

Simon White

John Clare's Sonnets and the Northborough Fens

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Contents

'THE PROSPECT FAR AND WIDE': AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY DRAWING OF LANGLEY BUSH AND HELPSTON'S UNENCLOSED COUNTRYSIDE <i>Ian Waites</i>	5
THE SUN LOOKS PALE UPON THE WALL AD 1841 <i>Alan Moore</i>	23
JOHN CLARE: 'THE MAN OF TASTE' <i>Adam White</i>	38
JOHN CLARE'S SONNETS AND THE NORTHBOROUGH FENS <i>Simon J. White</i>	55
CLARE'S GYPSIES AND LITERARY INFLUENCE <i>Sarah Houghton-Walker</i>	71
AN UNPUBLISHED LETTER AND POEMS BY JOHN CLARE <i>Eric Robinson and Robert Heyes</i>	94
REVIEWS	99
Peter de Bolla, Nigel Leask and David Simpson, eds, <i>Land, Nation and Culture, 1740-1840: Thinking The Republic Of Taste</i> (Donna Landry)	
M. M. Mahood, <i>The Poet as Botanist</i> (Roy Vickery)	
Bridget Keegan, <i>British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry, 1730-1837</i> (M. M. Mahood)	
Simon J. White, <i>Robert Bloomfield, Romanticism and the Poetry of Community</i> and Essaka Joshua, <i>The Romantics and the May Day Tradition</i> (Sam Ward)	
CONTRIBUTORS	107
ABBREVIATIONS	108

John Clare's Sonnets and the Northborough Fens

Simon J. White

It is a common critical perception that following John Clare's flit to the village of Northborough in the spring of 1832 he responded to the countryside in a new way. The argument that his sense of identity and belonging was unsettled by the move and that this is reflected in the poetry of the Northborough period has been repeated in different ways by several critics. John Barrell's view is still influential: 'At about the time of his removal to Northborough Clare wrote three remarkable poems, which between them reflect the ambiguous feelings towards the move that are expressed in the letters to Taylor, and also suggest the way in which Clare's poetry was to change during the next few years at Northborough.'¹ These 'remarkable' poems were 'The Flitting' and 'Decay', both of which were published in *The Rural Muse* (1835), and 'Remembrances' (written in 1832), and it is still a default position for many that they are the key to Clare's poetic response to Northborough. For Tim Chilcott, the 'accents sounded now strike a more urgent and insistent note, modulating into a sustained tenor of regret for the passing away of youth and joy [...] the poems are no less than litanies for the restoration of lost time.'² Jonathan Bate's account of the move in his biography focuses on these three poems although he does suggest that 'To the Snipe' (written in 1832) represents Clare's attempt to 'embed himself in his new environment.'³ Paul Chirico's recent study implies that Clare's ability to respond to nature was adversely affected by his new environment. It focuses on poems written before 1832, but introduces a brief discussion of 'Decay' in the context of the move to Northborough. Chirico demonstrates that the manner of representation in 'Decay' is complex, but the reader is still left with the impression that the move provoked a transformation in Clare's response to the natural world: 'The demise of poetry here seems to relate more to the fading of "fancys visions" (*Middle Period* (IV), p. 114, l. 2) than of nature itself, but the later references to the poet's belief that the flowers of

his youth were “from Adams open gardens” (*Middle Period* (IV), 1. 66) suggests a Fall from ideal beauty.⁴

‘The Flitting’, ‘Decay’ and ‘Remembrances’ all apparently bemoan the fact that the countryside around Northborough was not like Helpstone, but Clare did not imagine this difference.⁵ He explains it in a letter to John Taylor: ‘there is neither wood nor heath furzebush molehill or oak tree about it’ (*Letters*, p. 561). The countryside around Clare’s birthplace consisted of hilly pastureland and woodland to the south west with flatter arable land to the north east. The area around Northborough (particularly to the north and east) was made up of flat and featureless fenland.⁶ There is much in these poems that supports the idea that Clare experienced a new sense of alienation from his immediate natural surroundings. But his feelings were grounded in the physical realities of Northborough. In other words while the alienation might have been real and profound, it should not automatically be linked to the simple fact of his having moved, but rather to his complex engagement with a new and very different place. It is also important to bear in mind that, as the editors of *Northborough Sonnets* point out, these three poems are ‘crucial but probably uncharacteristic poems of [even the early] Northborough period’.⁷ As Bridget Keegan has demonstrated, Clare always admired the fens.⁸ But as she also acknowledges, it is in the short sonnet-like poems written at Northborough that he really comes to terms with the essence of the place.⁹ The editors of *Northborough Sonnets* rightly note that Clare’s ‘preference for shorter poetic forms’ (p. ix) increased after the move to Northborough. He was at work on several sequences of his shorter sonnet-like poems, which in this essay will be called sonnets for convenience, at about the same time that he wrote ‘The Flitting’, ‘Remembrances’ and ‘Decay’. Many of these poems display him endeavouring to make sense of the fenland country and people and they have not received the critical attention that they deserve. This essay takes up the suggestive remarks made by both Keegan and the editors of *Northborough Sonnets*, and examines Clare’s confrontation with the fen environment and the impact that this had upon the imagery and structure of his sonnets.

In the sequences that Clare wrote immediately after the move the representation of the countryside in a significant number of sonnets is more precise and more focused upon detail than in many of the Helpstone poems. It is true that some poems of the early Northborough period are driven by the kind of moralising argument that is present in so many of Clare’s first experiments

in the sonnet form—and a large number of those included in *The Midsummer Cushion* (1832) and *The Rural Muse*. But there are more that offer a glimpse of what he would achieve during 1836 and 1837. Clare was interested in his new environment and the title ‘Open Winter’ apparently links a poem, written shortly after the move, to the flat and open countryside around Northborough:

OPEN WINTER

Where slanting banks are always with the sun
The daisy is in blossom even now
& where warm patches by the hedges run
The cottager when coming home from plough
Brings home a cowslap root in flower to set
Thus ere the christmass goes the spring is met
Setting up little tents about the fields
In sheltered spots—primroses when they get
Behind the woods old roots where ivy shields
Their crimped curdled leaves will shine & hide
—Cart ruts & horse footings scarcely yield
A slur for boys just crizzled & thats all
Frost shoots his needles by the small dyke side
& snow in scarce a feather’s seen to fall
(*Middle Period*, V, pp. 228-29)

The title signals Clare’s intention to represent and celebrate the particular characteristics of an open fenland winter, rather than lament the loss of the familiar ‘closed in’ Helpstone winter. It is therefore strange that not all of the imagery in the poem is derived from observation of the fenland environment. The closing couplet of ‘Open Winter’ does directly evoke the fen, and the ‘slanting banks’ that ‘are always with the sun’, and which provide an ideal habitat for early daisies, could be found in open and flat fenland country criss-crossed in straight lines with drainage dykes. But in lines seven to ten of the same poem the favoured habitat of the early primrose is linked to a different kind of environment. The fen carr (woodland) that Clare might have found around Northborough would have been comprised of willow-alder and perhaps some birch, but there would have been no ivy-encrusted deciduous trees—ivy prefers the kind of dry habitat that would have existed in the woods around Helpstone.

The countryside revealed to the reader in ‘Open Winter’ is clearly a composite of Helpstone and Northborough. But more significantly,

in terms of the way Northborough transformed Clare's sonnets, it is also transitional in terms of his handling of the form. A comparison between this poem and 'Winter' (1824-32), a poem written at Helpstone and included in both *The Midsummer Cushion* and *The Rural Muse*, will illustrate the manner in which Clare's sonnets were changing during the early Northborough period:

WINTER

Old January clad in crispy rime
Comes trampling on & often makes a stand
The hasty snowstorm neer disturbs his time
He mends no pace but beats his dithering hand
& Febuery like a timid maid
Smiling & sorrowing follows in his train
Huddled in cloak of mirey roads affraid
She hastens on to greet her home again
Then march the prophetess by storms inspired
Gazes in rapture on the troubled sky
& then in headlong fury madly fired
She bids the hail storm boil & hurry bye
Yet neath the blackest cloud a sunbeam flings
Its cheering promise of returning springs
(*Middle Period*, IV, p. 190)

The interlinked rhetoric is organised around the arrival of succeeding personified months—each month being considered in a separate quatrain. In this respect it resembles most of the poems within *The Midsummer Cushion* and *The Rural Muse* that do not conform to one of the traditional sonnet types, in which the imagery is almost always linked rhetorically and syntactically; even in those that are made up of a series of couplets. Although the later sonnet is not completely free from abstraction, this earlier poem also contains much more elaborate personification and conventional poetic diction, particularly in the first four lines. Because this convoluted imagery is not grounded in the detail of the landscape, the transition from winter to spring is represented in a generalised and obscure manner. In 'Open Winter' on the other hand Clare was looking for a different kind of organising structure and he achieves this despite the lack of syntactical and rhetorical connection between the images. The poem coheres because the late-winter or early-spring flowers that constitute its subject matter are described with clarity and simplicity, and because the poem repeatedly returns

to this same focused theme. The reader is able to visualise the transition from winter to spring through precise representation of the kind of habitats preferred by the flowers. On the evidence of these two sonnets, far from causing him to become alienated, the countryside around Clare's new home sparked a greater interest in representing the detail of landscape features.

Despite the composite nature of the later poem in terms of subject matter, the contrasting descriptive tenor of 'Winter' and 'Open Winter' can be attributed to differences between Helpstone and Northborough. In Helpstone, winter would have been 'closed in' or at least over-shadowed by hills and woodland, and the abstract imagery denoting the stuttering arrival of a personified spring in the earlier poem is suggestive of a certain skulking reticence. It is almost as if January who 'mends no pace but beats his *dithering* hand' and 'Febuery [who] like a *timid* maid / smiling and *sorrowing* follows in his train' (my emphasis) are hiding behind these over-shadowing landscape features. Then March employs a kind of subterfuge as she apparently attempts to prolong winter's thrall—she 'Gazes in rapture on the troubled sky / & then in headlong fury madly fired / [...] bids the hail storm boil & hurry bye'. The poem does end with a promise that spring will return, but it is not couched in the most reassuring terms—'Yet neath the blackest cloud a sunbeam flings / Its cheering promise of returning spring'—and in general the imagery throughout the poem suggests deception and conflict. It goes without saying that 'Winter' does not constitute Clare's only representation of a Helpstone winter, but it is typical of the sonnets written before the move rather than those written after it. The imagery of 'Open Winter' by contrast is neutral and transparent because of the absence of obscuring personification and gloomy adjectival phrases. The poem does end with an image of winter apparently fighting back against the arrival of spring, but it is not an abstract image and does not suggest the disappearance of the newly emerging and necessarily hardy early-spring flowers: 'Frost shoots his needles by the small dyke side / & snow in scarce a feather's seen to fall'.

Like 'Open Winter' most of the other sonnets written during 1832 are best read as transitional poems that reveal the direction in which Clare's vision for the form was going but are not typical of the entire Northborough period. Indeed, because Clare experimented extensively with short sonnet-like poems at Northborough, the geographical and formal coherence implied by the title of the 1995 edition *Northborough Sonnets* can be misleading. For example,

unlike the sonnets of the early Northborough period, the poems written during 1836 and 1837 are almost exclusively comprised of seven usually end-stopped couplets. The rhyme scheme of 'Open Winter' (abab ccdc deaf ee) seems to be a combination of the constraining English sonnet structure and the more open couplet structure. This odd amalgamation does not lend it self to the narrative exposition typical of the English sonnet with its clear rhetorical divisions mirrored by the rhyme scheme. But it does suggest that Clare was struggling to find a rhetorical structure and rhyme scheme that was more appropriate for his new environment. Three years later Clare did write poems that through a combination of imagery, rhetoric and couplet rhyme scheme do capture the essence of the Northborough countryside. John Barrell suggests that many of the sonnets which Clare included within *The Midsummer Cushion* offer a 'complex manifold of simultaneous impressions' linked by 'idiosyncratic syntax'.¹⁰ He goes on to contrast these late Helpstone poems with those written at Northborough (during 1836 and 1837), and implies that the latter lose by the comparison because of their looser syntax and more open structure: 'what is lacking is any sense of relationship between the images; so that we have no idea of whether these are images all taken from the same place, as in an earlier sonnet we would know they were by the syntactical connections made between them [...] we are left instead with a strange continuum of impressions, image following image with an automatic regularity'.¹¹ This essay argues that the looser structure actually drove Clare's discovery of a new expressive potential and a new way of combining formal and rhetorical openness with a different kind of compression in these sonnet-like poems.

As Barrell noted, in the sonnets of the later Northborough period there is even less connection between rhyming couplets and sometimes between individual lines than in early Northborough poems. But this looser structure brings separate images into relief, and at the same time produces the effect of space between them in a way that reflects the lonely character of the Northborough landscape. It could be argued reductively that the repeated reference to strangers and to the lonely character of the country around Northborough in the sonnets written there is a reflection of the poet's own isolation and depressed emotional state. But this does not take account of the fact that loneliness—if this means the absence of humankind—is an uncomplicated good in many of Clare's poems. In fact both ways of explaining the references to loneliness in these poems would miss the point that Clare is

simply responding to his new environment. The fen was sparsely populated both in terms of human inhabitants and landscape features, and because it is flat it is a place in which space and distance is accentuated.¹² One characteristic sonnet of this later Northborough period announces its theme to be the sparsely populated fen in the opening self-contained couplet:

It is a lonely place indeed
 The very wild geese stay to feed
 The cattle stand & stare for home
 & glad to see a stranger come
 Will run to see the open tray
 & knock you down to get away
 The house among the thistles grey
 Was robbed & in the open day
 The dykes all trampled by the horse
 A broken ladder lies to cross
 The flaggy forrest & the flood
 The otter holes & ozier wood
 Are all the shepherd has to see
 Theres neither hill nor bush nor tree
 (*Middle Period*, V, p. 355)

Wild geese have traditionally been viewed as a pest by farmers so their willingness to 'stay to feed' is indicative of the fact that there are fewer farmers around to chase them away. Other discrete images reinforce the impression created in the opening couplet that the fen is an empty place. Perhaps a lack of people is the reason that the land is somewhat neglected or perhaps the poor condition of the land explains the absence of people: 'The dykes all trampled by the horse / A broken ladder lies to cross'.¹³ Whatever the causal relationship, broken and poorly maintained dykes would make flooding more likely. The representation of cattle disturbed by the loneliness of the fen is possibly a little anthropomorphic, but like the report of a house robbed in broad daylight it adds to the textured layering of suggestive imagery in the distinct vignettes that make up this poem.

In Clare's usage flaggy means reedy and the phrase 'flaggy forest' suggests that the clumps and beds of reed constitute the tallest vegetation in the fen. Then the compound image of the 'flaggy forest' and the 'flood'—which is all that 'the shepherd has to see'—further evokes the flat monotony of the fen landscape, in that (particularly in the partially drained fen) a small increase in

the level of the water table causes an extensive but shallow flood, through which only the flag or reed will be visible. Even when the land is not flooded, the monotony of the fen is generally relieved by only a few distinctive landscape features, but Clare picks out two of the most characteristic ones in the 'otter holes' and 'ozier wood'. Because the safety of water, in the form of the dyke system, would never be far away, the fen would be a very attractive habitat for the otter—much more so than the countryside around Helpstone—hence the prevalence of otter holes in the dyke sides. The phrase 'ozier wood' (or osier bed) is typically applied to the small managed plantations of carr woodland that Clare would have found in the fen, and which principally consisted of willow-alder that would have been cropped for rods. For Clare the low-growing willows in these osier beds do not seem to justify the designation tree or even bush because, as the closing lines remind the reader, in an echo of his January 1832 letter to John Taylor, there is 'neither hill nor bush nor tree' to be seen. All of these—the hill, tree and bush—were and still are dominant features of the country around Helpstone and it seems that Clare missed them, but the fen country inspired him to produce a kind of poetry that the area around his home village could not have done.

This poem implies some kind of disjunction between humankind—or rather human civilisation—and the fen environment. The domesticated cattle, brought to the fens in order to be fattened, will 'knock you down' in order to get back to a more domesticated environment (*Middle Period*, V, l. 6),¹⁴ and as the closing lines imply, there is little visual stimulation for humankind in such a place. But the poem that appears immediately after this sonnet in Peterborough manuscript B9, also written in a couplet rhyme-scheme, more forcefully evokes the apparent resistance of the fen to human civilization, that is only hinted at in the poem that begins with the line 'It is a lonely place indeed':¹⁵

So few the lonely journey stray
The very pathway grows away
One lonely man I see no more
Is hacking thistles on the more
A man may trample all the day
Nor see a house for all the way
They dig for trees that deeply lie
So long theyd almost touch the sky
They say who see his lonely face
They would not live in such a place

For all their eyes has ever seen
With him the world has hardly been
The shepherd laughs & never cares
Though gipseys shun a dwelling there
(*Middle Period*, V, pp. 355-6)

This sonnet evokes a fenland landscape that is not only sparsely populated but also rarely visited by human beings. The 'pathway grows away' or rather, becomes faint and then finally disappears, because the route is so rarely taken. Then the second couplet suggests both the lack and the presence of human activity in the fen: 'One lonely man I see no more / Is hacking thistles on the more'. The clause 'One lonely man I see no more' is followed by a verb phrase constructed around the present participle of the verb to hack. This rather strange grammatical construction implies that the worker (whom the observer apparently no longer sees) is present in the here and now. In fact throughout the entire sonnet this worker in the landscape is the only individual who is explicitly mentioned in the present tense. Another way of reading this rather disturbing and ghostly image is that it suggests humankind has only a very insecure foothold in the fen, as workers disappear and then reappear in the view of the observer. In Clare's day, life in wetland areas was still very hard and it is principally for this reason that not many people lived in such places. The people who did reside there made a marginal living from fishing, fowling, cutting turf and furze and through seasonal employment as shepherds. It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century, following drainage by steam-driven pumps, that arable farming began to dominate life on the fens and most fenmen became farm labourers.¹⁶

This poem complicates the identity of figures in the landscape in order to evoke the strange, almost magical quality of the fen. Who is this man for whom 'the world has hardly been'? The poem is generally ambiguous and his identity is certainly not made explicit. Is he a mummified corpse—a throwback to an earlier time—preserved in the bog environment and discovered by those digging for peat?¹⁷ In this case, the 'world has hardly been' for him because in the context of the early nineteenth century view of geological time, he had lived when the world had 'hardly been'. Or is he the chimera-like worker introduced in the third line of the poem? Perhaps the world has 'hardly been' for this man because he has spent most of his life making his idiosyncratic living in the sparsely inhabited fen, separated from the developing 'world' of human civilisation.

As Paul Chirico notes, because of his own ambiguous position as a labouring poet, Clare often obscures the relationship between the visiting or leisured labourer, the marks of past workers in the landscape and active workers present in the landscape of the here and now.¹⁸ In this poem, both workers and visitors who originate from outside the fen are repeatedly designated 'they' to disassociate them from the enigmatic worker in the landscape, and to bring into relief their disconnection from the fenland environment. How could they have an investment in such a strange and mysterious place, in which contact between the ghostly few who do live and work there and other human beings is rare.

Both the creative use of the indefinite article and the presentation of discrete images in individual couplets, linked occasionally by imprecise anaphoric reference, but not by coordinating conjunctions, contribute to the representation of the fen in the poem that begins with the line 'So few the journey stray'. Clare had employed the couplet form before, but as indicated earlier, John Barrell has shown that discrete images in early couplet sonnets are almost always linked, syntactically and rhetorically. Those produced at Northborough are much more resistant to rhetorical closure.¹⁹ In the poem that begins with the line 'It is a lonely place indeed', several individual lines and most end-stopped couplets could stand alone (particularly the first, fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh couplets). The structure is basically open, even if in the final two lines the apparently disparate imagery of the penultimate couplet is reintegrated into the poem's underlying rhetorical argument about the barren loneliness of the fen. (Having said this, in such a flat country it is unlikely that the shepherd would be able to observe a flooded landscape and otter holes in the dyke sides at the same time.) Despite the vestige of rhetorical and syntactical linkage present in the poem, the overall effect is of disconnection and space between discrete images. All of the couplets in the poem that begins with the line 'So few the lonely journey stray' could stand alone, despite the vague anaphoric linkage between three of them. Again it is the layering of imagery that gives the poem its distinctive quality. The equivocal structure reflects both the fleeting nature of relationships between human beings in such a sparsely populated and rarely visited place, and the uncertain and somewhat provisional relationship between humankind in general and the land. The looser structure works in a short poem like a sonnet, but would be unmanageable in a longer poem where the disconnectedness would either become tiresome or would quickly

cease to make rhetorical or thematic sense. It would not work in the same way in poems of much less than fourteen lines either: shorter poems would take on the characteristics of imagist poetry and would lose the rhetorical power derived from the layering of imagery. This raises a question: do these poems need to be precisely fourteen lines in length? The answer is no: although fourteen lines is close to the ideal length for the kind of sonnets that Clare was writing at Northborough during 1836 and 1837. This probably explains the poet's irritation at prescriptive accounts of what a sonnet should be: 'if those cursd critics could be shovd out of the fashion wi their rule & compass & cease from making readers believe a Sonnet cannot be a Sonnet unless it be precisely 14 lines' (*Letters*, p. 80).

Clare's endeavour to find a sonnet structure that could represent the enigmatic fen landscape had a profound influence upon his vision for the sonnet in general. Even when he looks back to Helpstone or seeks to represent country scenes that are not location-specific—not all of the poems written during 1836 and 1837 represent the fens—the new looser couplet pattern helped him to represent more familiar subject matter in new and challenging ways.²⁰ In the poems that begin with the lines 'The fire tail tells the boys when nests are nigh', 'The starnel builds in chimneys from the view' and 'The tame hedge sparrow hops about for seed' (*Middle Period*, V, pp. 247, 357 and 378) discrete images are linked thematically rather than by syntactical or rhetorical structures. The imagery in these three poems relates to different aspects of bird behaviour: nest building, feeding and defensive behaviour respectively. Although it is possible that the characteristics described in each poem were observed during a relatively short period of time on a particular day, it is more likely that they were observed over a longer period of time and combined from memory (particularly as some of the species described in the poems would be much less prevalent around Northborough). The images are represented as objective knowledge of the kind that would be possessed by the ornithologist with a particular narrow interest in birds, rather than a more general interest in the diversity of life in the countryside. Clare did relish such knowledge; he was a committed naturalist, but in earlier poetry it tended to be represented as organically linked to particular experiences, or to an emotional or moral response to the countryside, or both. In 'The Thrushes Nest' (written 1824-32), for example, the narrator describes his observation of a particular thrush over a period of time as it builds its nest and lays its eggs:

There lay her shining eggs as bright as flowers
Ink spotted over shells of greeny blue
& there I witnessed in the sunny hours
A brood of natures minstrels chirp & flye
Glad as that sunshine & the laughing sky
(*Middle Period*, IV, p. 187, ll. 10-14)

The narrator knows the countryside and has returned to the locality of the nest on many occasions, as he watches the thrush's 'secret toils from day to day' (*Middle Period* (IV), l. 6). His emotional engagement with the scenes that he describes in the poem is clear from the distribution of positive adjectives like 'merry', 'shining', 'sunny' and 'laughing'. The structure of the poem is driven by the narrator's secure sense of familiarity with the place, and the clear narrative connection between his life and the events that occur there over time. The editors of *Northborough Sonnets* argue that the later poems suggest a more fractured relationship with the landscape and that Clare is 'struggling to recover the determinacy lost' in 'the move from Helpston[e]' (*Northborough Sonnets*, p. xx). But given the absence of the egotistical 'I' from these poems it is much more likely that Clare is working through a new way of representing the countryside.²¹

Those sonnets within the Northborough manuscripts that do not obviously look to the fens for inspiration certainly represent aspects of nature that had always attracted Clare—for instance bird behaviour in the three poems discussed earlier—from a distinctive point of view. The images in the sonnets written at Northborough have something in common with vignettes or still photographic representations of a series of scenes. But these poems achieve much more than sketches or photographic stills in that they operate on a number of different levels. This is especially so of poems like that which begins with the line 'The cowboy sees the spring & hears the crows', and which consists of a series of isolated images linked by the theme of the coming spring. The poem focuses upon both humans and animals in the landscape. The use of isolated vignettes contained within single end-stopped couplets, or in some instances single lines, achieves clarity of focus upon each image.²² The images stand out to a much greater extent than would be the case if they were represented as part of a narrative, or a developmental description of a particular scene through time, as in 'The Thrushes Nest'. Like many poems within the Northborough manuscripts, the poem also contains far fewer adjectival phrases, and those that Clare does use

are of a different quality. They are relatively neutral like 'brimming', 'bleak in tone like 'desert', or focus upon the need for resilience in response to a less manageable countryside, like 'robust' and 'strong'. In sonnets like 'The Thrushes Nest', the syntactical apparatus connecting clauses and directing the narrative, combined with the over-use of emotionally engaged and engaging adjectival phrases, prevents individual discrete images from standing out so clearly. The extra space created by a spare use of language in the later poem also allows the inclusion of a greater number of images. The narrator is either taken out of the scenes described or is represented as being less emotionally engaged with them. But because of the increased number of gaps and interstices in the text, the reader is forced to combine discrete images, which are not generally located in space or time, to produce a compound representation of the countryside and its human and animal occupants. As Wolfgang Iser, most influentially, has argued, 'it is the gaps, the fundamental asymmetry between text and reader, that give rise to communication in the reading process; the lack of a common situation, and a common frame of reference corresponds to the "no-thing", which brings about interaction [and social communication] between persons.'²³ In other words, like abstract paintings, many of the sonnets of the later Northborough period require much greater creative engagement from the reader, and this might enable a greater understanding of the world represented in them.

The number of possible ways of reading these experimental sonnets of the later Northborough period also increases because, as a direct consequence of Clare's formal innovation, many of them offer a more dynamic impression of the countryside. Despite the less emotionally engaged tone, more is happening, and more people are involved in what is happening in the poem that begins with the line 'The cowboy sees the spring & hears the crows' than in earlier poems like 'The Thrushes Nest'. Apart from one, all of the images focus upon movement. The poem offers a much more outwardly-orientated impression of the countryside than 'The Thrushes Nest', which concentrates on activity in a particular place. There is movement across the land, and, in a way, the sonnet: the cowboy is passing through, the maids are on the way to the hedge to collect the 'cloaths' or to the farm with the new milk, and the ploughman is 'blundering' on across the field (*Middle Period*, V, p. 253, ll. 4 and 13). Then there is movement out of the space represented in the sonnet as the 'old cow tosses up the gate away / & seeks the pasture where the summer lay' and the 'traveller birds in all

directions flye' (*Middle Period*, IV, l. 7-8 and l. 11). The impression of dynamic and in some respects confused movement is reinforced by the looser syntactic structure, which allows space for diverse images and creates an impression of crisscrossing movement. Also, without the ordering syntax and rhetoric, the locations in the landscape from which the movement commences or from where it is observed are not clear.

The direct consequence of Clare's attempt to capture the fen environment, in poems like those that begin with the lines 'It is a lonely place indeed' and 'So few the lonely journey stray', is the unsettling formal innovation and the innovative treatment of space and time in that which begins with the line 'The cowboy sees the spring & hears the crows'. Far from becoming introverted and morbidly focused upon the past, the sonnets in which he strives to make sense of his new environment reveal his muse to be critically outward-looking. As had often been the case in Helpstone, he was interested in the detail of both the countryside and the way people engage with and within it. But the fact that Clare had a less well established emotional investment in the country around Northborough encouraged him to represent it in a way that would not have been possible in Helpstone. In and around his old home his love for the countryside and virtually everything in it clouded his vision. This is reflected in the fact that so many of the Helpstone poems either begin with or contain the words 'I love'. The same emotional investment impelled him to control representation through syntax and rhetoric. In poems like 'Open Winter', and those that begin with the lines 'It is a lonely place indeed' and 'So few the lonely journey stray', he is working through his response to the new place and his creativity manifests itself in some striking imagery and some strange but productive linguistic structures. The representation of the countryside in the sonnets written during the later Northborough period might not be as carefully managed as in many Helpstone poems, but readers are drawn into a more productive relationship with the scenes described. Clare's newer, freer structure not only enabled him to create a new kind of sonnet for a new kind of place, it also enabled him to remember and represent the old place and the familiar features of nature in a new way.

NOTES

1. John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 174.
2. Tim Chilcott, *'A Real World and Doubting Mind': A Critical Study of the Poetry of John Clare* (Hull: Hull University Press, 1985), p. 108.
3. Jonathan Bate, *John Clare: A Biography* (London: Picador, 2003), pp. 387-91.
4. Paul Chirico, *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 165.
5. See *Ordnance Survey Old Series (1824-1836) Map 142 Peterborough* (East Garston: Cassini Publishing Ltd, 2006), 13080505 and 15000709
6. Early attempts to drain the fens during the seventeenth century, under the management of Cornelius Vermuyden, ultimately failed because the peat-based soil shrank lowering the surface of the land. This made the fens even more prone to flooding. The fens were successfully drained again during the 1820s and 30s, using steam-driven pumps, so the environment and the wildlife would have been changing during Clare's time at Northborough as the countryside dried out. See Valerie Gerrard, *The Story of the Fens* (London: Robert Hale, 2003), pp. 85-121.
7. *Northborough Sonnets*, p. xx.
8. Bridget Keegan, *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry, 1730-1837* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 159-71.
9. Keegan, *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry*, p. 167.
10. Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, p. 179.
11. Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, p. 179. The editors of *Northborough Sonnets* rightly dismiss Barrell's view that Clare loses his sense of place (especially in so far as the use of dialect words and phrases is concerned) in the sonnets written at Northborough, but do not question the assertion that the looser syntactic structure is in some way a defect.
12. See *Ordnance Survey Old Series (1824-1836) Map 142*.
13. Although the condition of Deeping Fen did improve towards the end of the eighteenth century, there were still complaints about flooding, and the other fens around Northborough were in a very poor condition at the turn of the century. See H. C. Darby, *The Draining of the Fens*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), pp. 144-52.
14. See Darby, *The Draining of the Fens*, p. 153.
15. The editors of *Middle Period* consider this to be a continuation of the previous poem; in other words they print one twenty-eight line poem rather than two sonnets. It is, however, clear that the twenty-eight lines of verse is best read as two separate sonnets (they are presented in this way in *Northborough Sonnets*). There is no clear thematic, rhetorical or structural connection between the two passages of fourteen lines and there is a clear division at line 14/15.
16. Gerrard, *The Story of the Fens*, p. 166.
17. Pre-historic human remains were found on Flag Fen to the east of Peterborough at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Although there is no extant evidence, it is possible that remains were also found on Deeping or Borough fens.
18. Chirico, *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader*, pp. 82-96.

19. In 'John Clare: a bi-centenary lecture' Seamus Heaney suggests that the couplets in these poems ought to be called '*supplets*' because of the 'inexorable one-thing-after-anotherness of the world' represented in them (Houghton, p. 137).
20. This is another reason why it might be misleading to group them all together under the geographical tag *Northborough* as the editors of the Carcanet edition do.
21. Simon Kövesi has written of Clare's growing concern during the 1830s that over use of the egotistical 'I' was having a detrimental impact on discourse in general (and presumably poetic discourse in particular). See Simon Kövesi, 'John Clare's "I" and the "Eye": Egotism and Ecologism' in *Green and Pleasant Land: English Culture and the Romantic Countryside*, ed. Amanda Gilroy (Leuven, Paris and Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2004), pp. 80-88.
22. A number of critics have made a connection between Clare's poetry and Thomas Bewick's vignettes. See, for example, R. K. R. Thornton, 'Bewick and Clare: Two Rooted Men', *JCSJ*, 26 (2007), 5-20 (13-14).
23. Wolfgang Iser, 'Interaction between Text and Reader' in *Readers and Reading*, ed. Andrew Bennett (London and New York: Longman, 1995), p. 23.



part in the 'wider cultural acceptance of folklore', and sometimes provided evidence for antiquarians (p. 4).

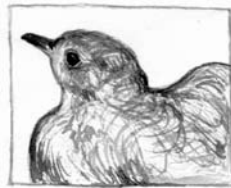
While May Day celebrations took many different forms, Joshua insists they all operated in what she calls 'the common sphere'; for the Romantics, this imagined space of 'public cultural activity' was 'characterized by its localness, its detachment from commercialism, and its focus on communal activity' (p. 12). Clare occupies a central place for Joshua, since in her view he adopts a 'more integrative approach' (p. 14) than his contemporaries, and 'provides the most sustained commentary on the function of the common sphere and on its dialectical place relative to bourgeois society' (p. 135).

Joshua starts her chapter on Clare by addressing the tendency to perceive Clare's 'identity as a poet' in 'terms of cultural polarization' (p. 116). According to her analysis, 'in writing about peasant life Clare does not see himself as bridging a gap between bourgeois and peasant, as many commentators suggest, but aims rather to establish himself in a public realm that has a different value system from that of the bourgeois literary sphere', and she contends that these values are 'derived from his understanding of the significance of customary culture, local knowledge and literary transmission amongst the peasant class' (p. 117). While I would quibble with certain individual details—Clare's friend Henderson, for instance, is described as 'middle-class' (p. 118), a statement which unduly simplifies the relationship between head gardeners and their employers, while his 'Brother Bard and Fellow Labourer' Allan Cunningham is accused of always having 'his eye on the literary market' (p. 122)—a

claim, incidentally, supported via a misattribution in *Letters* (here again the truth seems to me much more complex than the argument allows)—taken as a whole, Joshua's attempt to theorize Clare's praise of common fame and his dislike of fashion is extremely thought-provoking, and an original contribution to work on his poetry. Having said this, I also found myself wishing that she had allowed herself more room to consider the place of local tradition in individual poems by Clare, especially since she suggests that her concept of the 'common sphere' is in part derived from him. Her account of 'The Village Minstrel', for example, by far the longest discussion of one of his poems in the book, might well have dealt with Clare's own oft-cited complaints about that work, remarks which surely lie behind some of the critical comments she disagrees with.

These minor reservations aside, Joshua is to be commended for producing a study which broadens our understanding of Clare's poetics and the importance of local tradition and customary culture in the Romantic period; indeed both books should be read by anyone with more than a passing interest in Clare's work and the contexts which inform it.

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John Clare Society Journal 28 2009

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John Clare Society Journal 28 2009

Abbreviations

BY HIMSELF *John Clare By Himself*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Ashington and Manchester: Mid-NAG and Carcanet, 1996)

COTTAGE TALES *John Clare, Cottage Tales*, ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell and P.M.S. Dawson (Ashington and Manchester: Mid-NAG and Carcanet, 1993)

CRITICAL HERITAGE *Clare: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Mark Storey (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973)

DEACON George Deacon, *John Clare and the Folk Tradition* (London: Sinclair Browne, 1983)

EARLY POEMS (I–II) *The Early Poems of John Clare*, ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell and Margaret Grainger (two volumes, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989)

HAUGHTON Hugh Haughton, Adam Phillips and Geoffrey Summerfield (eds), *John Clare in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994)

JCSJ *The John Clare Society Journal* (1982–)

LATER POEMS *The Later Poems of John Clare*, ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell and Margaret Grainger (two volumes, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984)

LETTERS *The Letters of John Clare*, ed. Mark Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985)

MIDDLE PERIOD (I–II) *John Clare, Poems of the Middle Period 1822–1837*, ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell and P.M.S. Dawson (two volumes, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); (III–IV) (1998): (V) (2003)

MIDSUMMER CUSHION *John Clare, The Midsummer Cushion*, ed. Kelsey Thornton and Anne Tibble (Ashington and Manchester: Mid-NAG and Carcanet, revised edition, 1990)

NATURAL HISTORY *The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare*, ed. Margaret Grainger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983)

NORTHBOROUGH SONNETS *John Clare, Northborough Sonnets*, ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell and P.M.S. Dawson (Ashington and Manchester: Mid-NAG and Carcanet, 1995)

OXFORD AUTHORS *The Oxford Authors: John Clare*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984)

PROSE *The Prose of John Clare*, ed. J.W. and Anne Tibble (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951, reprinted 1970)

SHEPHERD'S CALENDAR *John Clare, The Shepherd's Calendar*, ed. Eric Robinson, Geoffrey Summerfield and David Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, revised edition, 1993)

SUMMERFIELD *John Clare, Selected Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Summerfield (London: Penguin, 1990)