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‘Hail England old England my country & home’: Englishness and the Local in John Clare’s Writings

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I

Part of this article is based on a paper that I delivered at the conference on English and Welsh Diaspora held at the University of Loughborough in April 2011. It was a remarkable occasion that produced a strong sense of community and a variety of creative interchanges. I was interested and stimulated, sometimes surprised and challenged, and occasionally exasperated. This exasperation says as much about me as it does about the conference. Many delegates spoke eloquently about culture and place, a subject that has become of urgent interest in recent years as environmentalists celebrate the local while advocates of globalisation seek to dispense with it. The conference's emphasis on the power of local attachments seemed to me to be in danger of ignoring the significance of rootlessness, a state that is often presented as a characteristic of modernity, but which should not be confined to any specific period. Was my own experience of disconnection from place and past less meaningful, perhaps even less English, than that of delegates with a close connection to particular places? Was it simply an example of the aspirational self-fashioning of the upwardly mobile 'chattering classes'? I would hope not: delocalisation is a complex process and people from all kinds of background are increasingly likely to experience place as transition rather than location. The weekenders who can have such negative effects on rural communities are only one example of this geographical mobility. There must be ways of resisting what Nick Groom called in his stimulating plenary address the 'Tescoification' of England without being reduced to a nimbyism that wants to hold place in stasis. And, of course, the internal displacements that have always been a part of English culture are now connected to a much larger pattern of global displacements that are changing the cultural and ethnic composition of England. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the conference was its attempt to move beyond both conservative idealisation of the local and a vaguely leftist

cosmopolitanism that seems oblivious to the significance of place to identity. This article attempts to build on this work by rethinking the well-worn topic of John Clare's connection to place, and in the process rethinking the concepts of 'local' and 'place' themselves.

In order to do this, it may help to locate myself as its author. My engagement with Clare, and my experience of the conference, reflects personal anxieties about identity and place. Does it betray some sort of psychic hollowness, or even moral failure, not to care much about where I come from, or where my ancestors lived, or what they did in order to live? In my own case, growing up in rural and suburban Bedfordshire in the 1980s, I struggled to find much pleasure or beauty in my environment. Perhaps I wasn't looking in the right places. My childhood and adolescence sometimes felt like a prelude to getting away and starting again somewhere more inspiring. So it was exciting to encounter Brighton and the South Downs when I went to study at the University of Sussex in the 1990s. There I developed an interest in the existentialism of Sartre and Camus, writers who have proved attractive to many dissatisfied late adolescents. In what I suspect was a creative misreading of their work, I saw in it a refusal of origins, an assertion of the individual's capacity for continual renewal and self-creation, a denial of place. The grey blankness of the English Channel, which I found curiously fascinating during this period, seemed the objective correlative of my own sense of emptiness and potential.

What would an ecocriticism look like that took its existentialism not only from Heidegger and the phenomenologists but also from the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* and *Existentialism and Humanism*? It might be more comfortable with dislocation and absence – what Wordsworth called 'blank desertion' – and more aware of the contingency of all human projects, including environmental ones. It might be less invested in the local and authentic, and less likely to collapse into primitivism. It might be less prone to sentimentalising the Other. It might resemble in some respects the 'ecology without nature' mooted by Timothy

Morton in an important recent book. Its arguments are too complex to summarise here: it offers a critique of the role of nature and place in ecological writing, not only examining how they operate as rhetorical constructs, but also arguing that they impede ecological thought. Morton focuses especially on the limitations of *ecomimesis*: writing that claims directly to place the self in the natural world but which is inevitably troubled by the deferral of meaning characteristic of all texts. To the extent that Sartrean existentialism makes a virtue of displacement and contingency, it may have quite a lot to offer contemporary ecocriticism.[1]

The significance of 'local attachments' has been seen as crucial to the development of Romantic poetics, and as a salutary reminder of the dangers of sacrificing a sense of place in the pursuit of modernisation.[2] But the dangers of unreflective localism are nowhere more apparent than in critical work on John Clare. It is temptingly easy to construct a narrative of his life and writing that moves straightforwardly from home to homelessness, from a strong sense of self to a disintegration of identity. The importance of place in his work is not in doubt – his capacity to find meaning in the smallest details of his environment – nor should the deracination of rural communities by enclosure be downplayed.[3] But when Clare writes about his experiences of childhood and youth in pre-enclosure Helpston, he often writes about alienation. To be a labouring-class poet in rural Northamptonshire, to read and write and to wander the fields without any apparent purpose or errand, was to be marked out as different; it was, in fact, to be out of place.[4] This is one reason for my own interest in Clare. If reading and writing can transport us, however partially, to somewhere else, then for some adolescents it allows a temporary escape from a community (the family, the school, the village, the suburb) that may seem stifling or conformist.[5] Literature did this for me and I think that it did it for Clare too: reading and writing as displacement. And perhaps writing that seems the most palpably locatable is in fact the most potentially dislocated: after all, to write about a place is to separate it from the self by turning it into an object. As Richard

Cronin remarks, 'it is the object both familiar and strange that most excites [Clare]' (140). His localism was always troubled, always displaced, always on the verge of vanishing. In Clare's work, the local, like the figure of joy in Keats's 'Ode on Melancholy', is always just about to leave the party.

Like all forms of cultural analysis, ecocriticism, despite the efforts of some recent practitioners, is in danger of being mired in unhelpful dichotomies: the rural versus the urban; the local versus the global (or national); the human versus the natural; and so on (see Morton and Nichols). This article doesn't claim to be able to escape from these, but it does at least attempt to problematise them. It stems from a larger project on the relationship between Romantic-period autobiography and national identity in which I argue that the 'Englishness' of the countryside, rather than being dependent on a simple process of othering, was produced through a complex intersection of different geographical associations. Clearly, as David Simpson has suggested, English national identity became increasingly defined during the Romantic period 'in terms of particular instances and local rather than cosmopolitan attachments' in response to the association of the French Revolution with 'theory, general ideas, and universalist ethics' (139). However, as he also points out, in practice this distinction was hard to maintain. Furthermore, recent research on the genealogy of globalisation has led to greater understanding of the increasing prevalance and power of global interconnections at least as far back as the eighteenth century (Hanley and Kucich). It is not only that the 'stretching' effects of globalisation might change our understanding of what the local actually is, as is suggested by the apt, if ugly, neologism of 'glocalisation' (Livingstone). As Morton asks, 'what if globalization [...] revealed that place was never very coherent *in the first place*?' (170). For Morton, place is not so much a thing as a question. The boundaries of here are always fluid and provisional, and dependent on a sense of there. Morton sees the local, like the decentred self, as 'constantly dissolving and disappearing'

(175). One does not have to buy into his brand of deconstructive criticism to take the point that, when the local is invoked, it always opens up the possibility of other places – perhaps even an endless metonymic chain of them – rather than closing them off. Representations of specific rural places are therefore also, potentially, representations of the city, of the nation, and of the rest of the world. This is apparent in Clare's work.

II

My argument about Clare and dislocation can be clarified by examining an important autobiographical fragment that he composed in the early 1820s. Although it is well known to Clare scholars – for example, it inspires Iain Sinclair's fine book *The Edge of the Orison* (2005) – the passage as a whole has not, as far as I am aware, been subject to sustained analysis. In fact Clare's prose has been generally neglected by critics, a serious omission as passages like this are as rich, complex, and psychologically sensitive as any of Wordsworth's 'spots of time'. Both writers are interested in reconstructing memories of liminal moments when the self is bewildered and out of place, as a way of understanding the subsequent development of their own imaginations. Here is the passage in full:

> I loved this solitary disposition from a boy and felt a curosity to wander about the spots were I had never been before I remember one incident of this feeling when I was very young it cost my parents some anxiety it was in summer and I started off in the morning to get rotten sticks from the woods but I had a feeling to wander about in the woods and I indulgd it I had often seen the large heath called Emmonsales

stretching its yellow furze from my eye into unknown solitudes when I went with the mere openers and my curosity urged me to steal an oppertunity to explore it that morning I had imagined that the worlds end was at the edge of the orison and that a days journey was able to find it so I went on with my heart full of hopes pleasures and discoverys expecting when I got to the brink of the world that I coud look down like looking into a large pit and see into its secrets the same as I believd I coud see heaven by looking into the water so I eagerly wanderd on and rambled among the furze the whole day till I got out of my knowledge when the very wild flowers and birds seemd to forget me and I imagind they were the inhabitants of new countrys the very sun seemd to be a new one and shining in a different quarter of the sky still I felt no fear my wonder seeking happiness had no room for it I was finding new wonders every minute and was walking in a new world ~~& expected the worlds end bye & bye but it never came~~ often wondering to my self that I had not found the end of the old one the sky still touch'd the ground in the distance as usual and my childish wisdoms was puzzld in perplexitys night crept on before I had time to fancy the morning was bye when the white moth had begun to flutter beneath the bushes the black snail was out upon the grass and the frog was leaping across the rabbit tracks on his evening journeys and the little mice was nimbling about and twittering their little earpiercing song with the hedge cricket whispering the hour of waking spirits was at hand which made me hasten to seek home I knew not which way to turn but chance put me in the right track and when I got into my own fields I did not know them every thing seemd so different the church peeping over the woods coublandd hardly reconcile me when I got home I found my parents in the greatest distress and half the vill[a]ge about hunting me one of the wood men in the woods had been killd by the fall of a tree and it servd to strengthen their terrors that some similar accident had

> befallen myself as they often leave the oaks half cut down till the bark men can come up to pill them which if a wind happen to rise fall down unexpected (*John Clare By Himself* [*JCBH*] 40-1)[6]

Perhaps the first thing to note is that this is travel writing and is quite typical of the genre during the period in associating 'wonder' and 'curiosity' with 'anxiety'. As Jonathan Lamb has shown, in the long eighteenth century the genre was sometimes seen as problematic because it threatened to isolate the self from civil society: 'in opening up the undiscovered world, [...] [it] opened up also the terra incognita of the mind, those hidden spaces where ugly and unsociable impulses lie' (6). The focus of Lamb's study is travel to the Pacific, but really the precise trajectory of the journey is unimportant compared to the experience of the traveller: Clare describes a child's travels into a psychic unknown land, and the alienation that results from this. A key influence is *Robinson Crusoe*, which affected Clare as a child to the extent that 'new Crusoes and new Islands of Solitude were continually mutterd over in my Journeys to and from school' (*JCBH* 15). This emphasises how Clare's everyday life in Helpston was inflected by the potentially alienating effect of romance.

Like so many of Clare's texts, the passage begins with 'I lov[e]d'; usually he then goes on to refer to a particular landscape or creature but here the love-object is solitude itself. Pleasure can be isolating and, for Clare, isolation can be pleasurable. Solitary pleasure can be found in experiencing the local and familiar, but the child also delights in the prospect of discovery and exploration. Even early on in the passage, there are hints that the child's 'wander[ings]' may be transgressive: he 'indulg[es]' his desire and the 'opportunity' to explore is a stolen one. He is enjoyably led astray by his 'cur[i]osity'. In an important essay, John Goodridge and Kelsey Thornton have analysed the significance of literal (as a pedestrian wanderer) and metaphorical (as a labouring-class poet) trespass in Clare's

writings. They show that there was good reason to be frightened of trespassing during Clare's lifetime, given the draconian Game Laws and the often violent conflicts between labourers and gamekeepers. Such anxieties, they argue, contribute to the prevalence in Clare's writings of 'the imagery of land boundaries, and of the two functions of boundaries, to enclose, and to exclude' (99-100). One of the interesting things about this fragment is that, unusually for Clare, he does not identify boundaries and then seek to cross them. Simply getting to 'the edge of the orison' would be sufficient; what the fragment provides, rather, is the fantasy of infinite open space, in which it is impossible to distinguish the beginning of one locale ('a new world') and the end of another ('the old one'). While it is tempting to relate this passage straightforwardly to the sense of space engendered by the open fields of pre-enclosure Helpston, as described by John Barrell, this needs some qualification. Barrell's influential work distinguishes between the local 'circular' topography of an open-field parish and the delocalised 'linear' topography created by parliamentary enclosure (103, 120). He shows clearly how Clare's identity and writing were bound up with the open-field system. However, what happens in this passage is that, when experienced directly rather than viewed from the village itself, the openness of the land surrounding pre-enclosure Helpston can itself also be delocalising, for it provides the self with no stable foundation, no clear connection to its point of origin.

A sense of excitement at the possibility of discovering 'the worlds end' is conveyed by the lack of punctuation, the anaphora ('I had often seen […] I had imagined […] so I went on […] so I eagerly wanderd on'), the piling up of abstract nouns ('hopes pleasures and discoveries'), and the repetition of key words like 'wonder' and 'new'. There is a powerful pun at the heart of the passage: to *wander* is also to *wonder*.[7] Above all, Clare gives an account of how the process of wandering/wondering changes the self and its relationship to the world. The child trespasses beyond the boundary of his knowledge and as a result

becomes less certain of his identity and what constitutes home. This is conveyed by the conceit that the flowers and birds no longer know who he is. Barrell points to the significance of the phrase 'out of my knowledge', which suggests the extent to which Clare's identity and his ability to make sense of the world were bound to Helpston (120-1). But, as with a Wordsworthian spot of time, this feeling of disorientation and (self-)estrangement is enabling as well as troubling. The child's response, at least initially, is not fear but 'wonder seeking happiness'. The turning point, literal and metaphorical, is when night comes. (That it 'crept on' suggests that the child's disorientiation is temporal as well as spatial.) The focus shifts from the workings of his mind to the nocturnal activities of the creatures he encounters. Their untroubled behaviour, expressed in verbs of movement and sound ('flutter', 'leaping', 'nimbling', 'twittering', 'whispering'), contrasts with the child's 'perplexitys'. The use of the past progressive tense ('was leaping') or even present progressive ('hedge cricket whispering') suggests a community of animals engaged in ongoing instinctual activities from which the child is excluded. Clare here provides what Barrell has called 'a manifold of particular impressions [...] a group of images apprehended as it were simultaneously' (161). When Clare does this, it is not, Barrell argues, simply to describe a place but rather 'to suggest what it is like to be in each place' (166). The twist in this example is that the 'manifold' suggests that the experience of wandering on Emmonsales heath is an experience of being *out of place*. The self becomes alien and ghostly, and it is appropriate that it is the fear of encountering similarly restless 'waking spirits' that causes him to seek to return home. The child's encounter with 'a new world' has profoundly changed his identity, leading to an epistemological crisis. He does not 'know' his own locality, for 'every thing seemd so different'. The connection between person and origin has been cut, or at least severely weakened. Furthermore, the lack of an object for 'reconcile me' (with what?) suggests that this estrangement is not only to do with the self's relationship to the world, but also reflects

an internal schism. This is not caused by a strange experience *per se*, but by having an experience that reveals the strangeness already implicit in the familiar. The distinction between the originary place of Helpston and the seemingly endless open space leading to the edge of the orison becomes difficult to maintain. Place is hollowed out.[8]

It is significant that the 'anxiety' that Clare imputes to his parents at the beginning of the passage has by the end turned into 'the greatest distress … [and] terrors'. The fear that the child might have been expected to have experienced, but which is earlier only implied, seems to have been projected on to his father and mother. In a similar move, his hunt for the edge of the orison is mimicked by the fact that they and 'half the vill[a]ge' have been hunting him. The role of the 'woods' in this passage is important. The child's wandering off when he should have been collecting 'rotten sticks' seems mysteriously connected to the accident affecting one of the 'wood men'. Clare's collection of wood may itself have been a form of trespass. Robert Bushaway has shown that although 'the taking of dead wood was anciently a popular right, protected by customary law [...] the transition from custom to crime occurred in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the wood-gatherer faced increased legal sanctions and was more regularly stigmatised as a wood-stealer' (68). The distinction between green and rotten wood was very much open to interpretation in the period; wood gathering might well involve gleaning the branches of a living tree. In 1766, Bushaway notes, the law on wood gathering was strengthened; gleaning wood from a timber tree at night could lead to transportation for seven years (80). That Clare was well aware of this issue is apparent from *The Parish: A Satire* (mostly composed in the early 1820s) in which he describes how 'my Lords chief woodman' has become the 'terror of the village brood / Who gleand their scraps of fuel from the wood'. This was the poor's 'last refuge':

Small hurt was done by such intrusions there

> Claiming the rotten as their harmless share
>
> [...]
>
> But turks imperial of the woodland bough
>
> Forbid their trespass in such trifles now (*Early Poems* [*EP*] ii. 775)

These lines recogise that wood gathering was always an 'intrusion', but one that was tolerated in a fairer, pre-enclosure community. Now landowners have become despotic 'turks imperial', severely curtailing the poor's access to the land, and wood gathering has been criminalised. Clare may here be thinking particularly of Helpston after its enclosure in 1809, but it is also quite possible that he is referring to the longer-standing attempts to curb wood gathering identified by Bushaway.

'Wood men', therefore, were by no means innocent figures for Clare, as he associates them with painful changes to the landscape associated with enclosure: in *Helpstone* (1820), he notes 'How oft I've sighd at alterations made / To see the woodmans cruel axe employ'd / A tree beheaded or a bush destroy'd' (*EP* i. 159). Thus there is guilt, anxiety, and a sense of loss in the 'orison' passage, as well as wonder and excitement. To move into the unknown, to encounter the 'unexpected', is to face not only the possibility of transgression, but also the prospect of the dissolution of the self, which is figured in the child's fear of 'waking spirits'. Clare's journey to the edge of the orison, his breaking of boundaries, is also an encounter with death. This is hinted at earlier in the passage, where 'the brink of the world' is associated with 'heaven' and, perhaps, hell ('a large pit'). The fragment breaks off before drawing any Wordsworthian conclusions about the long-term effects of such apprehensions on the self. Alan Vardy argues that Wordsworth's 'idealist sublime' focuses on 'the expansion of the poet's mind' through transgression, while Clare refuses 'to recuperate the objects of nature into the aesthetic construction of the self' (24, 18). A comparison of the end

of the boat-stealing passage from *The Prelude* with the end of Clare's passage tends to support this point. Whereas the nocturnal encounter with the 'huge peak' emphasises its effect on the young Wordsworth's imagination – '[...] 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' (39) – Clare's experience of liminality ends with the material detail of the physical threat of a falling tree. However, that is not to say that Clare is uninterested in the construction of the self through the sublime. Not only is the child at the time changed and disturbed by his experience, but this retrospective passage, with its controlled, distanced presentation of childish experience, suggests the adult ability to manage the excess of the sublime that is lacking in the child. The implication is that the incident is educative: enabling as well as troubling. It is an assertion of the significance of confusion, blankness, and loss – the delocalising effects of the sublime – in forming subjectivity.

III

This article complicates the still-prevailing critical view of John Clare as a writer of the 'local'. He was always interested in its potential strangeness and the delocalising effects of literature. He also had a sense of national identity. Clare's writings show evidence of the attempt to think of England in two related ways: as a political community brought together at times of threat, and as a community of taste brought together by a way of apprehending the natural world. The latter idea is presented most effectively in 'The Flitting', written after his move from Helpston to Northborough in 1832. The poem is often quoted as evidence of how Clare's identity depended on his sense of place. It is true that it reflects epistemological

confusion consequent on the move. In January in 1832, he wrote to his publisher John Taylor that 'I have had some difficulties to leave the woods & heaths & favourite spots that have known me for so long for the very molehills on the heath & the old trees in the hedges seem bidding me farewell [...]' (*Letters* 561). It's typical of Clare to emphasise his connection to the local environment through personification, projecting his own dislocation and loss onto the natural world. Something similar happens in 'The Flitting', but it goes far beyond the letter by finding strategies to deal with this loss, an aspect of the poem that is often forgotten (e.g. Bate *Song* 162). Rather than being a straightforward *cri de coeur*, it is a complex, ambivalent text.

'The Flitting' describes how in the new environment of Northborough, the summer is 'like a stranger'; the nightingale is 'at loss'; 'the sun een seems to loose its way / Nor knows the quarter it is in'; Clare is surrounded by 'all foreign things' (*Poems of the Middle Period* [*MP*] iii. 479-83; ll. 3, 27, 55-56, 98). The dislocation is not only geographical, but also temporal. No longer reminded of the past by contemplating well known spots, Clare is separated from his memories: 'Theres none where boyhood made a swee [swing] / Or clambered up to rob a crow' (ll. 99-100). But the poem does not end with this epistemological crisis. It goes on to consider the relationship between a close engagement with one's local environment, and the sort of writing that Clare admires. He rejects the 'haughty pomp' (l. 154) and sublime images of 'fancys straining eye' (l. 158) in favour of 'verse that mild & bland / Breaths of green fields & open sky' (ll. 161-2). This gentle 'native poesy' (l. 164) recollects and admires the smallest details of nature, a point emphasised by the punning personification ('poesy'/'posy') of the muse bearing 'wreaths' (l. 164) of flowers. The landscape around Northborough, therefore, is no longer conceived as 'foreign' (l. 98); this alterity is shifted onto the 'marble cities' (l. 211) associated with sublime verse.

What does Clare mean by ‘native poesy’? Probably two things: that it is naturally occurring and that it relates to particular origins. Earlier in the poem, he describes the pleasure of contemplating the ‘native field’ (l. 16) surrounding Helpston. Here, though, it refers to something greater than simply his home parish. After all, in the later part of the poem, he accepts that the new environment of Northborough is not totally different. He is reminded of, and connected to, Helpston as he views the weeds (shepherd’s purse, ivy, and woodbine) that surround his new home:

> I feel at times a love & joy
> For every weed & every thing
> [...]
>
> & why—this ‘shepherds purse’ that grows
> In this strange spot—In days gone by
> Grew in the little garden rows
> On my old home now left—And I
> Feel what I never felt before
> This weed an ancient neighbour here
> & though I own the spot no more
> Its every trifle makes it dear (ll. 189-90, 193-200)

The sight of the shepherd’s purse links him to the past, but this is more than simple nostalgia. Something new and strange happens to the self, as is emphasised by the caesura in the middle of the stanza. There’s an embryonic sense of interconnectedness that goes beyond the local to include ‘every weed & every thing’. What we have in this poem, then, is a recognition that

the self-pitying regret of the early stages of the poem is insufficient and childish; a feeling that 'ill becomes a man (l. 58). There is an acceptance that 'times will change and friends must part' (l. 205). Furthermore, however inchoately, it presents the possibility of a wider community based, at least partly, on a love of the natural world.

The final stanza describes the triumph of nature over man-made objects and, by implication, the superiority of 'native poesy' over sublime verse:

> So where old marble citys stood
> Poor persecuted weeds remain
> [...]
> And still the grass eternal springs
> Where castles stood and grandeur died (ll. 211-12, 215-16)

John Lucas reads 'The Flitting' as a political poem, rather than 'a stoical exercise about coming to terms with the poetry of nature', suggesting that its final lines refer to 'the idea that to the owners of England its people are weeds or grass'; therefore the poems concludes with 'an act of reclamation that is radical. [...]. This is an invading army' ('Places' 94-5). This reading is plausible, but it works against arguments he has made elsewhere about Clare's lack of a sense of Englishness. He interprets the taming of Clare's regionalism by publishers and patrons as symptomatic of the way in which, as an 'outlaw' dialect poet, his voice was not considered properly 'English'; therefore, although Clare's alienation is 'deeply representative of English experience', he is unable to construct the 'totalising myths' about England that we might find in Wordsworth and Shelley (*England* 160).

Clare's localism seems at times to have entirely trumped any sense of Englishness, but this does not always apply: if Lucas is right about 'The Flitting', then Clare is referring at

the end to a *national* community of oppressed plebieans. After all, it wasn't just Helpston that was affected by enclosure. The triumph of 'persecuted weeds', therefore, is not simply peculiar to Clare's 'native spot': they can be found in Helpston, Northborough, and everywhere else. 'The Flitting' is a poem about loss, but also about escaping from self-pity through identification with a wider community that incorporates the natural world, but also the rural labouring classes (which is not to say that Clare did not feel alienated from this group too). By imagining himself as a 'weed', transplanted from his 'native spot' but still capable of producing 'native poesy', Clare is able to move away from the troubled, solitary self of the early parts of the poem to something like a celebration of national community.

IV

'The Flitting' is a complex, lyrical, and ultimately uplifting poem. Its treatment of national identity is quite different from that to be found in Clare's earlier patriotic verse. These poems are more publically-orientated, using the language of popular songs and broadside ballads as well as, one suspects, newspaper articles that Clare had read. In their tendency to present Britain (rather than England) as a community brought together at times of threat and conflict, they are clearly influenced by the popular unifying rhetoric surrounding the Napoleonic Wars. But Clare is rarely convincing in this mode, perhaps because it entails suppressing the individuality and attention to detail this is so effective in 'The Flitting'. For example, in 'Waterloo' (1820), Clare celebrates 'british courage british breed', and suggests that, at times of national victory, the 'lowliest of the lowly plain' must bid 'adieu to toil / And [his] rural strains awhile' (*EP* 1. 208-9). British national identity is more significant than individuality and overwrites class differences: 'Gen'rals Privates all as one / Each at heart a Wellin[g]ton'

(211). This poem provides a gloss on the asylum notebook that Clare kept towards the end of his life, which mainly contained names of various women that he had met, but also shows him identifying with great men like Byron and Wellington. Nelson was a particular favourite: thus we find the possibly delusional (or simply playful?) sentence 'Lord Nelson (John Clare) on Board the "L'Orient" Flagship receiving the Swords of the Enemy' (quoted in Bate, *John Clare* 503).[9] It was reported by a visitor to Clare during the asylum years that he was able to give convincing accounts of the Battle of the Nile and the death of Nelson at Trafalgar, 'fancying himself one of the sailors who had been in the action' (Mitford i. 195). Clare's later identifications are adumbrated by earlier poems that focus on three British admirals: Benbow, Grenville, and Nelson.[10] In 'Nelson and the Nile' (1830), the admiral is so dominant as to obscure all other figures, standing metonymically for the sailors celebrated by Clare in other poems and for the nation itself: 'Where ever Englands flag unfurled / He riegned & ruled alone' (*MP* iv. 101). The poem deifies Nelson to the extent that he commands the elements and causes Neptune to 'thr[o]w his coral crown away' (a conceit that Clare had also used in an earlier poem on Benbow) (104). By the end of the poem the concentration on Nelson's apotheoisis means that England has been forgotten.

Other early poems are more focused on the national community, and particularly on English or British valour. In 'Hail England old England my country & home', England is 'the dread of the world', whose 'brave heroes roam [...] in libertys cause', and which itself is protected by 'thou flowers with their cannons & Guns' and by the 'guardian Ocean' (*EP* i. 38-9). By 'dread' Clare means principally something like reverence – perhaps implying that the country has a divine sanction –and this is the most obviously imperialistic of his poems. Clare does seem occasionally to have shared the public sense that the nation was under attack and needed to be celebrated and exalted. In another early poem, 'Death or Victory', British courage is contrasted with 'Gallias Sons [who] may fear / British Blood advancing near', for

'a true bred Briton never flies / [...] / He either wins the day or dies' (*EP* i. 301-2). And 'Death of the Brave' celebrates the honour and courage of a 'hero' 'to his Country true to his king brave & loyal' (*EP* i. 248). By dying 'in his countrys cause', he ensures that his fame will inspire national unity: 'And British youths fir'd by th'Examples gave / Shall hasten to Battle & hasten to Glory' (248, 250).

Clare's sense of the political nation generally only arises in response to a threat, external or internal. Thus the poem 'England', included in an April 1820 letter to Taylor, is written in the context of the political crisis surrounding Peterloo and the Cato Street conspiracy. It's notable that, when the threat is internal, Clare turns to England rather than Britain. What results is a confused, troubled poem that suggests, I think, Clare's difficulty in conceiving of England as a political community. Here is the opening, and also the final, stanza:

> England my countrey mong evils enthralling
> Where is the name that is dearer then thine
> Where is the heart so detests in thy falling
> Or woud beat with more sorrow to see it then mine
> England my country theres villains woud crush thee
> Thats shouting out freedom disention to sow
> In this hour of danger I heartily wish thee
> That scource of protection I cannot bestow (*Letter* 49)

There is something rather depressing and hopeless about this poem; despite it stridency, it expresses a sense of impotence in the face of the 'evils' besetting England. And is nation here really anything more than a 'name'? There is none of the specificity that we see in much of

Clare's work. The poet himself appears to be 'enthrall[ed]' by 'evils': all he can do is emphasise the strength of his 'sorrow'. The anarchistic villains seem likely to succeed: an enemy within. The poem's metre contributes to its ambivalence. Anapestic and dactylic rhythms gives it a certain energy and drive, and connect it to the popular verse forms like broadside ballads. But the energy of the verse tends to be dissipated by its expressions of impotence. In the next stanza, the acknowledgement that England is already a restrictive and unequal society weakens the nationalistic rhetoric still further:

> England thy word so enchantingly sounding
> Thy name in my heart thrilling raptures renew
> & may thy base natives their mother land wounding
> Meet the resentment of those who are true
> Sharp tho the rod of restriction may bind thee
> Tho freedom may groan with much load overpowerd
> Better keep laws that have ages confind thee
> Then break them with wolves & be instant devourd (49)

Clare tries to give this stanza a more optimistic tone; now it is England that does the enthralling, seizing hold of the speaker's heart. Still, the message is hardly straightforwardly triumphalist: better to suffer grim restrictions and imprisonment than to be destroyed! This uncertain tone continues throughout the poem; thus Clare urges that it is better to be 'slaves in a land of your own / Then yield up to traitors to vainess aspiring / & banishd as slaves into deserts unknown' (50). The poem offers the hope of escaping from these two unpalatable alternatives, but it is a slender one. In the penultimate stanza he offers 'warm [...] wishes' that England will be freed, and suggests that 'doubtless heroes be born thee', but the most he can

offer in the end is the hope that 'Yet may come the day when thou shalt be free' (50). The auxiliary verbs 'may' suggests the poem's lack of confidence and can be usefully compared to the end of Percy Shelley's 'England in 1819', which concludes that the various national flaws listed 'are graves from which a glorious Phantom may / Burst, to illumine a tempestuous day' (327). Despite their ideological differences, the two poets are faced with a similar problem: how to conceive of political change without violent revolution on the French model. In Clare's poem, the repetition of the first stanza means that it ends with the speaker emphasising his failure to protect the country. Clare wants England to change in some way, but is unable to imagine any form of change that would not be destructive.[11]

'England' is not one of Clare's best poems; that he himself was not comfortable with it is apparent from the heavy irony of his comment to Taylor that 'I think I shall stand a chance for the Laureat Vacancy next time it turns out!!!!'. Taylor was surely being diplomatic when he stated that 'I like the Poem on England very well, but not quite so much as some others' (*Letters* 51). Nonetheless, it is a significant work. It exemplifies Clare's ambivalent politics, which were heightened by his need to stay on good terms with patrons like Radstock, and how they made it difficult for him to conceive, in a positive sense, of England as a political entity. Part of the problem is that Clare generally avoided the simplistic Francophobia that we find in many writers of the period and which allowed them to imagine Englishness through a process of Othering. His sense of how the 'rod of restriction' ruled England was too powerful for this. It is therefore quite appropriate and consistent when he writes to his wife in 1848 describing the Northampton Asylum as 'the purgatoriall hell & French Bastile of English liberty' (*Letters* 657). Similarly, in the poem 'Remembrances', 'Inclosure like a Buonaparte let not a thing remain': the cultural cliché that associates tyranny with the French is in both cases mobilised by Clare to suggest the oppression of the English labouring classes (*MP* iii. 133).

V

If it does not work in political terms, where else does Clare's sense of Englishness lie? To answer this we need to return to the concept of 'native poesy', a concept which stems from a combination of his rural roots and his engagement with urban literary culture, particularly the circle around the *London Magazine*.[12] As is apparent from *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1827) – written on the suggestion of Clare's and the *London Magazine's* editor, John Taylor – the poet was invested in rural customs which, while they might be peculiar to a particular parish or region, could also be seen as forming part of a national tradition. In the mid-1820s, he projected a collection of 'National and Provincial Melodies Selected from the Singing and Recitations of the Peasantry in and about Helpstone and its neighbourhood'.[13] The connection between local, provincial, and national tradition could not be more clearly made. In the poem 'The Songs of Our Land', he emphasises that such traditional melodies played a valuable role in cementing a national tradition of liberty and heroism and protecting the nation from its foes. He claims that these songs are 'like ancient landmarks', a particularly powerful image for Clare, suggesting that they provide individuals with the possibility of navigating national identity, just as a particular tree or pathway would allow him to navigate his own 'self-identity' (*Later Poems* [1984] ii. 1000).

These interests were not simply a product of his rural background: as Mina Gorji has argued, 'Clare's personal nostalgia for local folk culture also became part of an urban and collaborative endeavour to celebrate and revive the song and customs of merry England' ('"Merry England"' 9). Would Clare's collection ever have been conceived if he had not gone to London? 'Cockney' writers for the metropolitan literary journals such as the *London* and the *New Monthly Magazine* sought to represent and reaffirm the significance of rural

popular culture, sometimes for reasons to do with their oppositional politics. Like William Hazlitt and John Hamilton Reynolds, Clare was enthusiastic about 'The Fancy', the subculture surrounding pugilism that emphasised its patriotic virtues; he visited the Fives Court to observe the boxers training, and wished that he was able to offer patronage to 'Jones the Sailor Boy', who as an ex-member of the British Navy, exemplified what prize-fighting was meant to be all about (*Prose* 96). For urban writers such as Hazlitt, Reynolds, Charles Lamb, William Hone, Leigh Hunt, and Keats, celebrating traditional customs, games, tales, and festivities also entailed celebrating a particular strand of English literature, which included Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calendar*, the work of various other 'old poets', Walton's *Compleat Angler*, and the songs and ballads included in Percy's *Reliques* and other collections (some of which would have been included in Clare's collection). As Clare noted in 'To Charles Lamb' (1829-30):

> Friend Lamb thou chusest well to love the lore
> Of our old by gone bards whose racey page
> Rich mellowing Time made sweeter then before
> The blossom left for the long garnered store
> Of fruitage now right luscious in its age (*MP* iv. 205)

The connection between a certain sort of poetry and natural fruitfulness is palpable. A similarly ecomimetic link is made to Walton's *Compleat Angler*, which Clare described in 1824 as 'a delightful book it is the best English Pastoral that can be written the descriptions are nature unsullied by fashionable tastes of the time' (*JCBH* 171). Similarly, in an 1832 letter to Taylor, he stated that the poem William Brown was 'very original & true to nature that is very english [...] a sort of Isaac Walton in verse' (*Letters* 563). This is what he means

by ‘native poesy’: being English, for Clare, suggests a closeness to the specifics of the natural world and an ability to represent them accurately and without literary pretension, producing ‘verse mild and bland’, and avoiding ‘fancys straining eye’.

This article has focused mainly on Clare’s pre-asylum work. It is well known that his later poetry often moves away from the careful topography of his earlier writings, and shows the self lost in strange environments: it does not necessarily fit his own definition of ‘native poesy’. However, Morton reads the most famous late poem, ‘I Am’, as a culmination of Clare’s ecological concerns precisely because of its sense of displacement: the ‘stunning moment’ when ‘otherness is perceived as intrinsic to the self’ (200). Similarly, his later work can be seen as a form of ‘native poesy’ that registers the complexity and ambivalence of nationhood. This is apparent in the Byronic imitations of 1841, Clare’s middle-aged *annus mirabilis*. In ‘Don Juan’, ‘England’s glory’ is presented ironically, as a cant phrase covering the self-interested political squabbles of ‘Whig and Tory’ (*Later Poems* [1964] 88). And in ‘Childe Harold’, it is invoked only in relation to loss and decline: ‘England my country though my setting sun / Sinks in the ocean gloom and dregs of life’ (*Later Poems* [1964] 44). In the same year, he would imagine himself to be the pugilist Jack Randall issuing a ‘Challenge To All The World’ (*JCBH* 266). Its cosmopolitan call – ‘he Is Not Particular As To Weight Colour Or Country’ – suggests the delocalisation of Clare’s writing in this period. It also suggests the difficulty of conceiving of national identity in monolithic terms. Martial sports like pugilism and wrestling were often represented in the early nineteenth century as the apotheosis of specifically English masculinity, and yet this was always a porous and unstable discourse. Clare’s father, a keen wrestler, was half-Scottish (like Byron), and Randall was Irish. An idea of ‘Merry England’ had to include other parts of the British Isles while ostensibly excluding them. Indeed, the principal historiographical difficulty in dealing with national identity in the Romantic period is the discursive slippage between Englishness

and Britishness. British boxers and even, with caveats, ethnic outsiders like the Jew Daniel Mendoza and the African Americans Tom Molineux and Bill Richmond could participate freely in the world of 'The Fancy'. Non-English pugilists, paradoxically, could be seen to embody Englishness by the same writers who emphasised their alterity, revealing the fragility of a national identity fractured between localism and cosmopolitanism.

Ironically, the fragility of Englishness is most apparent in Clare's early patriotic poems, which move away from the naturalistic mode of most of his poetry to a strained and rather unconvincing form of public assertion. For Clare truly English 'native poesy' may actually entail writing that does not deal with England as an abstraction. But this is more than unreflective localism or *ecomimesis*. Rather than being 'nature unsullied', Walton's work was generically polyphonic and highly intertextual (Keegan, '"Completeness"' 11-12). Similarly, as Gorji suggests, Clare's 'extensive knowledge' of local customs and songs, apparent in writings such as *The Shepherd's Calendar*, was 'mediated through [...] "polite" literary channels' ('"Merry England"' 23). It seems that it was at least partly through his engagement with metropolitan literary culture that he was able to fashion himself in relation to the larger narrative about Englishness contained within the concept of 'native poesy'. So simply locating Clare within a national community as well as that of his home parish is to miss the point. Both forms of community were, to use Morton's phrase about Helpston, 'always already crisscrossed with otherness' (200). One of the dangers of dealing with labouring-class writers like Clare is that we get distracted by our sympathy for them as victims of class prejudice and by an ecocritical tendency to fetishise the local. The limitations of this approach are increasingly apparent: whatever problems Clare had, his creativity was spurred and developed by his encounters with the alien and unfamiliar, and his desire to identify himself with an idea of national community that itself was contested and unstable.

Notes

I am very grateful to David Fairer and Bridget Keegan for their comments on an earlier draft of this article. Thanks also to those who responded to the paper I delivered on Clare at the University of Loughborough.

1. Although Morton mentions Sartre in passing, other philosophers are given much more emphasis in his discussion. However, his emphasis in the book's final pages on the need for 'radical commitment' seems to me authentically Sartrean.

2. For a suggestive account of poetry and place in the Romantic period, see Stafford.

3. The most significant study on Clare and place remains Barrell. Later critics have emphasised the ecological aspects of Clare's localism: see, for example, Bate, *Song* chapter 6, and McCusick chapter 3.

4. As recent critics have noted, Clare found a new form of place by locating himself within literary culture and history (e.g. Gorji, *Place of Poetry*).

5. Clare's attitude to the village community was an ambivalent one; a sense of alienation existed alongside a desire to celebrate communal rituals and customs (Houghton).

6. At the time of writing there is no complete scholarly edition of Clare's prose. This edition of his autobiographical writings offers scrupulously accurate transcriptions, but not all material is included and the ordering and juxtaposition of fragments is inevitably open to question. The editors connect this passage with another autobiographical fragment to create a longer piece, but, having consulted the relevant manuscript (Peterborough MS A34, R6), it seems to me to stand as a discrete entity.

7. Clare associates his dislike of formal education with wandering: 'I considered walking in the track of others and copying and dinging at things that had been found out some hundred

years ago had as little merit in it as a child walking in leading strings ere it can walk by himself' (*JCBH* 16).

8. Morton's work tends to problematise any clear distinction between space and place (e.g. 169-70).

9. L'Orient had carried Napoleon to Egypt in 1798 and was the French flagship at the Battle of the Nile, which exploded after its magazine caught fire. Nelson's coffin was carved from a piece of the ship's main mast.

10. For Clare's interest in the sea and naval matters, see Keegan *Nature Poetry* 137-47.

11. For a helpful account of Clare's politics, see Vardy chapter 8.

12. A detailed account of Clare's connection with the *London* can be found in Sales 34-49.

13. Deacon is an invaluable resource for understanding Clare's engagement with rural customs and songs.

14. Keegan notes Clare's fascination during the asylum years with the sea as a symbol of the self adrift (*Nature Poetry* 146-7).

15. Clare and pugilism is discussed by Bates and Sales 130-44. For pugilism and national identity, see Higgins and Whale.

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