth's anxiety that such diction be 'purified' of such defects seems terribly misplaced in this context, the context of Clare's reading. So slippery is the matter of cultivated versus 'low' poetic diction, that even Eric Robinson and David Powell, probably the most vocal defenders of Clare's use of dialect words, become confused. They include Milton's word 'swinkt' in their glossary of Clare's dialect words in their edition of the autobiographical prose.[13]

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Central to Clare's poetic principles was the idea that an interrelationship existed between the aesthetic issues of 'low' diction and self-creation. He believed that the ethics of representation per se was at stake in discussions of his use of local vernacular speech. Clare's defence of idiomatic speech was based on the assumption that only through local language could local objects be accurately, and truthfully, represented. Calls for the purification of Clare's language, besides being couched in class condescension, threatened the very objects Clare wanted to preserve and elevate. His poetic representation of the landscape established the aesthetic value of its constitutive objects and resisted the commercial values that threatened its destruction.

Crucial to aesthetic judgements of Clare's lack of sublimity, judgements which contributed to his canonisation as a 'minor' writer, was the assumption that his diction was trapped in a landscape that failed to attain sufficient poetic heights. But it was precisely Clare's deliberate and spirited defence of the intrinsic value of the local against the affectations of poeticisms that provided one of the driving forces of his poetry. When *The Village Minstrel* was published in 1821 the critics predictably groused about Clare's use of 'provincialisms' (rustic speech unpurified of its defects), and about the lack of sublimity in his landscapes. These two

complaints were interdependent, and together they constituted an aesthetic judgement about the nature of the sublime and the beautiful that threatened Clare's chosen landscape, his locality, by labelling it poetically 'deficient'.[14] In retrospect, it seems absurd to praise Clare's careful observation of nature, while criticising the variety of natural objects he had to choose from (was the anonymous critic in the *Literary Gazette* suggesting a grand tour of the continent?). And, it seems equally absurd to praise his 'naturalness', the source of his genuineness, while demanding that he purify his 'natural' speech into the elevated language of *the poet*.

This returns us to Wordsworth, and the crucial distinction between Wordsworthian and Clarean aesthetics. In Wordsworthian poetics the aesthetic categories of the beautiful and the sublime are the ultimate ends of the poem; the objects of nature are the means to those ends not ends in themselves. And ultimate poetic value therefore lies in the aesthetic expansion of the poet (and vicariously of the reader) – what he, Wordsworth, called 'abundant recompense' in 'Tintern Abbey', or the growth of a poet's mind. Clare, on the other hand, resisted this self-referential system of value in his poems by striving for what might be called a truthful representation of the natural objects around him. They were in themselves 'the beauties', not the source of an intellectual achievement called 'beauty'. This was not an accident. It was a deliberate choice. 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; and yet, it is precisely this assumption that defines him as a 'minor' poet. Clare, in manuscript marginalia of 1821, made his poetic intentions clear in his response to the critics' complaints about his unpurified language in *The Village Minstrel*:

> [the] observation that Poets should conform their thoughts or style to the taste of the country by which he [the anonymous critic being challenged] means fashion—is humbug.

And in another note he took a precisely contrary view to that of the critics of the shortcomings of the second book:

> I . . . often feel sorry that I did not withhold it a little longer for revision. the reason why I dislike it is that it does not describe the feelings of a rhyming peasant strongly or locally enough . . . [15]

Clare's search for the 'genuine word' was a deliberate aesthetic choice, and raised questions about the very ethics of representation.

Clare took the issue of 'genuine' representation one step further by arguing that *all* poetic language was finally unequal to the task of capturing the intrinsic value and pleasure of the natural scene. In the sonnet simply entitled 'The Scene', from *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, Clare illustrated the impossibility of representing aesthetic value. The poem begins with a list of the natural objects that can be viewed from a single point: 'The landscapes stretching view that opens wide.' Within this expanse the poet's gaze seems to fall on a disconnected series of things:

> The steeple peeping just above the trees
> Whose dangling leaves keep rustling in the breeze
> —& thoughtful shepherd bending oer his hook
> & maidens stript haymaking to apear
> & hodge a wistling at his fallow plough
> & herdsman hallooing to intruding cow[16]

The accident of the steeple being framed by the trees is the only thing that connects the first two lines of this passage, and the human inhabitants of the scene are of the most humble, and presumably unpoetic, character. Yet, it was the aesthetic value of precisely this sort of landscape that Clare wished to establish. The homeliness of the 'herdsman hallooing to intruding cow' was transformed by the aesthetic pleasure it afforded. Clare made the most extravagant possible claim:

> All these [objects viewed] with hundreds more far off & near
> Approach my sight—& please to such excess
> That Language fails the pleasure to express

The poet was overwhelmed by the 'excess' of the scene. Such an experience answered both critics of the humbleness of the landscape, and those conditioned by Wordsworthian aesthetic assumptions. The failure of the poet to represent the surfeit of pleasure inherent in the scene caused a cognitive crisis characteristic of the sublime, a crisis of perceptual excess, and thus demonstrated that sublimity could be located in the most humble natural landscape. Clare's Northamptonshire landscape was as aesthetically valuable as the Alps. But, unlike Wordsworthian versions of such overwhelming moments, no effort was made to recuperate the perceptual excess of the scene, and the poet's failure, into personal growth; its value was purely intrinsic and remained unassimilated. Contrary to critics who claimed Clare's chosen landscape was incapable

of creating sublime transport, the poem argued that such transport was dependent on the quality of perception, on attention to detail. Furthermore, Clare demonstrates the value of the scene by refusing to exploit it.

In the early 1830s, Clare presented the aesthetic notion of the unrepresentable in simple and eloquent terms. A margin note to a prose fragment in which Clare had tried and failed to transcribe the song of the nightingale expressed the unrecuperable power of the objects of nature:

> ... many of her [the nightingale's] notes are sounds that cannot be written the alphabet having no letters that can syllable the sounds.[17]

The extraordinary use of 'syllable' as a transitive verb captures the sheer physicality of the poet's failure. Yet in this failure Clare discovered a potential sublime via his careful contemplation of his sensual experience of his place within the natural world (as the hearer of the nightingale). Clare is transported by the nightingale's song, and his failure to represent either the song or his experience of it need not devalue its aesthetic import.

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Normative Wordsworthian categories

I want to develop some of these aesthetic arguments further by looking at two sonnets from later in Clare's career, specifically in relation to Wordsworth's poetry. The first, from around 1835, is 'The Vixen':

> Among the taller wood with ivy hung,
> The old fox plays and dances round her young.
> She snuffs and barks if any passes by
> And swings her tail and turns prepared to fly.
> The horseman hurries by, she bolts to see,
> And turns agen, from danger never free.
> If any stands she runs among the poles
> And barks and snaps and drives them into holes.
> The shepherd sees them and the boy goes by
> And gets a stick and progs the hole to try.
> They get all still and lie in safety sure,
> And out again when everything's secure,

And start and snap at blackbirds bouncing by
To fight and catch the great white butterfly.[18]

In the note to this poem in the Robinson and Powell *Oxford Authors* edition of Clare, the editors explain that it is from a group of poems concerned with the theme of human cruelty to animals.[19] While I agree that many readers are led to reflect on this theme, I would suggest that such reflection is the result of the reader's aesthetic and emotive responses to the poem, rather than the poet's intention. The poem does not make moral pronouncements. Much of the pleasure in the poem is in its images of spontaneous animal behaviour. The stunning final image of the foxes leaping in an effort to catch 'the great white butterfly' depicts the animals' behaviour as its own ends. The young foxes do not find their value as part of an illustration of the evils of the hunt, or of the wantonness of the boy in the poem, but in an action that we, as humans, cannot comprehend. It is partly this final incomprehensibility of their behaviour that we translate into spontaneous joy. However, this affective response is not recuperated into the systematic self-expansion of the poet. Rather, it remains inexplicable, refusing to serve as an uncognisable negative stage in a sublime moment. The poem insists on the intrinsic value of the foxes, not on their potential as a moral lesson. After the fact, if we accept the value of the foxes as objects of nature per se, then we can conclude that cruelty towards such objects is unethical and perhaps immoral. But even the reader's recuperation of the poem into their personal moral education is resisted by the final inexplicability of the poem's action. Clare insists that ethics and aesthetics are intertwined in this way: in order to represent the intrinsic value of the objects of nature, the poet and the audience must recede as the ultimate centres of aesthetic value. There is strong evidence in poems like 'The Vixen' 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. He knew at first hand what it was to be menaced as an object of nature. The collapse of the traditional relationships of rural labour had taken a physical, emotional and material toll on Clare, and, as I indicate at length in Chapter 2, others hotly contested his very identity as a peasant poet beyond his own power of self-determination.

Clare's refusal to affect such a conversion of value in his poetry defines his 'minorness', according to the critical tradition (from Taylor's echoes of the Preface to Harold Bloom's 'failed Wordsworthian'). Compare,

for example, Clare's total lack of concern about the boy in 'The Vixen' to the famous Wordsworthian boy of 'The Prelude', Book First. Both are engaged in acts of transgression against nature, but in Wordsworth the boy's transgression is the site of moral learning made meaningful as evidence of a kind of primitive sensibility necessary to the growth of a poet's mind. When Wordsworth purifies these humble recollections he intellectually converts them into 'abundant recompense'[20] and redirects all value into the poet. The child's moral terror is taken as early evidence of the poetic capacity for the sublime:

> . . . but after I had seen
> That spectacle [the 'huge peak'], for many days, my brain,
> Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
> Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts
> There hung a darkness, call it solitude
> Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
> Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
> Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
> But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
> Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
> By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.[21]

This is the familiar structure of the idealist sublime[22]: a crisis, or negative stage, based on the uncognisability of the sublime object, followed by the supersession of the object into the expansion of the poet's mind. As evidenced by his written views on Wordsworth in his letters, Clare was deeply suspicious of this idealist structure precisely because it collapsed any intrinsic value of the object into the purely human value of self-expansion. He made his feelings about the ethics of this exploitative relationship to the 'pleasant images of trees' abundantly clear (in more prosaic terms) in the letter to Taylor of 1821 lamenting the impending destruction of his favourite elms, and his representation of the foxes in 'The Vixen' repeated this analysis in the realm of poetry. The violence of the terms in the letter, the trees were 'condemned to die' by the 'savage' who owned them, was replaced in the sonnet by a quiet defence of the foxes, but the claims for the intrinsic value of each was consistent over the roughly fourteen-year period between the two.

Clare's stubbornness in his adherence to the many registers of this single principle, the ethical refusal to exploit the objects of nature, whether by physical or aesthetic means, cut him off from the production

of true poetic genius according to the dominant aesthetic theories of the day. But that is not to say that his poetic practice did not constitute an aesthetic position. He believed in a different poetic truth, in a strict adherence to truthfulness in the representation of nature and human activity in nature. Even when the poet entered the poem as a human figure, potentially the poem's subject, Clare refused to redirect meaning into the poetic self. This resistance to recuperation is clear enough in another sonnet of around 1835, 'The Mouse's Nest':

> I found a ball of grass among the hay
> And progged it as I passed and went away;
> And when I looked I fancied something stirred,
> And turned again and hoped to catch the bird—
> When out an old mouse bolted in the wheats
> With all her young ones hanging at her teats;
> She looked so odd and so grotesque to me,
> I ran and wondered what the thing could be,
> And pushed the knapweed bunches where I stood;
> Then the mouse hurried from the craking brood.
> The young ones squeaked, and as I went away
> She found her nest again among the hay.
> The water o'er the pebbles scarce could run
> And broad old cesspools glittered in the sun.[23]

The human figure in the poem gives us no clue about what this event might mean. We witness an instinctual response (the poet's running) to an inexplicable sight. We cannot even guess at the cause of this response, much less construct a moral out of it. If this were an incident from 'The Prelude', the poet would meditate on the event and eventually secure its meaning, and the apparent panic attack would be superseded as a necessary negative stage in the growth of the poet's mind. This final meaning would be at the expense of the quality of the moment, and Clare strives to preserve the truthfulness of that visceral moment's inexplicability. The final couplet is a logical non sequitur; the glittering cesspool bears no relation to the mouse, yet it rings true as the next moment in Clare's intense perception and scrupulously accurate representation of the world he viewed. In creating these intensely perceptual poems, Clare is unique as a sonnet writer. Rather than developing an argument through the length of an octave and sestet or three quatrains and a couplet, Clare creates a series of

vivid perceptual moments of an almost cinematic quality. The matter of the poems is not formal, and thus the sonnet becomes merely the unit of perception.[24]

Coleridge and the trouble with rustics

Clare's resistance to locating aesthetic value in the process of reflection was deliberate and consistent. His reasons for resisting were complex, and concerned social as well as aesthetic worries about the exploitation of objects. But in another way Clare's poetry seemed in perfect agreement with Wordsworth's poetic aims. Wordsworth argued eloquently for the inherent aesthetic value of the rural landscape and its inhabitants, and this argument legitimised Clare's subject matter. The rural scene was established as a suitable subject for poetry. However, Wordsworth's use of rustics had different goals. He idealised such figures in the process of self-creation, 'Resolution and Independence' being the prototypical example, while Clare represented such figures for their own sake. Nonetheless, as I indicate in Chapter 2, critics were quick to concede that Clare's subjects were poetical, partly on Wordsworthian grounds. Hostility to Clare's humble subject matter, usually by conservative critics, was primarily grounded in class biases, but also appeared in aesthetic debates. Specifically, Coleridge's turn against Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* as a poetic project (partly as the result of his sense of grievance at being excised from the book) supplemented critical concerns about Clare's 'lowness' and vulgarity. It was precisely Wordsworth's claim of the superior authenticity of rustic speech, albeit 'purified of its defects', that Coleridge most fiercely attacked in *Biographia Literaria*. Critical reception inevitably picked up the terms of that attack, and the value of colloquial speech, so crucial to Clare's aesthetic claims, became contested terrain. Coleridge's attack on Wordsworth serves as one of the foundations of Romantic theory, and thus becomes a key piece in the intellectual history of the construction of Clare's place in the Romantic canon.

In chapter 22 of *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge loses his patience with the central conceit of Wordsworth's use of rustics. The idea that rustics were as the speakers of the poems' philosophical truths becomes too much:

> in order to remove all doubts on the subject [the poetical nature of a rustic character], [Wordsworth] had *invented* an account of his birth, parentage and education, with all the strange and fortunate accidents which had concurred in making him at once poet, philosopher and *sweep*![25]

In his attack he makes it clear that he considers the phrase 'peasant poet' to be an oxymoron: '...*one* BURNS, among the shepherds of *Scotland*, and not a single poet of humble life among those of *English* lakes and mountains' (emphasis his, p. 132). Such a figure, then, could only function as a mask for the poet, which Coleridge denigrates as a weak 'ventriloquism'. His objection here is, specifically, to Wordsworth's confusion of the 'high' and the 'low', what Coleridge calls Wordsworth's 'inconstancy', the false 'matter-of-factness' (p. 126) of his choice of characters. This argument runs that the poem is marred by an incongruous combination of 'high' poetic ideas and diction, with 'low' subjects, in this case, rustics. It is absurd, he argues, to pretend that the speaker in 'The Excursion' could be a pedlar. To illustrate this perceived fault, Coleridge selects a particularly bad Wordsworth poem as an example, 'Gipsies'. He employs withering sarcasm to make his point: 'he [Wordsworth] expresses his indignation [over the Gipsies' lack of industry] in a series of lines, the diction and imagery of which would have been rather above, than below the mark, had they been applied to the immense empire of China improgressive for thirty centuries'(p. 137). Here are the offending lines (quoted in full by Coleridge):

> The weary Sun betook himself to rest.
> —Then issued Vesper from the fulgent West,
>   Outshining like a visible God
>   The glorious path in which he trod.
> And now, ascending, after one dark hour,
> And one night's dimunition of her power,
>   Behold the mighty Moon! this way
>   She looks as if at them—but they
> Regard her not:—oh better wrong and strife
> Better vain deeds or evil than such life!
>   The silent Heavens have goings on;
>   The stars have tasks—but these [the Gipsies] have none.
>
> (pp. 137–8)

It is difficult not to agree with Coleridge that this is absurd diction to apply to a gypsy camp, but what is surprising, perhaps, is his defence of the gypsies against Wordsworth's presumptuous moral judgement. He decries the poet's lack of reflection concerning the actual conditions of the gypsies' lives, that they 'might probably have been tramping for weeks together through road and lane, over moor and mountain, and consequently must have been right glad to rest themselves' (p. 137).

Coleridge persuasively demonstrates that the poem is objectionable on both grounds (the aesthetic and the social). From a social perspective, in particular, Wordsworth, in attempting to assert his moral superiority, inadvertently expressed the opposite.

Coleridge's detection of moral weakness in Wordsworth moves him to object to the characterisation of the gypsies, but his primary motive is not a defence of the gypsies. He is not writing in order to illustrate his sympathy for the plight of the landless. More accurately, he objects to Wordsworth's failure to sympathise, and he believes that this reflects negatively on Wordsworth's capacity for poetic sympathy. Wordsworth's diction is shown to be absurd, and his observations suspect. In short, Coleridge's quarrel is aesthetic.

The best possible illustration of the moral and poetic shortcomings of Wordsworth's poem is provided not by Coleridge's attack, but by an irregular sonnet of Clare's from about 1840, 'The Gipsy Camp'. Written at Northampton asylum, it is a poem of profound identification and sympathy, and treats the same subject as Wordsworth's poem. However, Clare's poem presents a complete antithesis to Wordsworth's in terms of diction and moral sympathy:

> The snow falls deep; the Forest lies alone:
> The boy goes hasty for his load of brakes,
> Then thinks upon the fire and hurries back;
> The Gipsy knocks his hand and tucks them up,
> And seeks his squalid camp, half hid in snow,
> Beneath the oak, which breaks away the wind,
> And bushes close, with snow like hovel warm:
> Their stinking mutton roasts upon the coals,
> And the half-roasted dog squats close and rubs,
> Then feels the heat too strong and goes aloof;
> He watches well, but none a bit can spare,
> And vainly waits the morsel thrown away:
> 'Tis thus they live—a picture to the place;
> A quiet, pilfering, unprotected race.[26]

Not only is Clare not interested in judging the gypsies, the only language of judgement is directed back at the reader as a challenge to his or her habitual notions about gypsies. The fact of their 'pilfering' is not denied, but rather is presented in the context of the description of the camp, and the other descriptive adjectives that surround it, 'quiet' and 'unprotected'. The effect of this is to force the reader to re-evaluate

'pilfering' as an oversimplified view of the gypsies. Furthermore, Clare has no interest in the construction of a moral position for the poet through the agency of the poem. His aesthetics, here as elsewhere, are dedicated to the faithful representation of the object and the resistance of the urge to recuperate the aesthetic process back into the construction of the self. In fact, sympathising as he does with the gypsies' plight, any authorial self-creation would offend his sensibilities as an exploitation of human misery. In stark contrast to the self-congratulation and utter lack of sympathy that Coleridge denounces in the Wordsworth poem, Clare sympathises with the characters in his poem in an intense way. He literally follows the 'pilfering' boy back into the camp by imagining his needs; the boy 'thinks upon the fire', and returns because warmth is momentarily of primary importance in this harsh economy of needs. Clare's sympathy is extended to the extreme point of empathising with the camp dog whose hunger is an eloquent re-expression of the gypsies' own. His imaginative sympathy for the dog recalls 'The Vixen', and, as with that earlier example, Clare resists the construction of his own moral position in favour of a detailed representation of the harsh reality of the world he saw. The realistic delineation of a series of moments, the experiences of suffering in the gypsy camp, is the sole poetic purpose of the poem, rather than the means to a self-aggrandising moral position.

What then would Coleridge have made of 'The Gypsy Camp'? Would he have commended its fierce resistance to the moralising weakness of Wordsworth's poem? It is impossible to say, but it is important to remember that the defence of the gypsies was not Coleridge's motive for writing. Furthermore, the 'lowness' of Clare's subject concerned Coleridge as much as his famous rival Francis Jeffrey, and the conclusion he drew from his attack on Wordsworth's 'Gipsies' was not that Wordsworth had failed to truthfully represent the gypsies, although that was undoubtedly so, but that gypsies were not a fit subject for poetry. As a subject they violated a 'fundamental distinction', made by Coleridge earlier in chapter 22, between the correct objects for art and for philosophy. In that passage, Coleridge objected to Wordsworth's use of rustic characters, even as he admitted that we should consider all persons as equals regardless of their various stations in life; he nonetheless objected because they were, what he called, 'immediate objects', and, as such, better suited to treatment in 'sermons or moral essays'. He made his distinction on these grounds, and as follows:

> It [representation of rustics] seems, indeed, to destroy the main fundamental distinction, not only between a poem and prose, but even

> between philosophy and works of fiction, inasmuch as it proposes *truth* for its immediate object instead of *pleasure*. (p. 130)

Clare's poem takes *truth* for its immediate object. This Coleridgean distinction provides a succinct expression of the aesthetic divide between Clare and mainstream Romantic aesthetics. His insistence on the truth of his poetic representations is in direct opposition of the construction of the poetic self that dominates the poetics of both Wordsworth and Coleridge. What is euphemistically called *pleasure* in Coleridge's distinction refers to the aesthetic process by which the poet affects self-creation through poetic creation. An 'immediate object' is too easily grasped to afford the 'pleasures' of the sublime or the beautiful. For example, the subject of 'Resolution and Independence' is not the leach gatherer, but rather Wordsworth's harnessing of his personal crisis into a moment of self-expansion – the sublime effect. Clare resists this aesthetic effect on ethical grounds. He sees it as an exploitation of the object being represented, in that case, the leach gatherer. 'The Gipsy Camp' makes this clear enough, I think, in its gestures away from the poet and towards the feelings of the members of the camp (including the dog). Anything outside the accurate description of those represented and their feelings is extraneous to the poem. Clare would call these extraneous additions, as he did in the letter to Sherwill quoted above, Wordsworth's 'affected fooleries', the philosophical pretensions that to Clare's mind marred many of Wordsworth's poems.[27] In order to see how completely integrated this belief is in Clare's mind, one need only recall the angry letter to Taylor complaining about his landlord's plan to cut down his favourite elms and his outrage at 'his arrogant presumption'. This powerful attachment, what he elsewhere calls his love of 'wild things almost to foolishness',[28] forcefully illustrates Clare's respect, even reverence, for the objects of nature and his opposition to the 'presumption' of converting them to our use. This ethical stance is indistinguishable from his aesthetic stance vis-à-vis representation (as I argued above in relation to Wordsworth). Put another way, Clare refuses to differentiate between ethics and aesthetics, and thus refuses to abide by Coleridge's 'fundamental distinction'. It is this refusal, as I have said, that comes to define Clare as a 'minor' poet; the critical judgement of him as 'minor' really means that he 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 project.

*

The trouble with rustics, then, for Coleridge is first of all that they are 'immediate objects', unsuitable for poetry. They entrap the hapless Wordsworth in confusions about the very aims of art, and into embarrassing examples of uneven diction. Clare is doubly troubling in this regard because not only does he directly resist Coleridge's 'fundamental distinction', he *is* a peasant, and thus functions as an extremely uncooperative, if 'immediate', object; he is a living challenge to Coleridge's original assertion of the impossibility of a 'peasant poet'. He points to the distinct possibility of an 'English Burns', and perhaps a whole tradition of poets who had simply fallen outside the boundaries of Coleridge's critical view.

Another set of assertions from chapter 17 of the *Biographia* brings us full circle in our examination of the critical contexts of Clare's poetry. In describing Wordsworth's notions of the purity of rural speech as expounded in the Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads* Coleridge strikes a familiar note. In his argument against Wordsworth's claims for rural diction, Coleridge alludes to that other trouble with rustics, their use of idiomatic speech. More importantly, he attacks Wordsworth's extravagant claims for that speech in the Preface. Here, again, is the crux of Wordsworth's argument:

> Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language.[29]

Coleridge, of course, will have none of this, and goes on at great length, attacking the very basis of Wordsworth's claims by pointing out that:

> a rustic's language, purified of all provincialism and grossness, and so far reconstructed as to be consistent with the rules of grammar (which are in essence no other than the universal laws of logic, applied to psychological materials) will not differ from the logic of any other man of common-sense, however learned or refined he may be, except as far as the notions, which the rustic has to convey, are fewer and more indiscriminate. (p. 52)

Coleridge's parenthesis raises a question, to be addressed in Chapter 3, about the language theory that underwrote aesthetic judgements in the period. It amounts to a succinct, if very Coleridgean, recapitulation of Harris's theory of 'universal grammar'. Cobbett was actively challenging

this theory and its assumptions about class and language at the time, in his grammar, and by parliamentarians through petitions for reform. Coleridge's reliance on such theory serves as a marker of his turn to conservatism and reactionary politics, and reveals him as a political opponent of Cobbett who argued that grammar was a set of rules that did not determine the quality thinking that they shaped. Cobbett argued that grammatical correctness was an arbitrary system imposed in order to exclude the mass of the populace from the political process – and from the ongoing debate about their enfranchisement.

In his attack on Wordsworth, Coleridge deliberately overlooked the political context of Wordsworth's original statements. The vocabulary of levelling implied in the claim that the common man had a more authentic existence than members of the corrupt and decadent urban milieu in London[30] was clear enough, but Coleridge effectively buried it with his reactionary condescension. Coleridge supports his argument with examples from Wordsworth's poetry. The argument works from both directions; he shows that Wordsworth did not really employ rustic speech at all in poems like 'Michael' (in such instances he didn't know what he was talking about when he described his poetic method), and in the real experiments with the rural idiom, in the ballads, he failed precisely because such language contaminated his poetic thinking and representation. The poet's attempt to represent 'maternal affection' in 'The Idiot Boy', for example, had instead produced a portrait of 'morbid idiocy' (p. 51). This is a failure of diction in Coleridge's view, and leads him to conclude that the English peasantry are singularly incapable of poetic beauty or philosophic complexity. According to Coleridge, Wordsworth's experiment with rustic speech had seriously contaminated his poetic thinking, and part of Coleridge's project in the *Biographia* is to expunge this taint, and thus purify Wordsworthian poetics. And, as a noted above, part of what is expunged is the political impetus of *Lyrical Ballads* itself.

Clare again provides a challenge to the basic assumptions of Coleridgean aesthetics. His initial success in London literary circles was, in part, because he fulfilled the requirements of a Wordsworthian type; he was literally a 'peasant poet'. As such, he was nonetheless at odds with Wordsworthian ideals, in that he was not so much representing rural speech 'purified of its defects' as he was naturally employing such speech. He is thus a more extreme case of what Coleridge abhorred in Wordsworth's experiments with idiom. Furthermore, Clare was utterly opposed to removing the 'defects' of the rural idiom, and rather (consistent with his aesthetic and ethical beliefs) took the faithful representation

of it as one of his poetic goals. In this he is an extreme example of a poet at odds with Coleridge's pronouncements on Wordsworth's 'defects'. Not only did Clare employ 'unpoetical' rural speech, he refused to 'purify' it to suit literary tastes. In the letter of 1821 quoted above, he answered the critics of 'The Village Minstrel' by making it clear that the need to 'describe the feelings of a rhyming peasant strongly or locally enough' far outweighed any criteria dependent on literary taste. Clare did not want to purify his poem of its 'provincialisms'; he wanted to make sure that they were faithful to nature and that the intrinsic value of those who spoke them was accurately represented. Again, the divide here is over the purpose of poetic representation. Coleridge believed that poetry should provide the 'pleasure' of sublime transport, or the harmony of beauty, while Clare believed it should, as accurately as possible, represent the objects of nature in order to assert first their intrinsic, and secondarily their aesthetic, value.

Relying on Coleridge's statement in chapter 22, then, Clare should be an impossibility other than as a poetic mask for a more cultured poet, a dubious 'ventriloquism'. And, while it is patently false that Clare is the exception that proves Coleridge's rule – the *one* English Burns, (the tradition of self-taught English plebeian poets was extensive and over half a century old by Coleridge's writing), part of the profound sadness of Clare's life is his exceptional status, which removed him from the labouring class of his birth and yet failed to allow him membership in the London literary class. Despite this, it is crucial, I believe, to examine what kind of poetic exception he is to Coleridgean aesthetics. This is important both for what it shows us about the divergence of various practices of Romantic poetics and traditions, and for what it tells us about the conformity of subsequent critical judgements. The critical view of Clare as a 'minor' Romantic poet has been constructed from the materials of Wordsworthian and Coleridgean aesthetics, yet these materials are wholly unsuited to the task of reading Clare's poems. Any thorough re-examination of Romanticism and its cultural assumptions must take into account the ways in which Clarean poetics directly challenge and subvert the 'old Romanticism', and thus contribute to our critical understanding of the 'new Romanticism'.

The 'stranger soul'

To return briefly to the summer of 1820 and Clare's departure for London, his feeling that a 'stranger soul' had 'jumped into' his 'skin' not only made it difficult for him to imagine who he might be as an

individual following this seminal change in circumstances, but it also indicated that it was difficult to know who he was in class terms. He had been removed from the landless labouring class into which he had been born, by virtue of his literary gift, but, as is clear in the prose fragment, he was not yet the member of any other class. He felt a sense of displacement when he saw others 'ditching', one of his 'old occupations', and he experienced the guilty pleasure of 'lolling' in luxury in the moving coach.[31] And this displacement was complete in that he felt his old self had been usurped and a new John Clare put in its place. While it is too simple to suggest that this ambivalent class identity was the root cause of Clare's eventual madness, the overwhelming feeling of isolation that dominated his life did, in part, have its source in his inability to find stable membership in any class. Over the following ten years Clare made something of a virtue of his isolation in the village as it drove him to expand his range of contacts, both in his immediate neighbourhood and nationally.

Clare, of course, had always felt estranged from village life even as he chronicled it. *Poems Descriptive* is marked both by its deep commitment to the rural way of life that it sees threatened by the progress of the system of enclosure, and by a refined sensibility in delineating the objects of nature. In other words, the sensitivity that created his political commitments *and* his desire to represent the beauty of the countryside simultaneously connected him to his native landscape and marked his alienation from its other inhabitants. John Barrell argued that Clare's faithfulness to his 'locality' (Barrell's term), and the dependence on a 'sense of place' produced the poetry. In an unpublished early poem, 'Lamentation of Round Oak Waters', the specificity of the landscape underwrites the poem's force. In that and other poems, he was not discussing enclosure as a general social ill, but rather demonstrating its physical effects on the topography of a specific tract of land. Clare's vocabulary redoubled this discreet 'sense of place' by naming it in 'local' terms: 'the bawks and Eddings are no more' ('bawks' were the green strips between cultivated fields and 'eddings' are the green margins at the ends of fields). However, the same poem, that on the one hand so intimately represented Clare's connection to his landscape, also proclaimed his essential alienation from its other human inhabitants. The personified voice of Round Oak spring observes of the poet's agonistic relationship with the other local 'swains':

> 'The sports which they so dearley lov'd
> Thou could's't not bear to see

And joys which they as joys approv'd
Ne'er seem'd as joys to thee
The joy was thine couldst thou but steal
From all their Gambols rude
In some lone thicket to consceal
Thyself in Sollitude[32]

This feeling of separateness was severe enough to be a subject of gossip in the village, and a concern for Clare's mother as he himself reports: 'I grew so fond of being alone at last that my mother was fain to force me into company for the neighbours had assured her mind into the fact that I was no better than crazy'.[33] We are left then with a paradox concerning Clare's perception of himself as a member of the rural labouring class. He was doubtless a member of this class, his poetics are founded on the minute perceptions of the experiences of a rural swain and on the 'sense of place' those experiences engendered in him, but he was unable to feel any intimate relationship to the other specific members of his class. The quotation above from his journal even suggests a certain amount of alienation from his mother. Despite this, he was still able to understand and sympathise with the economic plight of those around him, and he was careful in his analysis of the effects of enclosure to exempt the other local 'swains', the other members of his specific class, from ultimate responsibility in the destruction of the landscape:

'But sweating slaves I do not blame
Those slaves by wealth decreed
No I should hurt their harmless name
To brand 'em wi' the deed
Altho their aching hands did wield
The axe that gave the blow
Yet 't'was not them that own'd the field
Nor plan'd its overthrow (p. 23)

During his early village life then, he is a class of one, the peasant poet, and this designation becomes a name for belonging to two classes, peasant and poet, and to none. Once he embarks on his trip to London and his career as a published poet, he is forever alienated from full membership as a peasant (his status as a poet contaminates him), and, as we shall see, sociability becomes one of his key literary values as he develops a network of friends and correspondents across class boundaries.

Clare argued for the intrinsic value of nature as opposed to its use value, whether that use value was seen as the destruction of the trees lining the banks of Round Oak brook or in the aesthetic production of Wordsworthian 'spots of time'. John Barrell makes an analogous point at the very end of *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, when he argues that Clare's refusal to suppress the specificity of the objects in his poetic landscapes put him at odds with eighteenth-century landscape aesthetics, in particular with the emphasis on the creation of harmony via the arrangement of the objects of the visual field. The aesthetics of the beautiful, of course, demand this visual harmony as their very definition, but the picturesque is no less dependent on a constructed harmony, and is under considerably more psychological pressure to achieve it. The picturesque risks including jarring elements in the visual field so that their assimilation can create greater aesthetic pleasure than the overly-domesticated beautiful can achieve, and without engaging in the potentially dangerous attachments of the sublime. Clare's refusal to assimilate the jarring details of the 'local' made him literally dangerous (his landscapes were outside the confines of aesthetic and ideological certainty, harmony in the broadest sense); and this refusal thus resulted, in Barrell's memorable phrase, his 'writing himself out of the main stream of European literature'.[34] Thus efforts to understand Clare as a peasant or a rustic, whether in the tradition of picturesque aesthetics or of Wordsworthian poetics, end by further marginalising him as not only as a peasant, but also as a 'minor' writer.

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