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## “A language that is ever green”: the poetry and ecology of John Clare

In his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1802), the poetic manifesto of the Romantic revolution, William Wordsworth famously declared that the “principle object, then, which I proposed to myself in these poems, was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them throughout, as far as possible, in a selection of language really used by men” (Quoted in Wu 1995:252). This radical reorientation of poetry, both in terms of language and content, was based on another startling social and aesthetic conclusion that, according to Wordsworth, it was among the lower classes – the peasants and farm labourers – that the deepest and truest source of natural language and human feeling could be found:

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; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and (from the necessary character of rural occupations) are more easily comprehended and are more durable; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. (Quoted in Wu 1995:252)

Such a personal and poetic commitment to the rural proletariat represented a fundamental break in the aristocratic traditions of English literature which had previously shown little or no interest in the lives of ordinary people. The fact that Wordsworth takes it upon himself to give voice to this silent majority and to interpret their thoughts and feelings is perhaps somewhat presumptuous. It did, however, lead to a greater awareness of and interest in the lives of people whose traditional function was only to “serve and stand and wait”, to use Milton’s phrase (*On His Blindness*). Moreover, Wordsworth’s celebration of the poor encouraged a number of lower class poets to emerge from the anonymity of their condition and express themselves in poetry during the Romantic period. It was a moment in English letters when publishers started to take notice of and were willing to support, at least temporarily, individual peasant poets by making their work available in print. Robert Burns (1759-96) is of course the prime example, although there were others. Robert Bloomfield (1766-1823), a farm labourer and cobbler from Suffolk, portrayed the life of Giles, his orphan alter ego, in a pastoral epic, *The Farmer’s Boy*, that sold 26,000 copies in three years. Ann Yearsley (1756-1806), who worked as a milkmaid near Bristol, became a successful writer of poems, plays and novels and was a prominent activist in

fighting the slave trade, using her pen to promote the cause. James Chambers (1748-1820) was an itinerant Suffolk peddler who managed to get a slim volume of his own poetry published by popular subscription. John Nicholson (1790-1843), known as 'The Airedale Poet', whose nature poems also found their way into print, worked as a journeyman wool-comber. To this list of published working-class poets can be added Mary Collier (1688-1762), a washer-woman who wrote *The Woman's Labour*; Mary Leapor (1722-1746), kitchen maid and author of the poetic *Essay on Woman*; Robert Dodsley (1704-1764), a weaver and writer of *Servitude*; and William Falconer (1732-1769), a sailor who wrote the epic poem *Shipwreck*. Perhaps the most prolific, but poetically underestimated member of this group of lower class writers of the period is, however, John Clare (1793-1864). He is certainly one of the most eloquent representatives of Wordsworth's "low and rustic life", although he saw himself rather more assertively as a poetic "Champion for the poor" (Clare 2000:269). From his own experience, Clare knew very well the need to break the silence surrounding the lives of labouring men and women, to speak out against the injustices directed against his class. As he said himself: "I wish the good of the people may be found at the end & that in the general triumph the poor man may not be forgotten for the poor have many oppressions & no voice to speak his oppressions above them [...] as it is I much fear it as the poor mans lot seems to have been so long remembered as to be entirely forgotten" (Clare 2000:268-9).

The question is begged of course: what made Clare himself so particularly well placed to give expression to the thoughts and aspirations of the rural poor at the time? In his *Preface*, Wordsworth identified both the language and sensibilities of lower-class people like Clare as being "more easily comprehended [...] and [...] incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature" (Quoted in Wu 1995:252). Clare's own life was certainly a continuous struggle between poverty and poetry, both experiences informing his desire to make sense of the changes impacting on the society and nature in and around the Northamptonshire village of Helpston where he lived. This tension between writing and harsh reality was to define the whole of Clare's troubled existence, beginning in his childhood where he was torn between attending the village school and working as a labourer in the fields. Later on, Clare tried to make a living as a gardener and lime burner until 1818, when he was forced to rely on poor relief to survive, another recurring aspect of his life. The malnutrition he experienced as a child not only affected his bodily growth, it also contributed to the bouts of physical and mental ill health that seriously affected him as an adult. Despite this, Clare's first collection of poetry, published in 1820 by subscription – *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* – was an unexpected success, as was his *The Village Minstrel and Other Poems*, published the following year. His two later volumes, *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1827) and *The Rural Muse* (1835) proved less popular, however, and the subsequent sales of his poems were never enough to keep Clare and his family out of poverty. It was the increasing pressure to feed himself, his wife and seven

children, as well as his deepening disillusionment at his treatment by publishers and critics in London, that drove him into further periods of sickness and depression. Finally, in 1837 Clare was committed to a mental asylum where he remained between intervals until his death. He did however continue writing throughout, despite the neglect of both the fate of his person and his poetry.

In recent years there has, however, been a certain revival of critical interest in Clare's work, although he is still most often relegated to the category of regional nature poets. In 1986 Eric Robinson wrote for instance: "John Clare's fame as a poet of nature and the English countryside grows every day" (Robinson 1986:9). A decade or so later, Duncan Wu, while claiming Clare to be "one of the foremost poets of the time", still limits his achievement to the personal and the pastoral: "Clare was a master not only of descriptive nature poetry, but of the confessional lyric" (Wu 1995:997). More recently, his biographer, Jonathan Bate, declared Clare to be "without question the greatest labouring-class poet England ever gave birth to", but also added, "Yet it has taken a long time for him to win his place, in Keats's phrase. 'among the English poets'" (Bate 2004:545). In an attempt to reaffirm Clare's radical reputation, Robinson returned in his introduction to an anthology of Clare's political verse and prose to the significance of Clare's social standpoint as a writer: "As always in Clare, we see politics from the bottom up" (Robinson 2000:xxxiv). Robinson also notes, echoing Wordsworth's recourse to a "language really used by men", that Clare's writing not only reflects his Northamptonshire accent, spelling as he spoke. He used dialect words consciously and without apology as part of a broader movement of literary and political defiance: "The vernacular as used by common men was threatening to the whole English cultural establishment. It has long remained so" (Robinson 2000:lv).

It is this lower-class perspective in the poetry of John Clare that I want to explore in greater detail. Not only in order to see how the more political side of his thinking translates itself into poetry, but also to show how Clare's poetic response to the dramatic transformations in society of the time provides a unique, eye-witness account of the impact these changes had on the people who were the victims of them. Moreover, since the consequences of this radical reorganisation of the countryside in Britain the 18th and 19th centuries are still with us, I think it important to return to a writer like Clare who was there at a critical point in the process and whose poetry delved into its broader implications, not least environmentally. In a brief comment, E. P. Thompson states that "Clare may be described, without hindsight, as a poet of ecological protest: he was not writing about man here and nature there, but lamenting a threatened equilibrium in which both were involved" (Thompson 1993:180-1). I want to show in a more comprehensive way how Clare's perception can be defined as ecological, in the modern sense, as telling us something significant about our relationship to the earth, in particular about the way in which the land is owned and cultivated. My focus is therefore on what Clare himself called, most presciently in *Pastoral*

*Poesy*, his “language that is ever green”, that is a voice that speaks about the essential bond between man and nature (Quoted in Williams 1973:132).

What was happening in the countryside during Clare’s lifetime that caught his critical attention, both poetically and politically? What were the changes that were transforming the face of rural Britain, changes that Clare himself saw had such a decisive effect on both nature and the people living close to it? In the first volume of *Capital* (1867), Karl Marx describes how an agrarian revolution led by capitalist farmers was sweeping through England at this time, resulting in the enclosure of the commons and the eviction of the rural poor in waves of brutal collective displacement:

We have seen how the forcible seizure of the common lands, accompanied for the most part by the transformation of arable into pasture, began in the fifteenth century and lasted on into the sixteenth [...] The advance that has been made in the eighteenth century is shown in this, that the law itself now became the instrument by which the theft of the people’s land was achieved, although the great farmers continued to use their petty private methods in addition. The parliamentary form of this robbery was to pass Acts for the enclosure of commons; in other words, decrees whereby the great landowners made a present to themselves of the people’s land, which thus became their own private property [...] a systematic seizure of communal landed property helped, side by side with the theft of the State domains, to swell the size of those great farms which, in the eighteenth century, were called “capital farms” or “merchant farms”, and “to set the countryfolk at liberty” as a proletariat for the uses of industry. (Marx 1974:802-3)

Marx, who began his political career defending the right of German peasants to gather wood on the Rhineland commons that were also being enclosed by the big landowners, was not surprisingly writing against the grain in all this, since the dominating discourse from the Enlightenment onwards was that enclosure was the best way to improve the land by replacing unproductive people with more profitable forms of cultivation – all in the name of economic progress. This massive social deportation from country to city was, as Marx noted, disguised behind the modernizing term of “clearing”:

The last great act of expropriation, the last stage in the divorce of the agricultural population from the soil, has taken the form of what is called the clearing of estates, that is to say the sweeping of men off them [...] What the “clearing of the estates” really signifies can be fully realised only by a study of the promised land of modern romantic literature, the Highlands of Scotland. There the process is distinguished by its systematic character, by the grand scale on which it is carried out. Whereas in Ireland the landlords have gone so far as to sweep away several villages at a time, in Scotland areas as large as German principalities are dealt with at one blow. (Marx 1974:807)

Marx also points to the “vigorous polemic” that was subsequently waged about the actual outcome of this ruthless agrarian revolution, both economically and socially (Marx 1974:803). It is a debate that has continued to reverberate through to our own time. One of the more positive assessments of the effects of the

enclosures can be found, for example, in A. L. Morton's *A People's History of England*, where the changes are characterised in terms of the ineluctable march of urbanisation and the merging of agricultural and industrial production:

The revolution in agriculture had three results which went far beyond the limits of agriculture itself. First it increased the productivity of the land and so made possible the feeding of the great industrial population in the new towns. Second, it created a reserve army of wage earners, now "freed" completely from any connection with the soil, men without ties of place or property. It provided a force of free labourers corresponding to the free capital [...] and it was the coming together of this labour and this capital, at a time when the large scale production of commodities was at last possible, which was the essence of the Industrial Revolution. Third, there was the creation of a vastly increased internal market for manufactured goods. The subsistence farmer, with his domestic industry and his isolation from the outside world, might consume a good deal and yet buy very little. The labourer into whom he now evolved was usually compelled to consume a great deal less but everything he consumed had to be bought. And it was only on the firm basis of a substantial home market that a great exporting industry could be built up. (Morton 1971:330)

In his classic study, *The Making of the English Working Class*, E. P. Thompson claims in contrast that there was very little to celebrate about the enclosures, considering that the cost of increased productivity was paid by ordinary people whose livelihoods were swept away in its wake. Instead, it represented a monumental piece of rural theft perpetrated by a bourgeois class that was now firmly in the political and economic saddle after the English revolution of 1640:

Enclosure (when all the sophistications are allowed for) was a plain enough case of class robbery, played according to fair rules of property and law laid down by a parliament of property-owners and lawyers [...] But what was "perfectly proper" in terms of capitalist property-relations involved, none the less, a rupture of the traditional integument of village custom and of right: and the social violence of enclosure consisted precisely in the drastic, total imposition upon the village of capitalist property-definitions [...] Those petty rights of the villagers, such as gleaning, access to fuel, and the tethering of stock in the lanes or on the stubble, which are irrelevant to the historian of economic growth, might be of critical importance to the subsistence of the poor. (Thompson 1975:237-9)

In a more recent summing up, G. E. Mingay concludes that the issue is still unresolved among historians, not only because the enclosures were controversial and their consequences so far-reaching. The transformation of rural England from open landscape into fenced-in farmland has continued to underpin the debate up to the present day about free access to the countryside and the ultimate return of the commons to the people.<sup>1</sup> Although Mingar himself tends to side with the Enlightenment narrative of economic rationalisation and man's domination of nature, he clearly remains nervous about the implications this had for ordinary people:

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<sup>1</sup> See further: Simon Fairlie. "A Short History of Enclosure in Britain" in *The Land*, issue 7, 2009. [www.thelandmagazine.org.uk](http://www.thelandmagazine.org.uk)

[P]arliamentary enclosure has been the subject of controversy for over a hundred years. The debate continues: broadly, the difference of opinion is not so much one of ideology, between historians of the left and those of the right; rather it depends more on what weight is given, on the one hand, to the social effects – the loss and distress experienced by squatters, cottagers and small occupiers, and how extensive these effects were; and, on the other hand, to the economic benefits, in the shape of increased food production and, often, expanded rural employment at a time of an upsurge in population and rapid urbanisation. (Mingay 1997:148)

As in most epochs, the reactions of the lower classes go generally unrecorded, even though it is they who tend to bear the brunt of such historical upheavals. However, in the case of the enclosures in England, we have at least one person who knew all about what was happening, who thought deeply about its meaning and who was able to publish his poetic reflections on it. That voice belongs to John Clare. In their study, *The Village Labourer*, the Hammonds noted the fact that “enclosure has been described in literature, and described by a victim, John Clare, the Northamptonshire peasant, who drifted into a madhouse through a life of want and trouble” (Hammond 1995:331). J. F. C. Harrison also singles out the importance of Clare’s personal insight into what he saw: “John Clare, the peasant-poet and son of a cottage farmer in Helpstone, Northamptonshire, is perhaps the only voice of an actual victim of enclosure. Helpstone was enclosed by an Act of 1809 when Clare was sixteen” (Harrison 1984:230). Let us turn therefore to the poetic response of John Clare to these events in order to see how intrinsically linked his writing was to an early ecologically minded, worm’s-eye-view of his times.

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Clare’s poem *The Mores* (The Moors) deals specifically with the impact of enclosure (“Inclosure”) both on the people and the countryside. There is moreover a clear-cut binary of before and after, reflected in the idea of childhood liberty to roam unhindered across the commons. The fencing-in of woodland and pasture areas that had for centuries been used by everyone is depicted therefore not only as a betrayal of traditional rights. Implicitly, the privatization of the common land appears in itself as unnatural, as a crime against the animals, birds, insects, trees, flowers, rivers and streams themselves. There is also a recurring theme in this and other similar poems by Clare of a loss of community: the organic symbiosis with nature is cut by the carving up of the countryside by the big landowners. All such arbitrary acquisition of common land puts moreover the whole principle of private property into question, not least historically. “When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?”, as the saying went. To create such a contrast, Clare begins his poem with an image of the limitless space and infinite horizons, both physical and spiritual, that the commons provided:

Unbounded freedom ruled the wandering scene  
Nor fence of ownership crept in between  
To hide the prospect of the following eye

*Ronald Paul - A language that is ever green...*

Its only bondage was the circling sky  
One mighty flat underfed by bush & tree  
Spread its faint shadow of immensity  
& lost itself which seemed to eke its bounds  
In the blue mist the orisons edge surrounds  
(Clare 2000:46-7)

This sense of unrestricted communing with nature is, however, quickly replaced by darker images of the marginalization of poor people whose presence on the land is now made illegal. Raymond Williams argues that the “strength” of Clare’s poetry is “in its connecting feelings of human warmth and community, in a time of real dispossession, eviction and social division” (Williams 1973:140). Clare not only viewed the enclosures as a transgression of ancient custom, they were a violation of the earth that left both man and nature stunted:

Now this sweet vision of my boyish hours  
Free as spring clouds & wild as summer flowers  
Is faded all – a hope that blossomed free  
& hath been once no more shall ever be  
Enclosure came & trampled on the grave  
Of labours rights & left the poor a slave  
& memories pride ere want to wealth did bow  
Is both the shadow and the substance now  
(Clare 2000:47)

The stanzas that follow reinforce this feeling of spiritual incarceration by contrasting the legal enslavement of men with the freedom that even domestic animals enjoyed when the commons were open to all. There is an aspect of terrible irony in the fact that when the right to graze their cattle and sheep onto the commons was revoked, people were often themselves replaced by herds of sheep grazing on a grand scale. It is the disruption of a delicate ecological balance that Clare already senses at this early stage, something that flew in the face of his own feeling that human beings are just one part of nature, not lords of it:

The sheep & cows were free to range as then  
Where change might prompt nor felt the bonds of men  
Cows went & came with every morn & night  
To the wild pasture as their common right  
& sheep unfolded with the rising sun  
Heard the swains shout & felt their freedom won  
Tracked the red fallow field & heath & plain  
Then met the brook & drank & roamed again  
The brook that dribbled on as clear as glass  
Beneath the roots then hid among the grass  
While the glad shepherd traced their tracks along  
Free as the lark & happy as her song  
But now alls fled & flats of many a dye  
That seemed to lengthen with the following eye  
Moors loosing from the sight far smooth and blea

*Ronald Paul - A language that is ever green...*

Where swopt the plover in its pleasure free  
Are vanished now with commons wild & gay  
As poets visions of lifes early day  
(Clare 2000:47)

The concluding stanzas of the poem turn therefore to the farmers themselves and their drive to parcel up the land in their own private interest. The enclosing of the commons is seen by Clare as a reflection of the unmitigated greed of those who seek only to exploit nature's resources for a quick profit. Their mindset was a prison house that was imposing itself on the countryside with such disastrous environmental consequences. Their "rebel schemes" to turn the land into the domain of the few also went against the covenant that, according to Clare, exists between all living things to share the earth's natural beauty and bounty together. Instead, much to Clare's growing dismay, the signs were going up everywhere, warning people off the land, notices that are as familiar to us now as they were strange then: 'Keep out', 'No entrance', 'Trespassers will be prosecuted'. Even the birds in the sky are curtailed in their flight by the earthly powers of private ownership:

Like mighty jiants of their limbs bereft  
Fence now meets fence in owners little bounds  
Of field & meadow large as garden grounds  
In little parcels little minds to please  
With men & flocks imprisoned ill at ease  
[...]  
He gazed upon them with wild fancys eye  
As fallen landscapes from an evening sky  
These paths are stopt – the rude philistines thrall  
Is laid upon them & destroyed them all  
Each little tyrant with his little sign  
Shows where man claims earth glows no more divine  
On paths to freedom & to childhood dear  
A board sticks up to notice 'no road here'  
& on the tree with ivy over hung  
The hated sign by vulgar taste is hung  
As tho the very birds should learn to know  
When they go there they must no further go  
Thus with the poor scared freedom bade good bye  
& much the[y] feel it in the smothered sigh  
& birds & trees & flowers without a name  
All sighed when lawless laws enclosure came  
& dreams of plunder in such rebel schemes  
Have found too truly that they were but dreams  
(Clare 2000:48)

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Although Clare's long satirical poem, *The Parish*, does not deal directly with the enclosures, it nevertheless reveals the changing balance of forces that these



clearances created within the village community itself, in particular the growing tensions between the labouring poor and the big farmers. Robinson notes in this context that “Clare is preoccupied with the consequences of enclosure for human rights and relationships. The poor man becomes a ‘slave’ when he has lost his ‘rights’. He no longer mixes on equal terms with the farmers” (Robinson 2000:xxxvi). Elaine Feinstein has described Clare’s epic, which was never published in his lifetime, as “one of the fieriest political poems in the language” (Quoted in Robinson 1986:16). Indeed, Clare himself, according to his biographer, “thought of it as the best thing he had ever written”, but he was warned against publishing it because of its radical content (Bate 2003:294). The title of the poem has a symbolic meaning since the parish was traditionally associated with a small, self-governing community surrounding a church, now “on the parish” meant being unable to support oneself. In the poem Clare traces a shift in village values, not least in terms of the role of the church, from being a source of community to supporting the self-serving, land-grabbing ethos that emerged with the enclosures. It was now every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost. Moreover, by trampling on ancient rights, the enclosures also showed that there was now one law for the rich and another for the poor:

Truth that could once its own redresses seek  
Is now deemed nothing & forbid to speak  
Driven like an exiled king from past renown  
Power took its place & keeps it with a frown  
But tis well known that justice winks at crimes  
A saying that is in season at all times  
Or why should the poor sinning starving clown  
Meet jail & hanging for a stolen crown  
While wealthy thieves with knaverys bribes endued  
Plunder their millions & are not pursued  
Nay at the foot of Tyburns noted tree  
They do deserving deeds & still go free  
Where others suffer for some pigmy cause  
They all but murder & escape the laws  
Skulking awhile in bribery's dirty den  
Then start new guilt & pass as honest men  
(Clare 2000:86)

The poem is made up of a series of satirical vignettes depicting the people of the parish, mainly the middle-class landowners and clergy that rule the village. The very names of these local worthies give an indication of their dubious moral character, much in the same satirical tradition of Bunyan and Milton: Squire Dandy and Miss Peevish Scornful, Farmer Bigg and Farmer Cheetum, Headlong Racket, Parson Saveall, Dr Urine, Bumtagg the Bailiff, and Mr Puff. These people are meant to symbolize the new philistine order that has replaced the older culture of mutual assistance that served the villagers well in the past. Although once again, there is a nostalgic contrast between then and now, the main thrust of the satire is to expose the lifestyles of the ruling coterie of social climbers that had

replaced co-operation with their cold cash nexus. Clare does this through caricaturing the newly acquired artificial habits, behaviour and opinions of these nouveaux riches farmers and their families:

Such are the upstarts that usurp the name  
Of the old farmers dignity & fame  
& wares that lovely maid in days gone by  
The farmers daughter unreserved tho shy  
That milked her cows & old songs used to sing  
As red & rosey as the lovely spring  
Ah these have dwindled to a formal shade  
As pale & bed rid as my ladys maid  
Who cannot dare to venture in the street  
Some times thro cold and other times for heat  
[...]  
Thus housed mid cocks & hens in idle state  
Aping at fashions which their betters hate  
Affecting high lifes airs to scorn the past  
Trying to be something makes them nought at last  
These are the shadows that supply the place  
Of farmers daughters of the vanished race  
(Clare 2000:52-3)

Robinson also remarks on the sense of social deference that this transfer of rural power began to engender in the village: “What comes through most strongly in ‘The Parish’ is the lack of independence among the poor and the greater pressure upon them to become subservient to ‘parish kings & queens’” (Robinson 2000:xxxvi). The contempt in which the poor were held, even by the local parson, was based on the fact that they had been disenfranchised twice over and were now seen as an economic burden to society. Firstly, the law had been manipulated to remove their traditional right to the common land. Then when they were unable to make a living on the little that was left, they were treated as feckless vagrants whose poverty was to be punished, not least under the Malthusian auspices of the workhouse. The logic was that if they could not survive in the countryside, they must move to the towns to look for work. The parish would no longer provide for them. Like the land, they had to be cleared to be improved. In the poem, Clare uses the perspective of the past as a source of collective memory to challenge these new landowning lords of misrule. Historical revisionism or even amnesia has always been the tools of the oppressors. *The Parish* is written therefore as a form of poetic testimony to remind the masters of customs they would prefer to forget:

When farmers used their servants toils to share  
& went on foot to market & to fair  
Not like the present petty ruling things  
Disdaining ploughs from whence their living springs  
& looking high among their betters now  
[...]

*Ronald Paul - A language that is ever green...*

These were times that plainness must regret  
These were times that labour feels as yet  
Ere mockd improvements plans enclosed the moor  
& farmers built a workhouse for the poor  
& vainly feels them & as vainly mourns  
As no hopes live betokening like returns  
The cottage now with neither lawn nor park  
Instead of Vicar keeps a vicars clerk  
Woves may devour oppressions fiends may reign  
Nones nigh to listen when the poor complain  
(Clare 2000:98)

Another of Clare's most clearly ecological poems is "The Lament of Swordy Well" which, as Robinson explains, refers to "Swaddy Well, an ancient stone quarry used by the Romans, famed in Clare's childhood for wild flowers, white lizards, and a fine species of copper-hued butterfly. It was also a traditional camp of gypsies" (Robinson 2000:262). What Clare does in his depiction of this ancient piece of common ground and much loved local beauty spot is to personify it as a living being, giving it a character and a voice of its own. Here we have nature turning the tables on humankind, talking back by lamenting the spoliation of the environment. It is a powerful indictment of the enclosures and an appeal for the return of stolen land to common ownership. The poem can also be seen as a variation on the theme of Marx's later comment that when men speak of nature in terms of economic productivity and usefulness, "it would scarcely appear to a sheep as one of the 'useful' properties that it is edible by man" (Quoted in Foster 2000:16). In this case, it is the land itself that revolts against the destruction of its natural reserves by a bunch of fox-hunting, profit-hungry farmers:

My mossy hills gains greedy hand  
& more then greedy mind  
Levels into a russet land  
Nor leaves a bent behind  
In summers gone I bloomed in pride  
Folks came for miles to prize  
My flowers that blo[o]med no where beside  
& scarce believed their eyes

Yet worried with a greedy pack  
They rend & delve & tear  
The very grass from off my back  
Ive scarce a rag to wear  
Gain takes my freedom all away  
Since its dull suit I wore  
& yet scorn vows I never pay  
& hurts me more & more  
(Clare 2000:218)

What we find in this remarkable poem is a further dramatisation of Clare's overriding theme of enclosure shattering the natural chain-of-being between the

generations. It is a point to which Marx also returns in volume three of *Capital*, where he speaks of the earth as a common and not a private heritage that human beings have not only on loan, but have a duty to pass on in better shape than they find it. Sentiments which Clare would surely have shared:

From the standpoint of a higher socio-economic formation, the private property of particular individuals in the earth will appear just as absurd as the private property of one man in other men. Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the earth. They are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations, as *boni patres familias* (Good heads of the household)" (Marx 1991:911).

In the *The Lament of Swordy Well*, the image of the earth turned upside down by enclosure, both literally and metaphorically, is also projected onto the animals themselves who react empathetically to the condition of the poor with the same feelings of disempowerment and unnatural exclusion:

The bees flye round in feeble rings  
& find no blossom bye  
Then thrum their almost weary wings  
Upon the moss & die  
Rabbits that find my hills turned oer  
Forsake my poor abode  
They dread a workhouse like the poor  
& nibble on the road  
(Clare 2000:216)

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John Clare described his writing as "the voice of a poor man" (Clare 2000:267), as one who tried to speak out both for himself and others of his class, people who were seldom if ever heard in the public debate. Not only that, Clare's personal experience of work on the land gave him a sense of physical and spiritual identification with the soil, coupled with a growing rage at the way it was being mismanaged and polluted. There is therefore a note of political urgency in Clare's poems that he was witnessing the birth of a new epoch of farming whose methods were already unsustainable. It is this expressed ecological awareness in Clare's poetry that I have tried to bring out more fully in this essay. Today we are reaching the end of the ongoing march of capitalist agribusiness, now on a global scale, with its murderous scarcity of food in some places coexisting with rotting superfluity in others. The idea of constant economic growth using limited natural resources has reached a critical stage in its historical development. It is an environmental equation that is not only polluting the planet, but pushing it to the limits of survival. Clare saw the signs of this ecological instability earlier than most. Unfortunately, as the Hammonds noted, his was a poetic protest that remained generally unheeded: "Clare's day was brief and he had few readers" (Hammonds 1995:331-2) Perhaps it is time to start listening to the voice of John Clare.

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