



# John Clare and the Manifold Commons

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**ABSTRACT** There are growing and justifiable concerns about the degradation of the planet—the land, sea and atmosphere on which all life depends. While these problems unfold on a global scale they are not evenly distributed, either in terms of cause or effect. This has not stopped powerful and universalizing explanations about why ‘our planet’ is being exhausted, and how ‘we’ must respond with urgent action. One of the effects of this response is that environmental problems are naturalized as empirical facts around which new forms of governance and regulation must emerge. While this technical response might be effective at managing discrete environmental problems it can obscure important questions about the ways in which we produce and reproduce social and natural life. The 18th century was also a period in which the problem of scarcity gave rise to new ways of managing and organizing social and natural life. The naturalization of scarcity was a cornerstone of liberal economics, the intellectual justification for various forms of enclosure and ‘improvement’. One person who challenged this powerful narrative was the poet John Clare (1793-1864). Where liberal economics began with the abstraction of self-interested ‘man’ and finite ‘nature’, Clare began with his own experiences of the world around him. This commitment to the here and now is not to be confused with notions of a ‘pre-modern’ union of human and nature. Rather, Clare’s poetry describes and reveals the many different natures which unfold through ongoing, negotiated and changing relations between people and things. Rather than a fear of limits, the excess of possibilities inherent in this vision of the ‘manifold commons’ provides him, and us, with a different way to imagine and enact alternative forms of social and natural life.

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*Indeed*

*I feel at times a love and joy*

*For every weed and every thing.<sup>1</sup>*

## Scarcity

In 2011, Charles Glover, the environmental campaigner, wrote a critical review of Mark Kurlansky’s ‘The Last Fish Tale’, a sympathetic history of fishermen from below. “[Kurlansky],” wrote Glover, “remains hooked on a mythical figure in an oily sweater at a time when what makes a fisherman great is now measured by what he leaves in the sea.” Glover dismisses Kurlansky’s ‘romanticization’ of fishermen, arguing that environmentalists are the ones who

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<sup>1</sup> John Clare, “The Flitting,” in *Major Works*, ed. E. Robinson and D. Powell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 255, lines 189-190.

need to be praised. As an example, he quotes a campaign by environmentalists to close off 6,500 miles of sea to fishing, "with support from intelligent fishermen."<sup>2</sup>

Charles Glover is best known for his documentary, "The End of the Line." As the title suggests, the film is part of the popular genre of eco-catastrophe. Combining footage of industrial scale fishing and predictions by international scientists on the future collapse of global fish stocks the message is unambiguously stark. After nearly two hours of apocalyptic predictions by leading fisheries scientists, the documentary concludes with the suggestion that this tragic outcome can be averted by consumers becoming more aware of what fish they are eating and where it is from. The documentary played an important part in popularizing the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) eco-label for fish products. Established by the multinational corporation, Unilever, and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the label is supposed to encourage fishermen to fish sustainably and consumers to buy sustainably.

Glover calls for the closing off of the sea from 'rapacious' fishermen, while at the same time seeking to channel their economic self-interest into a new market for 'sustainable' fish. While grounded in real concerns to protect marine life, Glover's solutions spring from an uncritical acceptance that fishermen are self-motivated individuals competing in a global commodity market. Undoubtedly this is part of the story, but Glover, and others, succeed in elevating this figure from a particular subjectivity inserted within particular social relations of production, into a natural fact that must be acknowledged and managed appropriately. At the same time, fish are 'naturalized' as a finite bio-economic resource to be managed within certain biological limits. The problem of exploited fish stocks is translated into the familiar terms of liberal economics: the efficient management of scarce resources under the conditions of unlimited demand. The result is a set of policies and regulations which appear to be neutral in terms of balancing the biological reproducibility of fish stocks with fishing effort within a global market. The exclusion of fishermen from the fisheries, whether as a result of restrictions or market pressures, thus comes to be seen as an unavoidable part of sustainable development.

While Glover's response to the problem of overfishing may be an extreme example, the assumptions on which his position is based and the type of demands it gives rise to are widespread. These assumptions generalize or naturalize the problem of planetary limits or scarcity. To naturalize means to de-historicize. It involves obscuring or implicitly accepting the *particular* historical processes and social relations through which fish stocks came to be over-exploited; the ways in which fishermen became subjects within particular, capitalist social relations of production which encouraged and fostered the modernization of fishing fleets and the pursuit of profit through the expansion of fish catches. As well as obscuring the particular causes of scarcity, this perspective can also obscure the different social relations which exist and persist: the different use-values, forms of exchange and reciprocity which exist in different communities over time.

Even the more progressive, radical voices within environmental politics begin with the urgent demand to 'protect' a finite planet. In his article 'Two Faces of the Apocalypse', Michael Hardt describes the difference between anti-capitalist activists and climate change activists at

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Glover, "Review: The Last Fish Tale by Mark Kurlansky," *The Daily Telegraph* 12 May (2011).

the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 15) in Copenhagen.<sup>3</sup> While the former insist that 'another world is possible', the latter adopt the slogan: 'There is no Planet B'. While sympathetic to their position, Hardt points to the political limitations of such a statement, especially when read alongside the neoliberal mantra of 'There Is No Alternative', or, more ominously, an earlier phrase from the liberal lexicon: "injustice is preferable to ruin."<sup>4</sup> Hardt traces these different political positions to contrasting notions of the commons. On one hand, anti-capitalists consider the commons as a social/economic commons, representing the product of human labor and creativity, including ideas, knowledge and social relationships. On the other, environmental activists speak for the ecological commons, identified as the earth and its ecosystems, including the atmosphere, rivers, forests and forms of life which interact with them. Hardt argues that the former does not operate under the logic of scarcity, while the latter does.

While Hardt admits that his categorization is simplistic, he reinforces a familiar distinction between the 'immaterial commons' (social) and the 'material commons' (ecological). This encourages us to consider the scarcity of material resources (fish, oil, forests) as 'real' and the scarcity of immaterial resources as 'artificial', due to their endless reproducibility. But this distinction obscures the historical processes through which material resources, such as land, forests, rivers, come to be identified as discrete resources separated from social relations and the communities who depend on them.

In the mid-18th century the scarcity of grain had become a serious issue for governments throughout Europe. This wasn't primarily because the population was going hungry but because lack of grain in the towns was producing riots and social disorder.<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault has identified this problem of grain scarcity as a key moment in the emergence of a new form of modern government. In a 1977 lecture, he analyzes a text by the Physiocrat, Louis-Paul Abeille entitled: *Lettre d'un négociant sur la nature du commerce des grains* (1768). Abeille identifies how state resources were being wasted on the prevention of scarcity and the spectre of future revolt. He argues that the only real basis for good government is the management of real phenomena: rather than trying to prevent scarcity, government needed to accept the 'reality' of scarcity, its existence as a phenomenon that could not be avoided. Abeille counsels for a shift in governmental knowledge and policy-making: scarcity has to be managed and regulated rather than repressed. Instead of merely focusing on the market, with the limited objective of controlling prices and circulation, Abeille and the Physiocrats thus advise the state to focus on the production of grain itself, with everything that is likely to happen to it from planting to harvesting to sale and consumption. The overall effect of this analysis was that the probability of scarcity was diminished and compensated for by taking into account a whole set of phenomena and their relations to one another. "In other words, it is an economics, or a political-economic analysis, that integrates the moment of production, the

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Hardt, "Two Faces of the Apocalypse: A Letter from Copenhagen," *Polygraph* 22 (2010): 265-274.

<sup>4</sup> Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science* 162 (1968): 1243-1248.

<sup>5</sup> Edward P. Thompson, *Customs in Common. Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1993).

world market, and, finally, the economic behavior of the population, of producers and consumers.”<sup>6</sup>

Foucault’s concern with Abeille and the problematization of scarcity in the 18th century is the way in which the problem is turned from a local, discrete issue into a general, universal one. Scarcity emerges in this period as a ubiquitous and permanent feature of the human condition, the catalyst for an expansion of social and scientific knowledge and the basis for new modes of governmental intervention in social life. While Foucault identifies the ‘naturalization’ of scarcity as a turning point in the genesis of modern forms of government and power, he does not explicitly relate this to the dramatic re-organization of social and material life which occurred at this time. While enclosure tends to refer to one aspect of this re-organization of land and people, it is inseparable from the broader process of ‘improvement’ and the liberal economic rationale on which it was based. Foucault’s analysis allows us to see these processes as the unfolding of a particular ‘regime of truth’, an economic rationality which appeared to be neutral by working with and through existing tendencies and effects rather than allowing any morality or language of rights to contaminate its calculations. As Hildyard *et al.* write: “enclosure is a compound process which affects nature and culture, home and market, production and consumption, germination and harvest, birth, sickness and death. It is a process to which no aspect of life or culture is immune.”<sup>7</sup>

Obscured and excluded by this ‘neutral’ knowledge of liberal political economy were the many different forms of common life constituted through alternative social and material relations. These were not measurable in terms of bio-economic criteria. These reproductive practices and knowledges were grounded in everyday life; they were not understood in the terms of individual profit, exchange value or ownership. Most importantly, these forms of common life were not subject to the general condition of scarcity. While scarcity may have been a dimension of social experience it was not a universal condition; it was not the iron law of economics under which people were forever condemned to labor.<sup>8</sup> “The commons”, Peter Linebaugh writes, “is not a natural resource exclusive of human relations with it. *Like language itself, the commons increases in wealth by use*”<sup>9</sup> (my emphasis). The rest of this paper draws on a different ghost from the 18th century, the poet John Clare (1793-1864), whose poetry offers a vision of this relational form of common life, one which is not scarce or finite but manifold and abundant. When he ‘roamed’ the unenclosed fields around his home town of Helpston, Northamptonshire, in the middle of England, he did not encounter a discrete array of natural entities or resources. This wasn’t because he was ‘pre-modern’ but because he was attentive to the variable and unpredictable relations that unfolded through his encounters with the world around him. For Clare, there was no single ‘nature,’ rather there were ongoing relations that constituted many different natures or, what I call, the ‘manifold commons.’

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<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the College de France, 1977- 1978* (USA: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 41.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Hildyard *et al.*, “Reclaiming the Commons. The Corner House,” 1995, URL : <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/resource/reclaiming-commons>

<sup>8</sup> Arturo Escobar, “Steps towards an Antiessentialist Political Ecology,” *Current Anthropology* 40, no. 1 (1999): 1-30.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Linebaugh, “Enclosure from the bottom up,” *Radical History Review* 108 (2011): 11-27.

## Experience

In his autobiography Clare describes a summer morning when as a child he went to gather rotten sticks from the wood. Soon he ‘had a feeling to wander about the fields.’ He walked towards the horizon, across Emmonsales Heath. “So I eagerly wandered on and rambled along the furze the whole day till I got *out of my knowledge* when the very wild flowers seemed to forget me and I imagined they were the inhabitants of a new country and the very sun seemed to be a new one and shining in a different quarter of the sky” (my emphasis). Clare returned at dusk after finding the right path back to his village but, he records, “when I got into my own fields I did not know them— everything seemed so different.”<sup>10</sup>

John Barrell refers to this account, and the phrase ‘out of my knowledge,’ in order to illustrate and make sense of John Clare’s unique relationship with the locality in which lived, Helpston. He goes on to quote two further passages in Clare’s *Autobiography* which echo this idea of moving beyond one’s knowledge. “As long as he was in Helpston,” Barrell writes, “the knowledge he had was valid, was knowledge ... But once out of the parish his knowledge ceased to be knowledge.”<sup>11</sup> This geographic demarcation of familiarity and unfamiliarity is clear. However, the significance of this boundary for Clare and his poetry is not so clear. Barrell argues that Clare’s knowledge and identity is inextricably bound up with the particular geography and history of Helpston. When enclosure arrived and re-organized the landscape, it destroyed part of Clare’s knowledge and disturbed his identity. Clare’s poetry is seen, at least in part, as a consequence of this trauma; his poems were concerned with expressing and defending his and Helpston’s threatened identity.<sup>12</sup>

In his essay on John Clare, Timothy Morton reverses this interpretation. He argues that the poem ‘I am’ (“I am—yet what I am none cares or knows”), written near the end of Clare’s life, be taken as the starting point from which to read back and understand Clare’s experience and poetry. In this reading the particular strain of doubt and uncertainty (the absence of identity) revealed in ‘I am’ works as a kind of corrosive, breaking through the sentimental aura and ‘authenticity’ that is seen to mark his early life. His existential doubt, Morton observes, was not the product of subsequent alienation. It was there from the beginning. Clare was never ‘at one’ with the world. He was never enmeshed with his ‘locality’ because no such ‘locality’ ever existed, any more than a state of unity or a condition of harmony ever existed. What Clare’s poems give us, Morton argues, is the very opposite of what many understand them to give—the stable expression of a particular (‘authentic’) relationship to place. Morton helps us to see in Clare’s poems the “drastic, queer quality of what has normatively and neuteringly been called the love of nature.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Bate, *John Clare. A Biography* (Great Britain: Picador, 2003), 41-2.

<sup>11</sup> John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840. An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 121-2.

<sup>12</sup> Clare’s three favourite haunts—Oxey Wood, Langley Bush and Lee Close Oak—were all cut down or enclosed by the time he was a young adult. An early poem, “Helpstone,” echoes Goldsmith’s famous “The Deserted Village” (1770). “Ye perishd spots adieu ye ruin’d scenes/ Ye well-known pastures oft frequented greens/ Though now no more—fond memory’s pleasing pains/ Within her breast your every scene retains.” J. Clare, *Major Works* (2004), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Timothy Morton, “Ecologocentrism: Unworking Animals,” *SubStance* Issue 117, 37, no. 3 (2008a): 73-96.

In Morton's interpretation, 'getting out of my knowledge' still involves departing the security of a known world, the landscape around Helpston, but it also means encountering things for the first time, or in a different light. There is awe and wonder when Clare encounters wild flowers as though they were 'inhabitants of a new country.' This sense of unfamiliarity returns when he comes back to the world he is supposed to know and yet no longer does. The journey took him beyond himself but equally revealed to him the transience or mutability of the material world. Through roaming, new life and new things emerged.

The freshened landscapes round his routes unfurled,  
The fine-tinged clouds above, the woods below,  
Each met his eye a *new-revealing world*,  
Delighting more as more he learned to know,  
Each journey sweeter, musing to and fro.<sup>14</sup>

Here, in "The Village Minstrel," Clare depicts a character, Lubin, who escapes the 'community' he is supposed to be 'at one' with by wandering without any particular motive. He returns again and again to this 'new-revealing world' not because he knows it ('his' locality) but because he doesn't or can't ever know it: it always exceeds his knowledge. The historian Peter Linebaugh describes this as an "unenclosed epistemology."<sup>15</sup> I take this to mean a knowledge that is not yet finished, or, more accurately, one that is unfinishable.<sup>16</sup> It is unfinishable because his knowledge is not knowledge of a single, external world made up of discrete entities (animals, trees, rivers, forests). The world he encounters is real and tangible but it is not finite or static, rather it is one which he encounters and comes to know *differently* each time he explores it.

Clare does not obscure or seek to resolve the tension between his deliberate acting, his intentional agency, and the sudden and unpredictable agencies of the material world. He goes hunting for birds, "creeping on hands and knees through matted thorn," but knows how elusive they are, and how indifferent to his projects. Most of his contact with birds was through their song. While he became expert in distinguishing the different refrains, they were fleeting and hard to trace. In one poem he describes how boys in pursuit of the nest of the Landrail are left bemused as the song they follow appears to come both from under the ground and high up in

<sup>14</sup> John Clare, "The Village Minstrel," in *Selected Poems*, ed. J. Bate (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 35.

<sup>15</sup> Linebaugh, "Enclosure from the bottom up."

<sup>16</sup> Clare's education was always driven by a desire to exceed the limits of what he already knew. While he attended school sporadically—when his parents could afford the fees and his labour could be spared—most of his learning was informal. He taught himself to read at home by borrowing a book of essays and a farming manual from his neighbor. He used them to learn how to spell and made a guess at words he didn't know the meanings of. He describes how at the age of 16 he "felt an itching after every thing," obtaining textbooks on mensuration and practical geometry, arithmetic and algebra. One of his biographers, Jonathan Bate, writes that this "compulsion to pursue knowledge was damaging to his health" (Bate, *John Clare*, 27). What connects this adventure in education and his favorite pursuit of 'roaming' is the open-endedness of the activity: not done for any reason other than to open up new associations and meanings.

the sky: the bird, he writes, is “like a fancy everywhere/ A sort of living doubt.”<sup>17</sup> In “The Skylark” he identifies another mistaken assumption, describing a group of boys who imagine, without looking, that the sky lark must nest high up in the trees because that is where *they* would nest: high up away from predators and danger. In fact, as Clare observes, the sky lark goes against all such ‘reason’ and nests at their feet even as their eyes are turned expectantly to the sky.

Had they the wing  
Like such a bird, themselves would be too proud,  
And build on nothing but a passing cloud!  
As free from danger as the heavens are free  
From pain and toil, there would they build and be,  
And sail about the world to scenes unheard  
Of and unseen—Oh, were they but a bird!  
So think they, while they listen to its song,  
And smile and fancy and so pass along;  
While its low nest, moist with the dews of morn,  
Lies safely, with the leveret, in the corn.<sup>18</sup>

Clare’s contrast here between the flighty imaginations of the boys, who would imagine building ‘on nothing but a cloud’, and the earthy actuality of the sky-lark’s habits, firmly grounded in the corn, ‘moist with the dews of morn,’ illustrates the ways in which his poetic sensibility did not reproduce idealized representations of ‘nature.’ Just as the boys project their mistaken illusions onto a world which doesn’t heed them, poets too—and all those who attempt to speak for the natural world—fail to see more clearly, and concretely, the many ways in which actual goings-on betray such idealism and representation.

Clare’s descriptions “swoop upon the momentary,” as Seamus Heaney describes it.<sup>19</sup> The animals, flowers, streams, clouds, and countless other entities which stray across his path are not always present to him in the same way. They cannot be conjured up or known whenever he, the poet, wants to. Just as the birdsong fills the heath so does it retreat, ebbing and flowing, appearing and disappearing. The world Clare describes is ephemeral. He was too experienced in the trickery of light and movement, the way the contours of the hills disappeared in dusk or the way the coincidence of animal, tree and sky was never the same twice, to describe an atemporal natural world that never changed. Clare’s ‘everyday nature’ poems are resolutely committed to the single-presentness of things.<sup>20</sup> They resist metaphor, leaving no margin for expansion beyond the particular act of hearing or seeing things in the

<sup>17</sup> Clare, “The Landrail,” in *Major Works*, 233. Lines 13-14.

<sup>18</sup> Clare, “The Sky Lark,” in *Major Works*, 215. Lines 20-30.

<sup>19</sup> Seamus Heaney, “John Clare’s Prog,” in *The Redress of Poetry, Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 63-82.

<sup>20</sup> Tom Paulin, “Strinkling Dropples John Clare” in *Writing to the Moment, Selected Critical Essays, 1980-1996* (UK: Faber and Faber, 1998), 161-171. In a similar way, the poet Gerard Manley-Hopkins used the term ‘inscape’ to refer to the absolute singularity of things in themselves, their ‘this-ness’.

moment, the singularity of each concurrence. "Clare's depiction of nature is firmly delineated within a presentness that is its own, total world."<sup>21</sup>

This attentiveness to things in their singular presence, to the ways in which they perform and radiate and intervene in ways we might ignore, is not the same as a commitment to 'locality.' 'Locality' has been used to refer to Clare's undeniably close connection and affection for Helpston and the surrounding area.<sup>22</sup> But this understanding does not go far enough. In describing the immediacy of his experience, Clare expressed something far more concrete and particular than Helpston. Experience is not understood here as an internalized, reflexive state of being, but as a relational, material process through which self and world unfold together. Clare's poems are matter-of-fact, as though written in the very moment of this encounter.

How curious is the nest; no other bird  
Uses such loose materials, or weaves  
Its dwelling in such spots: dead oaken leaves  
Are placed without, and velvet moss within,  
And little scraps of grass, and, scant and spare,  
What scarcely seem materials, down and hair;  
For from men's haunts she nothing seems to win.<sup>23</sup>

Clare's poetry is full of such detail: it is as though he is taking you with him on his forays through the forests and up the trees, feeling and smelling all the textured materiality of the things he discovers. Clare was particularly attentive to the architecture and materiality of birds' nests, perhaps because of their curious combination of human, animal and organic matter. These nests were the embodiment of a certain inventive mattering. The birds did not care what or where their building materials came from. They were concerned with constructing a nest; they made do with what was available, even if that meant using less of what 'seem scarce materials.'

Coupled with this material observation is the recognition that the world is far more *banal* than we would like it to be. 'Banel' is an old French word that was used to designate all things relating to the tenants of a feudal jurisdiction.<sup>24</sup> From this came the generalized notion of 'open to everyone' or commonplace. Clare's love of the smallest and most trivial details contains something of this double meaning of 'banal.' In its resolute 'here-and-nowness' it describes nothing more than the most commonplace moments, moments with no higher meaning. At the same time the very ordinariness of these moments allows them to resonate with others, to provoke, as his friend Thomas Porter called them, 'universal feelings.' Porter was not an expert in verse or particularly well-read. He recognized something else in Clare's poems, something which went beyond a particular aesthetic sensibility or representation of the natural world or locality. He recognized the commonplace experiences which Clare evoked.

<sup>21</sup> Tim Chilcott, *'A Real World & Doubting Mind': A Critical Study of the Poetry of John Clare* (Hull: Hull University Press, 1985), 18.

<sup>22</sup> See Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape*.

<sup>23</sup> Clare, "The Nightingales Nest," in *Major Works*, 213-14. Lines 76-82.

<sup>24</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).



This was not a finished or neat world of nature but a seemingly infinite series of pictures—of birds, trees, dawns, sunsets—which captured particular moments as they materialized. Far from being neutralizing or depressing, the notion of banality as expressed in Clare's poetry opens up common ground, "a sort of gate into another dimension, a dimension that turns out to be none other than the nowness that is far more radically 'here' than any concept of 'here,' such as nation, race, gender."<sup>25</sup> There is a deep equality to this as human and non-human are all counted as singular entities beyond any particular configuration of roles or functions.<sup>26</sup> It affirms instead the 'democratic fullness of objects.'<sup>27</sup>

How beautiful e'en seems  
 This simple twig that steals it from the hedge  
 And wavering dips down to taste the stream.  
 I cannot think it how the reason is  
 That every trifle nature's bosom wears  
 Should seem so lovely and appear so sweet  
 And charm so much my soul while heedless passenger  
 Soodles me by, an animated post,  
 And ne'er so much as turns his head to look  
 But stalks along as though his eyes were blinded  
 And as if the witching face of nature  
 Held but now a dark unmeaning blank.<sup>28</sup>

A 'simple twig' appears to have more agency than a 'heedless passenger.' The former 'steals' from a hedge and 'dipples' down to taste the stream, as though reaching out to the concrete elements which, in that very moment, exist around it. The passenger, in contrast, is described as little more than an 'animated post.' He appears to move and act in a world which is already closed, a world which is already structured around certain relations and meanings. From this 'enclosed' perspective, the world is nothing but a 'dark unmeaning blank.' We can dismiss Clare's sentiment as 'romantic,' or naive, or we can recognize that we are all capable of

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<sup>25</sup> Timothy Morton, "Ecogocentrism : Unworking Animals," 52. This echoes lines from Patrick Kavanagh's poem, "Innocence," in which he rejects the idea that because he wrote of what he knew, a geographically and culturally limited world, his poems could only extend that far: "They said/ That I was bounded by the whitethorn hedges/ Of the little farm and did not know the world./ But I knew that love's doorway to life/ Is the same doorway everywhere" (P. Kavanagh, *Selected Poems* (UK: Penguin 1996), 101. (My emphasis).

<sup>26</sup> The relationship between aesthetics and politics has been argued by the philosopher Jacques Ranciere: "What really deserves the name of politics is the cluster of perceptions and practices that shape this common world. Politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience. It is a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear; which allows or does not allow some specific subjects to designate them and speak about them. It is a specific intertwining of ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking." Jacques Ranciere, "The Politics of Literature," *SubStance* Issue 103, 33, no. 1 (2004): 10-24.

<sup>27</sup> Chilcott, 'A Real World and a Doubting Mind.'

<sup>28</sup> Clare, "A Ramble, in *Selected Poems*, 7-8.

experiencing the sudden force of something as incidental as a twig, a world in which artifacts, things, branches, open up before us, luring us into thoughts and actions.<sup>29</sup>

Clare wrote, with no hint of exaggeration, that he “found the poems in the fields ...”<sup>30</sup> This simple truth is not poetic sentiment but a clear observation that his experiences did not spring from his mind alone, but were constituted with and through the force of the world acting upon him. He found infinite inspiration by paying continuous attention to this force, the way self and world were revealed, or achieved, through ongoing relations.<sup>31</sup> Rather than having to decide between the modern dualism of subject and object, or an imagined pre-modern world of unity, this foregrounding of experience as something which is never fully ‘bifurcated,’ nor fully ‘unified,’ pushes us to acknowledge the ongoing, messy and relational character of all existence.<sup>32</sup>

### Excess

In 1827, John Clare wrote one of his most well-known pieces of work, *The Shepherd's Calendar*. This long poem traces the course of a year through a close observation of the changing weather, characters, moods, labor and places where these take place, by hearth or in the open fields. He depicts the different productive activities that take place: threshing, mowing, woodcutting, milking and harvesting. But the *Shepherd's Calendar* was more than a description of the ‘practical realities’ of rural life. It offers a good example of the way in which this popular Georgic form was adopted by Clare and yet modified by a radical content. As well as the cyclical, harmonious passage of the year, the regular labors and pastimes which are synchronized with nature's rhythm, there is an excess of imagery which Clare has recorded not from his head, compiling images that neatly reproduce the aesthetics of the time, but from his forays into the forests and heaths.

Clare had been writing poems for publication in the *London Magazine*. These poems were fragments, scenes and events he had noticed and observed. His editor suggested that they

<sup>29</sup> See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010). Patrick Kavanagh expresses the same transformative potential of ‘love’ as a different mode of attention in his poem “The Hospital”: “But nothing whatever is by love debarred,/ The common and banal her heat can know.”

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Bate, *John Clare*, 15.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape*, 181. In his paper, “Exchanging Perspectives,” Eduardo Viveiros de Castro tells us how for Amazonian peoples “the original common condition of both humans and animals is not animality but, rather, humanity.” Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4, no. 3 (1998): 469-488. The consequence of this understanding is that humans and non-humans alike possess an internal spirit or soul, which translates as intentionality or subjectivity. A consequence of this is that relations between humans and non-humans take on the quality of ‘social relations’. In other words, non-humans are not a unanimous collection of ‘dumb’ objects, but rather they have differentiated and changeable roles to play within different contexts, ones which are not entirely mediated or controlled by human actors. This understanding of agency as relational does not allow for any easy or neat ‘inclusion’ of non-humans into a final ‘common life’.

<sup>32</sup> See Isabelle Stengers, “Experimenting with Refrains: Subjectivity and the Challenge of Escaping Modern Dualism,” *Subjectivity* 22 (2008): 38-59.

could be put into a volume which would be ordered around the calendrical months, as each poem pertained to a certain time of year. Clare's manuscript took five years to move from conception to publication. It was not just that it was rough and barely legible but that it contained far more material than it needed. The publishers wanted a world that was 'realistic,' meaning one that was complete, 'harmonious' and 'pleasing.' The basis of the cyclical year, the regular to and fro of socio-ecological exchange, is the perfect foil for this. But Clare was not just representing an 'economy of the common,' the embedded-ness of man and nature in productive labor. He described what he saw, including the "common wild and heath—the desolate face/ Of rude waste landscape far away from men."<sup>33</sup>

Jonathan Bate writes that the problem with Clare, from the point of view of a publisher, was that he noticed too much. He was an expert at the 'art of noticing.'<sup>34</sup> In the month of March, a particularly contested section of *The Shepherd's Calendar*, Clare notices the first half-open cowslip of spring, the mud knocked from a herd boy's boot and couch grass tangled in a plough. The publishers wanted him to cut out this excessive detail, which was seen as coming at the expense of 'genuine sentiment.'<sup>35</sup> In a letter written in 1826, as *The Shepherd's Calendar* was going to press, John Taylor, Clare's publisher, wrote: "I have often remarked that your Poetry is much the best when you are not describing common things, and if you would raise your Views more generally, & speak of the Appearances of Nature each Month more philosophically (if I may say so) or with more Excitement, you would greatly improve these little poems."<sup>36</sup> Nor was this opinion restricted to Clare's publisher: Barrell suggests that the "pressure on Clare to think and feel properly about nature was very considerable."<sup>37</sup>

In the end Clare was forced to cut out some of the description from *The Shepherd's Calendar*. But he also defended certain sections. He wrote to Taylor: "I think the one for March is better as there are images in it not noticed before by me or anyone else as I am acquainted with."<sup>38</sup> In this section, 'March', he describes a shepherd boy out with his flock,

The hailstorm sweeps—and while he stops to strip  
The stooping hedge-briar of its lingering hip,  
He hears the wild geese gabble o'er his head,  
Then, pleased with fancies in his musings bred  
He marks the figured forms in which they fly  
And pausing, follows with a wondering eye,  
Likening their curious march in curves or rows  
To every letter which his memory knows,  
While, far above, the solitary crane  
Swings lonely to unfrozen dykes again,

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<sup>33</sup> Clare, "Sand Martin," in *Major Works*, 208. Lines 2-3.

<sup>34</sup> Clare began, but never finished, a project which he entitled "Biographies of Birds and Flowers," intended as a compendium of all the notes and observations he had taken down in his notebooks over the years. These notes remain in manuscript. They are fragments, mini-essays, letters, ranging from a classification of snail shells to signs of the weather to the life of ants.

<sup>35</sup> Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape*.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Bate, *John Clare*, 300.

Cranking a jarring melancholy cry  
Through the wild journey of the cheerless sky.<sup>39</sup>

As a hailstorm sweeps across the land, the boy's eyes rise and follow the flight of the geese and make a connection between the shapes they cut in the sky and the letters he has partly learnt in school. At the same time as this strange connection between the incomplete knowledge of the boy and the occasion of birds flying through the air there is, higher in the sky, the indifferent flight of the crane with its 'jarring melancholy cry.' In this short passage, Clare evokes a startling scene-in-motion that combines several separate elements that seem to have no connection other than the fact that they occur simultaneously. Clare does not seek to censor these moments. The effect, like the 'jarring' cry of the solitary crane, is that the scene seems incomplete and unsatisfactory. Without alluding to any higher meaning it is no surprise that critics rounded on the descriptive excess of Clare's poetry.

In response to criticism from Keats that his poems employed description at the expense of sentiment, Clare wrote that he, Keats, "often described nature as she appeared to his fancies & not as he would have described her had he witnessed the things he describes."<sup>40</sup> The dissonance in Clare's poems was not naive or 'unformed'—it was deliberate in so far as he sought to express as well as he could the ways in which things are seen or heard or felt: hailstorm, geese, half-learnt letters, cheerless sky. Each of these events is as important, as worthwhile, as the other. Clare's writing was excessive to the prevailing economy of language and imagery because he did not discriminate between things in their concrete singularity. His imagery is not ordered by any particular aesthetic in which certain images are counted above others according to their relative qualities ('natural,' 'beautiful'). Clare counts everything he sees: everything that falls within his vision is granted access to his poems. The only quality that counts is being present. This translates into a form of counting that is never fixed, that can never end and that relies on constant attention to what is going on. As Chilcott argues, "[w]hatever unity he perceives is the product of the infinite diversity of natural elements, rather than of their fixed position within an analogical structure of understanding."<sup>41</sup> It is possible to see now how this contingency, which relates to nothing more than the presence of different bodies in the same place, differs from any prior aesthetic or ecological order which would identify and call out a prior order of elements and their relations.<sup>42</sup> For Clare, in his 'everyday nature' poems, there is a reluctance, even inability, to omit what appears in the immediate range of experience.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Clare, "March," in *Selected Poems*, 74-5.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape*, 146.

<sup>41</sup> Chilcott, 'A Real World & Doubting Mind,' 57.

<sup>42</sup> In "The Wren" he directs the first lines to those poets who dwell on certain birds and not others, a romantic preoccupation which can only be explained through a certain laziness of thought or hierarchy of metaphor.

<sup>43</sup> This 'anarchic' description is most evident in Clare's rambling journal notes: "March 25th The woods covered with anemonies or ladysmocks ... a little nameless bird with a black head and olive green back and wings—not known—seems to feed on the Ivy berry—comes when they are ripe and disappears when they are gone—said to have a sweet song—the blue anemonie or anemonie pulsitilla

The landscapes stretching view that opens wide  
 With dribbling brooks and rivers wider floods  
 And hills and vales and darksome lowering woods  
 With grains of varied hues and grasses pied  
 The low brown cottage in the shelter'd nook  
 The steeple peeping just above the trees  
 Whose dangling leaves kept rustling in the breeze  
 —And thoughtful shepherd bending oer his hook  
 And maidens stript haymaking too apear  
 And hodge a wistling at his fallow plough  
 And herdsman hallooing to intruding cow  
 All these with hundreds more far off and near  
 Approach my sight—and please to such excess  
 That language fails the pleasure to express.<sup>44</sup>

Clare's poems seem to burst with an intensity of description as he tries to note not only all the various elements but how, even in the short span of observing, they have changed. In a beautiful description of this sensation, Barrell writes: "no sooner does one object enter the poem than it is pushed aside by the next; so that we have the sense always that outside the poem are hundreds of images hammering to be admitted."<sup>45</sup> This exuberance arises from the fact that Clare does not seem to describe a scene in terms of chronology, one thing *after* another, but rather as things converge and overlap at the same time, synchronically. Thus the prominence of 'and' in his poems as he seems to grab at all that is available.

Clare described his own poetry as a "language that is ever green."<sup>46</sup> A 'language that is ever green' does not refer to an external 'natural' world that is static and finite, already contained within an existing set of relations, but to the many ways in which the world is encountered anew, growing, unfolding, through the excess of social and material relations. This excess is not due to the boundlessness of his imagination but to the 'really real' things carried in the unfolding of material experience. This might help us to understand how he wrote so much. Poems entitled "A Scene," "Evening," "Autumn," "Sunlight," all return to the same phenomenon configured differently. While leaves fall in autumn, and the sun sets at night, there is more to the individuated experience of these times than generalizable clichés. Clare's poetry is 'ever green' because there is always more that meets the eye than what is imagined.

If nature is understood to be a world 'out there,' external to the 'inner' creative force of imagination and thought, then we can say that there is no 'nature' for Clare. The world which Clare gives poetic voice to is not silent or 'dumb.' It speaks for itself, but not in the words or language of a human subject, the crude anthropomorphic 'animism' we can find in Disney films. It speaks, or at least communicates, through its active, material concreteness. In this way the material world does not impose itself on Clare, anymore than Clare imposes his own

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haunts the roman road—the bumbarrel featherpoke or longtailed titmouse its nest—the craunking noise of the woodpecker boring new holes a token of spring." (Bate, *John Clare*, 279).

<sup>44</sup> Clare, "A Scene," in *Major Works*, 11.

<sup>45</sup> Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape*, 151.

<sup>46</sup> Ronald Paul, "'A Language that is ever green' the Poetry and Ecology of John Clare," *Moderna Språk* 2 (2011): 23–35.

thought on the world. Together a world unfolds. Heaney describes this aspect of Clare's poetry as the "unspectacular joy and totally alert love for the one-thing-after-anotherness of the world."<sup>47</sup> It is in the process of encountering the immediate, excessive materiality of the world, of converging on mud, grass, wind, sun, bird, that Clare produces his poetic vision, a vision which did not, by definition, conform with the ideals and aesthetic norms of 18th century poetry. Barrell calls it an "aesthetic of disorder," one "in which landscape was praised on account of its formlessness, its failure to accommodate itself to correct tastes."<sup>48</sup>

### Manifold Commons

Clare's unqualified regard for the world he evokes in his poetry has been described by the literary critic Tim Chilcott as a-social, a-moral and a-spiritual.<sup>49</sup> Because there is no ordering of experience as it unfolds, no ordering of the material details, it appears anarchic. In one sense it is anarchic: without 'arche' is to be without starting point, without any initial affirmation of any value or principle which can be used to organize bodies and relations. While his poems express an unqualified love for the world in all its earthly, material strangeness, what does this mean when the enclosing walls are built and the forests eviscerated?

In 1776, Arthur Young, one of the early political economists and 'improvers,' travelled around Ireland. He gave an account of his travels in a text entitled "Tour around Ireland." Young was preoccupied with 'improvements': the majority of his travelogue is spent describing either the poor conditions of the land and the way it is being (mis)used, or applauding the changes which have already been implemented by certain progressive land owners. He lists exhaustively the lack of draining projects, transport infrastructure, land management and new agricultural techniques. He laments the impoverished condition of the majority of the rural population and ties their fate to the economic benefits (and incentives) which will arise from the 'improvements' he outlines. Near Callan, in Kilkenny, Young stayed with the Lord Chief Baron Forster.

He has made the greatest improvements I have anywhere met with. The whole country twenty-two years ago was a waste sheep-walk, covered chiefly with heath, with some dwarf furze and fern. The cabins and people as miserable as can be conceived; not a Protestant in the country, nor a road passable for a carriage. In a word, perfectly resembling other mountainous tracts, and the whole yielding a rent of not more than from three shillings to four shillings an acre.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Heaney, "John Clare's Prog," 70.

<sup>48</sup> Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape*, 152.

<sup>49</sup> Chilcott, 'A Real World & Doubting Mind'.

<sup>50</sup> Arthur Young, *A Tour In Ireland, 1776-79* (London: Cassell & Company, 1897), 45. In 1828, 50 years after Arthur Young had applauded the 'improvements' implemented by the Lord Chief Baron Forster on his land near Callan, County Kilkenny, the poet Amlaoibh Ó Suilleabháin got lost trying to find a short cut near Callan. In his diary he recalls passing a miserable looking cabin. A poor woman came out to help him find a short cut. She was weeping and as they passed along she pointed out to him the fields where she used to plant her potatoes and the land on which her cow, goat and horse used to graze. She goes on to list all the things which have been taken away from her by the rent collector: "I won't hear the crane calling in the marsh, nor the scream of the wild goose, or the marsh-plover

The various and inter-connected ways in which ‘improvements’ took shape, and the visible and dramatic ways in which they were inscribed into the landscape are illustrated in this short excerpt. Through the eyes of Young, who would, in 1794, be instrumental in establishing the Board of Agriculture in Britain, the land is valued in terms of the rent that can be extracted from it. This rent relies on the transformation of waste ground, or heath, into productive agricultural land, which itself relies on roads and infrastructure capable of transporting produce to new markets. This new circulation connecting the land, people and emerging global markets is not just a new mode of economic production, it is also an aesthetic. When Arthur Young regards a scene that he considers unproductive it is described in his writing as ‘incomplete;’ when he regards a scene he considers productive it is ‘pleasing to the eye.’ If Young expresses a vision of enclosure, then Clare gives us a vision of the ‘unenclosed.’<sup>51</sup>

Unbounded freedom ruled the wandering scene  
 Nor fence of ownership crept in between  
 To hide the prospect of the following eye  
 Its only bondage was the circling sky  
 One mighty flat undwarfed by bush and tree  
 Spread its faint shadow of immensity  
 And lost itself, which seemed to eke its bounds  
 In the blue mist the horizon’s edge surrounds.<sup>52</sup>

In this section from “The Mores,” Clare describes his gaze as it moves out across an ‘unbounded’ landscape. This freedom of movement was not just optic, it was haptic or embodied—this was the land he roamed through. ‘Roaming,’ as I have suggested, was closely connected to the ways in which Clare experienced ‘new revealing worlds.’ In this way, the ‘unenclosed’ landscape does not just denote an absence of fences, it recalls the idea of ‘leaving one’s knowledge,’ of encountering things differently. For Clare, enclosure is the process which stopped or blocked this freedom. Clare contrasts the ‘immensity’ of the ‘unenclosed’ landscape above with its shrinking through enclosure: “Fence now meets fence in owners’ little bounds,/ Of field and meadow, large as garden grounds,/ In little parcels, little minds to please/ With men and flocks imprisoned, ill at ease.”<sup>53</sup> Throughout his ‘anti-enclosure’ poems Clare reiterates this theme: enclosure shrinks the landscape and in the process strips the world of its multiplicity: “The thorns are gone, the woodlark’s song is hush,/ Spring more resembles winter

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pipin or the moor-plover whistling or the bleat of the jacksnipe. I won’t see the cormorant and I won’t hear the moorhen bubbling. And I’ll never drain the pool again for eel or pike ... The sweet mint with the white tips won’t grow again for me in the meadow by the pool, nor the white or red clover in the dry meadow. I’ll plant no more flax seed, not lift the flax nor steep it in the pool.” Thomas Kinsella and Sean Ó Tuama, *An Duanaire 1600-1900: The Poems of The Dispossessed* (Portlaoise, Ireland: The Dolmen Press, 1985), 257.

<sup>51</sup> Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape*.

<sup>52</sup> Clare, “The Mores,” in *Major Works*, 167. Lines 7-14.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 168. Lines 47-50.

now than spring."<sup>54</sup> This literal and metaphoric 'shrinking' is central to Clare's resistance to enclosure and his defense of the manifold commons.

In "The Lament of Swordy Well," Clare narrates the experience of enclosure from the point of view of a field, the 'Swordy Well.' He does not sentimentalize the scene or portray the recently enclosed field as a victim; "the language is direct and colloquial."<sup>55</sup> He describes in detail the way things used to be, the many ways in which the field was once used by different creatures and people.

The bees flye round in feeble rings  
And find no blossom bye  
Then thrum their almost weary wings  
Upon the moss and die  
Rabbits that find my hills turned oer  
Forsake my poor abode  
They dread a workhouse like the poor  
And nibble on the road ...

There was a time my bit of ground  
Made freemen of the slave  
The ass no pinard dare to pound  
When I his supper gave  
The gipseys camp was not afraid  
I made his dwelling free  
Till vile enclosure came and made  
A parish slave of me.<sup>56</sup>

John Barrell argues that this poem evokes the particular sense of local identity that is unique to Clare's poems. The Swordy Well, the narrator of the poem, is heard to regret being enclosed because of the loss of identity it will feel. This identity relies "on being left as it is."<sup>57</sup> But what is this prior identity or being? Clare does not describe a single field in the poem. Rather, he portrays the ongoing and changeable relations which exist between the field and a range of different communities. The bees are interested in the blossom which grows in the field; the rabbits use the soil beneath the grass; the slaves use it perhaps to graze an animal; the ass grazes on the grass; and the gypsies camp there periodically. Clare allows us to see, from the ground, how this field was never just a field, but always a field—and ... a field-and-bees; field-and-rabbits; field-and-freeman; field-and-ass; field-and-gypsies. The field is not discriminating; it is able to provide for many uses and needs. These needs are not just material: the gypsies are provided with a space to camp, allowing them a form of sociality free from the limits and pressures of fixed accommodation. By seeing and expressing what is otherwise invisible or

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<sup>54</sup> Clare, "The Village Minstrel," in *Selected Works*, 36.

<sup>55</sup> Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape*, 116.

<sup>56</sup> Clare, "The Lament of Swordy Well," in *Major Works*, 149-152. Lines 81-88 and 177-184.

<sup>57</sup> Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape*, 118.



silent, Clare articulates “the suppressed praxis of the commons in its manifold particularities.”<sup>58</sup> Agents of enclosure and ‘improvement,’ such as Arthur Young, do not hear or see these manifold particularities and thus a whole host of human and non-human subjects are no longer allowed to relate to the field; the field shrinks as it becomes part of only one circulation of meaning and value.

Importantly, this vivid sense of ongoing and variable relations challenges the interpretation that Clare is just defending the particular identity of this field. The poem does not so much lament the loss of identity, it attacks the exclusive right of ownership which closes off the field from its manifold relations. The field, we learn from the poem, has been turned into a site for mending-stone, a material needed for the building of roads in the parish. The field thus becomes a valuable resource within the emerging market economy. Clare does not simply object to this by appealing to the ‘intrinsic’ value or meaning of the field or some other essentialist argument.<sup>59</sup> Clare recognizes that the field is always part of changing social and ecological relations.<sup>60</sup> Grounded in everyday, variable relations, the commons is thus not commensurate with a single identity or value. The commons in this sense is best understood as a verb, a movement, rather than a ‘thing’: commons are produced through *commoning*—the ongoing, productive relations of people, animals and things.<sup>61</sup> The field in Clare’s poem corresponds to what Gibson-Graham refer to as the queer use of space, “as something that cannot be definitively dedicated to particular activities or exhaustively structured by a single form or ‘identity’, ... [t]his space is open, full of overlaps and inconsistencies, a place of aleatory relations and redefinitions, never fully colonized by the pretensions of a singular identity.”<sup>62</sup> By claiming it as a resource for ‘improvement,’ only one set of relations is accounted for, ignoring and excluding the many existing and potentially life-enhancing relations there could be.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Peter Linebaugh, *Ned Ludd & Queen Mab. Machine-Breaking, Romanticism, and the Several Commons of 1811-12* (Oakland, California: Retort Pamphlet Series, PM Press, 2012).

<sup>59</sup> Adrian Wilding writes that the relationship between poetry and nature has always been problematic: “While one must acknowledge the force of such images and recognize there is a critical role to be played by a poetic evocation of nature—that as Novalis put it, “poetry has been the instrument of choice for all true friends of nature” —the idea of a redeemed nature (Benjamin), or Bloch’s and Marcuse’s idea of nature as a ‘possible subject’, remains problematic. This is not least because both ideas re-enchant nature; they render nature mythic again, which is the simple antithesis of Enlightenment.” Adrian Wilding, “Ideas for a Critical Theory of Nature,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 19 (2008): 48-67.

<sup>60</sup> Peter Linebaugh writes, “[t]o speak of the commons as if it were a natural resource is misleading at best and dangerous at worst—the commons is an activity and, if anything, it expresses relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature.” Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto* (California: University of California Press, 2008), 279.

<sup>61</sup> See Dimitris Papadopolous, “Worlding Justice/Commoning Matter,” *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities* 3 (2012): 1-25.

<sup>62</sup> J. J. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1996), 87.

<sup>63</sup> Interestingly, Foucault describes how the rise of biopolitics in the 18th century precipitated new forms of opposition which demanded recognition and rights in the name of the body and of life. “Against this power”, he writes, “the forces that resisted relied for support on the very thing it invested in, that is, on life and man as a living being ... [W]hat was demanded and what served as an objective was life,

For Clare the 'topsy turvy' justice of enclosure was antithetical to a material justice grounded in the living, manifold commons, an ongoing responsiveness and awareness of the many different forms of life which inhabit, even momentarily, a space such as a field.<sup>64</sup> In other words he spoke against the limited and contingent claim which arrogated an impossible authority to itself: to speak for the various, changing and living relations of human and non-human.<sup>65</sup> Morton writes: "[w]e are compelled to rely on a list that gestures towards infinity."<sup>66</sup> He is referring to the need to get rid of any claim to 'nature' (or any other identity) which would attempt to qualify and thus limit what was or could be included in a collective of human and nonhuman.<sup>67</sup> Clare's poetic vision of the manifold commons evokes in vivid, concrete detail the everyday meaning of such an inexhaustible list. His poetry calls us to attend to the ways in which common life materializes beyond existing categories, expanding our life-needs rather than shrinking them.<sup>68</sup> This emphasis on the experimental and relational character of the commons, as ongoing and variable, helps us to think and feel our way beyond the

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understood as *the basic needs, man's concrete essence, the realization of his potential, a plenitude of the possible.*" Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 144-5. (My emphasis).

<sup>64</sup> The 'topsy-turvy' justice of enclosure described a rationality which was charged with increasing productivity (and staving off scarcity), even as it undermined the conditions for life for so many. Bate writes that the enclosures in Clare's time would have brought new prosperity to some of the larger farmers as production moved from subsistence/local economies to a market economy.

<sup>65</sup> This echoes Nicholas Blomley's analysis of a recent anti-enclosure struggle in Vancouver. While the urban architecture which was going to be commercialized and developed was considered 'abandoned,' it was layered over with years of historical memory and experience, experiences which continued to materialize through the everyday lives of those who lived near the building. The campaign to resist the 'enclosure' of the building enacted these qualities by using and re-inhabiting the space. This was not just an identifiable 'community' fighting for an urban 'resource' but rather a material politics which demonstrated and referred to the manifold relations and values which were constituted over time through the use of the space. Blomley, trying to find some way of expressing this common right or value settles on the 'right to not-be-excluded,' that is a negative right of the commons which cannot adequately represent its concerns and experiences within existing categories (of ownership) but nonetheless can still resist the claim of any individual or collective to exclude others. N. Blomley, "Enclosure, Common Right and the Property of the Poor," *Social & Legal Studies* 17 (2008): 311-331.

<sup>66</sup> Timothy Morton, "John Clare's Dark Ecology," *Studies in Romanticism* 47, no. 2 (2008): 179-193.

<sup>67</sup> See also, Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking environmental aesthetics* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>68</sup> See Nick Dyer-Witherford, "Species-being and the New Commonism: Notes on the interrupted Cycle of Struggles," *The Commoner* 11 (2006): 5-32. Similarly, Paul Rabinow describes this as a "practice of making": "This sensibility takes the mode of a keen awareness that the taken-for-granted can change, that new entities appear, that our practices of making are closely linked to those entities, that we name them, that we group them, that we experiment with them, that we discover different contours when deploying questions and techniques. When this sensibility becomes reflexive, it becomes an aesthetic not of taste nor of beautiful appearance but of the invention of new sensibilities, new concepts, new techniques and ideas of techniques in response to those incommensurabilities that question our practices and that eventualize our relation to them." Paul Rabinow, *Anthropos Today: Reflections on Modern Equipment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 67.

current, urgent claims to preserve a finite planet.<sup>69</sup> For Clare, speaking from the position of the manifold commons, there is no 'planet', any more than there is a 'field,' there are only relations which exist between people and things, and these relations are always variable and contestable.<sup>70</sup>

Clare's poetry has been read as an expression of the deep connection he had with Helpston before the onset of enclosure and 'improvement'.<sup>71</sup> While this is no doubt part of the story, we can miss something when we confine his poetry to a particular time and place. If we read John Clare's poems as the expression of something more profoundly particular than any place or time, we are directed towards a vision of the manifold commons which takes us away from the mutually reinforcing narratives of scarcity, liberal political economy and enclosure. His poetry is not simply attuned to an ideal of 'nature,' or a particular geographic locality. It is more fully concerned with the immediate, everyday *matter*ing of his experience in relation to the world around him.<sup>72</sup> The excessiveness of imagery this gives rise to is not naive or 'unformed' but is derived from the 'really real' ways in which he sees and hears and feels the world around him, one which is always unfolding beyond any particular qualification of what counts and what doesn't.<sup>73</sup> This critical sensibility requires the greatest amount of commitment and attention. It should not be understood and dismissed as a naive claim for infinite openness and freedom, but be seen within the concrete and material contexts in which decisions are made and life is lived.

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<sup>69</sup> Echoing the importance of experiment and construction, rather than more defensive postures, Timothy Morton writes: "[w]e destroy atavism and religious sincerity, in caring for the environment in the name of delight and passion, constantly making room for more writing, more songs and more care for our world." Morton, *Egocentrism*, 55.

<sup>70</sup> This echoes a line from Raymond Williams' essay, "Ideas of Nature", in which he criticizes the belief that Nature and Man might ultimately be able to find harmony or balance: "[this] directs our attention away from real and variable relations, and can be said to ratify the separation by making one of its forms permanent and its purpose fixed." Raymond Williams, "Ideas of Nature," in *Problems of Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 67-85. He is referring to Socialism in this context, but the same principle can be seen to underpin sustainable development and ecological modernization.

<sup>71</sup> E. P. Thompson writes, "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, *Customs in Common*, 180-1. The notion of a 'threatened equilibrium' hints at the common narrative of modern enclosure disrupting a pre-modern commons in which humans and nature lived in closer harmony, a mutual relationship founded in reciprocity and care.

<sup>72</sup> See Niamh Stephenson, "Elaborating Sociability: The Mattering of Unspeakable Excess," *International Journal of Critical Psychology* 12, no. 3 (2004): 162-86.

<sup>73</sup> This can be read alongside Starhawk's understanding of 'immanence' which she locates in radical dissenting groups such as the 17th century Ranters. "Ranters insisted that matter is good, because we live here and now." Starhawk, "Appendix A. The Burning Times: Notes on a Crucial Period of History," in *Dreaming the Dark* (USA: Beacon Press Book, 1982), 209.

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