# *'Lost in a wilderness of listening leaves': On the Woodland in the Writings of John Clare.*

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***Abstract***

This study is the first extensive engagement with the writings of John Clare's writings which are focused on the woodland. It situates the woods in the wider debate over land reform during Clare's lifetime, focusing on the ideology of Improvement and the effects of enclosure. Clare's work is at times placed in conversation with that of other labouring class poets contemporary to him in the belief that these are valuable poetic voices who are most vulnerable to and most involved in these issues surrounding the changing landscape. The thesis moves from the debate over enclosure in the open fields into an examination of the appeal of the deep woodland, both as a place to dwell in and a place of wildness, looking at what the appeal of these spaces means for our sense of belonging and how communities and individuals define themselves within a landscape.

***Contents:***

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

## *Introduction*

Clare is seen as a poet of fields, fens and moors, but his writing is so often at its strongest in the woodland. The woods offer fertile ground both to the imagination and to the practicalities of existence, occupying both a vital position in England's cultural imagination and providing what was, until the proliferation of cheap metal and fossil fuels, the central resource of society. This thesis looks at what the woodland represented to Clare, why it appealed to him so much and how he used it. Through this, the thesis aims to use the woodlands as a lens through which to look at the relationship between the individual and the landscape during Clare's lifetime (1793-1864), asking fundamental questions of how an individual and community can belong. This question of belonging has always been relevant but this era bears witness to a re-drawing of the landscape and a re-writing of the social contract in rural England, breaking up previously perceived notions of how society functions within the environment and, in that disorganisation, offers contemporary critics the chance to look again at this relationship.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries brought with them radical changes in land management, driven by society's new ability to shape and sculpt the landscape. These changes, both their scope and their pace, were debated within the discourse of Improvement – using new technology and methods to increase the nation's agricultural productivity. Alongside the re-allocation of land through enclosure, advances such as land drainage and reclamation, stock breeding and methods of increasing soil productivity dramatically changed land-management and agriculture and were, to an extent, necessary.[1] A rising population had to be catered for, both crop and animal farming could become more effective and the huge swathes of previously unusable land were able to be made agriculturally productive. A fundamental part of this re-structuring during Clare's lifetime was the impact of enclosure.

At its peak between 1780 and 1850, this process emphatically re-structured the parts of rural Britain it was employed in. Before enclosure, one acre out of every six was a form of 'waste' land, available for use by the local commoners.[2] Through common right, it was feasible that individuals and families could exist independently of wages. They were able to gather fuel, pasture livestock, forage and glean

[1] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985), 66.
[2] J. M. Neeson, *Commoners: common right, enclosure and social change in England, 1700-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 97.

the landscape. While many worked as well, these wages were supplementary.[3] Perhaps the greatest strength of the common right system was how it facilitated an economic independence alongside a strong, local social contract. Due to the shared nature of the land, there was a culture of compromise and discussion: "negotiation was as vital to common-field agriculture as pasture itself".[4] This extended beyond the confines of class, the field system necessitating "some risk sharing, a sense of common purpose with richer men – however tenuous – and a tradition of mutual aid".[5] Their worth extended beyond the economic. What would be seen by the market as waste space would allow "fuel every winter, some fine grazing in the spring, and space for a game of football or for courting".[6] They allow people and communities a freeing marginality, a chance for a life outside the confining necessities of waged work and debt.

The village where Clare grew up and lived his most formative years, Helpstone, was enclosed between 1807-20.[7] Clare would have spent his childhood years wandering the common, enjoying the freedom of the communal land, hunting for birds' nests and exploring the woodland without fear of being accused of trespass. By the time he was on the verge of adulthood, just old enough to truly empathise with his neighbours, to feel truly embedded within the landscape and understand the scale of the change which was happening, he would have watched what the landscape of his childhood be re-drawn, fenced off, with trees felled and new roads built. Clare's county was one of the most heavily impacted upon by these changes: "Between 1750 and 1815 two thirds of Northamptonshire's agricultural land was turned from open fields and commons to enclosed farmland".[8] Parliamentary Enclosure Acts gave surveyors the authority to re-package the communal narrow strips of land into demarcated individual lots, concentrating land in the hands of a smaller group of wealthier landowners. It was not only Clare's memories of childhood which suffered, this pursuit of efficiency had widespread and profoundly negative effects on the commoners: "The last generation of open-field peasants was more than decimated at enclosure: two-third of them lost all or more than 20% of their land within 5 years of an Enclosure Act".[9] These Acts represented a seismic change in the relationship between rural communities and the landscape.

The impacts of enclosure generally and specifically upon Clare have been studied extensively elsewhere. I have chosen to use the woodlands as the focus of this thesis as a way of using a fresh lens

[3] Ibid., 177-78.
[4] Neeson, *Commoners,* 153.
[5] Ibid., 321.
[6] Ibid., 173.
[7] Tom Paulin, Introduction to *John Clare Major Works* Robinson, E. and Powell, D. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), xix.
[8] Neeson, *Commoners*, 262.
[9] Ibid., 251.

to examine these issues. The lack of secondary literature on Clare's relationship to the woodland seems strange in light of the quantity of his writings which concern it. While Bridget Keegan has written on the woodland poetry of labouring class writers, her work on it is mainly a brief survey, involving short analysis of multiple authors as part of a wider-ranging approach to labouring class nature writing of the time.[10] Similarly, Tim Fulford's essay "Cowper Wordsworth and Clare: The Politics of Trees" engages with trees in Clare's work but its focus is spread among other authors and is largely focused on individual trees and their implications rather than the concept of the woodland as a coherent space.[11] This thesis aims to be the first extended analysis of the woodlands in Clare's writing.

Throughout human society's development, wood has been a fundamental resource, providing fuel for warmth and construction materials for housing and transport. Beyond its status as a resource site, the woodland is a distinct space in the landscape. At the outset of civilisation it supplied the materials to construct the outward manifestations of human society but also provided the boundary to that society, 'both a physical limitation of the land and a conceptual limitation of the rules by which it is governed.'[12] It is the natural state of the English landscape and, in a landscape in which genuinely wild land has all but vanished anyway, non-plantation woodlands stand as the most natural, the most original, form of nature in the landscape. This obviously comes with caveats, and there is effectively no pristine English landscape, but the woodland would be the least societally-controlled landscape someone living near Helpston in the early nineteenth century would have had access to. Clare says this explicitly as he lends his voice to a local stretch of land, turned into a quarry, Swordy Well:

> And save his Lordships woods that past
>
> The day of danger dwell
>
> Of all the fields I am the last
>
> That my own face can tell [13]

In the post-enclosure landscape, the woodlands and the Swordy Well are the only spaces that have remained the same, which have the same face. In the aftermath of enclosure in the Helpston area during Clare's early years, the woodland of the landscape became newly vulnerable. The image of the tree cannot now resist the possibility of it being felled as the land is re-drawn. The threatened loss of

[10] Bridget Keegan, *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry, 1730-1837* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.)
[11] Tim Fulford, "Cowper, Wordsworth and Clare: The Politics of Trees." *The John Clare Society Journal*, no. 14 (1995): 47-59.
[12] Ward, p.27.
[13] John Clare, "[The Lament of Swordy Well]", in *Major Works*, 147, lines 201-04.

that woodland and its accelerating commercialisation seem to gnaw at the heart of a sense of continual, land-rooted identity. The need to study this seems more urgent than ever, "In England, between 1930 and 1990, over half of the ancient woodland was cleared, or replaced with conifer plantation."[14]

I am using the term woodland to indicate an extended grouping of trees in which it is possible to enter far enough into that you can no longer see the frontier you entered through and the canopy joins above you. In this way, they are spaces that envelope you and which are profoundly different to the open land you leave behind. The use of the word 'forest', though occasionally used by Clare, has been avoided due to its original meaning of a royally designated space for the breeding and hunting of deer, indicating a mixed landscape of open land, low shrubbery and actual woodland.

This thesis focuses on Clare specifically but at times places him in conversation with other labouring-class poets contemporary to him. The new agricultural reforms of this time and their socio-political ramifications are unavoidably interwoven with class. I feel that these figures can offer a vital perspective as writers whose lives are both more exposed to nature and also more exposed to the changes in the developing rural capitalism, as well as offering a mild antidote to historic readings of them as lone, untaught geniuses. Throughout, the thesis aims to treat these changes in the landscape as lived experiences, to use these poems as witnesses to these changes and look at how their woodlands function in this new landscape. I have focused on Clare's work both because of its obvious quality and how it interacts with these ideas and with the landscape in a depth that stands out among the other labouring class poets. While, for example, other writers focus on enclosure in some depth and others invest in the woodland, it is rare to find a figure who harnesses Clare's breadth and incisiveness of focus. His nature writing exhibits a depth of attention to the landscape and the changes in it, an awareness of how these issues are interwoven, all galvanised by a profound depth of affection for his local environment.

The thesis begins in the open fields, with Chapter One exploring in more depth the issues of Enclosure and new forms of land management introduced briefly above. I have chosen two aspects of this new physical manifestation of political-geographic change – the newly erected fences broken by protestors and the trees which were felled as part of this re-structuring. These two types of object represent distinct moments in which the surrounding issues of enclosure become manifest, rendering the trees and fences both physically less and indelibly more.

[14] Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places*, (London: Granta Books, 2017), 9.

The second chapter is a study of the figure of the woodman, a rural character treated fairly extensively by Clare. In Clare's hands, he is a countryside character who has inherited certain Pastoral traits but in which these more traditional modes are interwoven with an awareness of the difficulty of labour and the financial precarity of life for the working class. The woodman is unstudied apart from an essay by Paul Chirico which focuses on a prose depiction of the figure as a text in itself, rather than as part of an on-running mediation on the figure.[15] Through this transitional figure, at home both in the woodlands and the village, this chapter moves the thesis towards the idea of dwelling in the woodland.

This theme is developed in Chapter Three which transports the focus of the thesis entirely into the woodland. The chapter begins with a discussion of Clare's yearning for seclusion, looking at how his poetry is concerned with how an individual seeks to remove themselves from society and find a new form of community within the environment. Following this, the chapter discusses different motifs of the woodland, that is, hollow trees, birds' nests, woodbines and bowers, in Clare's poetry, looking at how they interact with this notion of dwelling and how these motifs appeal to and are used by Clare.

The final chapter frames the woodland as the last remnant of a landscape resembling true wilderness that is available to Clare. The chapter looks at the appeal of wild land, turning to how Clare's use of form interacts with this notion of wildness and finally looking at the woodlands as isolating, meditative places and their similarity to ecclesiastical spaces and the tradition of hermits in Christian culture.

[15] Paul Chirico "'The Woodman' and the Natural Anthology", *John Clare Society Journal*, 19 (2000).

## *Chapter One: Improvement, Broken Fences and Cut-Down Trees.*

### *Section 1: Broken Fences*

Of the labouring-class poets, Thomas Batchelor (1775-1838) is the most attuned to the new agricultural developments of this time. Growing up in a Bedfordshire village to a family of tenant farmers, he developed a "deep interest in the region's agriculture, geology and social history."[16] This interest was keenly practical, to the extent that he has been used as a reliable analyst of farming costs at the time.[17] Depicting his native landscape, he writes "Calm are thy seasons, fruitful is thy soil, / Yet much to art is due and manual toil."[18] He knows the land is not Eden; it is cultivated, developed. His extended poem *The Progress of Agriculture* (1804) contains images of the land both before and after enclosure:

> Yet have I seen, nor long elaps'd the day,
>
> Where yon rich vale in rude disorder lay;
>
> Each scanty farm dispread o'er many a mile,
>
> The fences few, ill-cultur'd half the soil;
>
> Seen rushy slips contiguous roods divide,
>
> Mid worthless commons boundless stretching wide [19]

His critique of the pre-enclosed landscape is built around its visual and physical structure; it is in 'rude disorder', there are few fences and the 'worthless commons' stretch unchecked. Enclosure was a material intervention in the socio-geographical organisation of the county, wherein the new power dynamic was coded into the landscape in the form of a new infrastructure of division; boundaries, fences and hedges separating previously common land.

I have chosen two aspects of this new physical manifestation of political-geographic change – the newly erected fences broken by protestors and the trees which were felled as part of this re-structuring. These two types of object represent distinct moments in which the surrounding issues of

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[16] Scott McEathron introduction to Thomas Batchelor in Goodridge ed. *Nineteenth-Century Labouring-Class Poets Vol. 1.* (Pickering & Chatto, London: 2006), 71.
[17] Ibid., 71.
[18] Thomas Batchelor, *The Progress of Agriculture; Or, The Rural Survey*, *Poems* (London: Parnassian Press, 1804), 68.
[19] Batchelor, *The Progress of Agriculture,* 70.

enclosure become manifest, rendering the trees and fences both physically less and indelibly more. The breadth of issues involved in the fencing and moulding of arable common land should not be underestimated, as Neeson argues, the enclosers wanted "wanted to improve society as well as agriculture: they wanted to change the structure of rural England".[20] Batchelor details the processes which enacted this change:

> The spade, the pickaxe, smooth'd the rugged land;
>
> Harrows sharp-tooth'd, and rolls, with pond'rous toil
>
> Have pulveriz'd and cleans'd the weedy soil;
>
> Manures and argil o'er the surface spread,
>
> Fix'd the loose sands consistent to their bed.
>
> Hence, many a year has seen their harvests glow
>
> In emulous rivalry of fertile vales below.[21]

Thanks to improved farming, this once-waste heathland is able to rival the green fields, 'weedy soil' becoming arcadian vales. To Batchelor this change is revelatory, its progress painted in luminous language. This is the side of Improvement which is not documented in Clare's verse, the newfound ability to provide more food and wealth which was the direct result of the upheaval in the landscape which Clare and others lament.

In many poetic depictions of enclosure, there is a pronounced focus on this change in the visual texture of the landscape. These new advances resulted from a re-drawing of the landscape, in which surveyors would re-design the 'rude disorder'; demarcating new parcels of land, planning new roads, and smoothing out the natural contours of the landscape. As Batchelor writes,

> Industry, thy unremitting hand
>
> Has chang'd the formless aspect of the land.
>
> To distant fields no more the peasants roam,
>
> Their cottage-lands and farms surround their home;
>
> And hawthorn fences, stretch'd from side to side,

[20] J. M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 45.
[21] Batchelor, *The Progress of Agriculture,* 77.

Contiguous pastures, meadows, fields divide.[22]

In that phrase 'formless aspect' and the earlier 'rude disorder', there is the impression that un-Improved land is shapeless chaos, a landscape devoid of organisation in an intellectual framework in which structure was becoming paramount. It is in this spatial re-organisation that this new agrarian system is at its clearest. Open-field parishes which for centuries had been formed as "hundreds of strips" surrounding the village were transformed into the patchwork of "rectilinear blocks" we see across the English countryside today.[23] Routes which had previously been forged from use were re-mapped, as Crane writes, "desire-paths were blocked and replaced by paths and roads orientated on towns and markets […] Counter-intuitive right-angles were introduced where paths or roads were forced to follow the hedged or walled perimeters of a newly bordered field."[24] Clare's home village of Helpston witnessed a wave of new road-building in the early nineteenth century.[25] By the time he was 20, Clare would have seen a wave of new developments which replaced self-forged routes with relatively uniform roads, "of a proper width and hedged".[26] Rather than routes which followed the landscape and which were worn into the landscape through people's organic movements, now people were trammelled into fenced and hedged ways, their view blinkered, their movements directed.

Clare's 'The Mores' (1823) is a poem primarily about the issues of freedom and scale in the enclosed landscape.[27] The word 'free' and its linguistic and ideological offshoots form the figurative structure of the poem; fences are depicted as bondage, new boards declare no 'road here' where once there were 'paths to freedom'.[28] While obviously built from a nostalgic idealisation, the enclosure writings of Clare and other labouring-class poets show the complexities of the interrelation of people and space which existed. The ability to move around the landscape unchecked by boundaries and fences is a recurring feature of this sub-genre of enclosure poetry. Clare gives the panoramic view of the landscape before these developments:

In uncheckt shadows of green brown and grey

Unbounded freedom ruled the wandering scene

Nor fence of ownership crept in between

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[22] Batchelor, *Progress of Agriculture,* 82.
[23] Nicholas Crane, *The Making of the English Landscape,* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2017), 412.
[24] Ibid., 412.
[25] John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1743-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 106.
[26] Ibid., 108.
[27] John Clare, "The Mores", in Robinson, E. and Powell, D. ed. *Poems of the Middle Period 1822-1837* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996-2003), ii, 347.
[28] Clare, "The Mores", lines 70 & 69.

To hide the prospect of the following eye

Its only bondage was the circling sky [29]

It is a broad, spreading expanse, 'uncheckt', 'unbounded'. The capacity to meander and roam which is at the root of Clare's concept of the natural world is composed both of the ability to physically traverse the land and to visually explore it. Here, in this fence-less landscape the eye and body are free to roam. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, during periods of war and revolution in which freedom is such a fundamentally contested and loaded term, Clare here finds it in the common-fields. In that un-divided, un-tamed space there is a fundamental freedom of movement which is repeatedly framed as being key to personal and societal freedom.

In Clare's verse, this socio-political, aesthetic dimension of an understanding of land, borne of this lack of countryside infrastructure as a result of enclosure, is woven into something deeper. Behind the socio-political references to 'freedom', 'The Mores' aims to depict a harmonious framework of moving parts:

Cows went and came with evening morn and night

To the wild pasture as their common right

And sheep unfolded with the rising sun

Heard the swains shout and felt their freedom won

Tracked the red fallow field and heath and plain

The brook that dribbled on as clear as glass

Beneath the roots they hid among the grass

While the glad shepherd traced their tracks along

Free as the lark and happy as her song [30]

The cows and sheep move with the sun. The shepherd 'traced' the sheeps' tracks as 'free as the lark'. There is an inherent delicacy in tracing the lines of the sheep and the land, starkly contrasted to the system of fencing which is to follow. The impression of the shepherd as another part of the moving framework is reinforced via the metaphor, as the physical mimicking of the sheep flows into the figurative aerial fluidity of the lark, twice mapping the human onto the natural, working to erode the

[29] Clare, "The Mores", lines 6-10.
[30] Clare, "The Mores", lines 25-34.

distinction between the two. Combined, it has the feel of a form of mellow clockwork, each interlocking part rotating around the landscape, societal and natural working to the same rhythm.

However, following enclosure new physical markers appeared across the landscape. Now, where Clare turns, "A board sticks up to notice 'no road here' / And on the tree with ivy overhung / The hated sign by vulgar taste is hung".[31] This interlaced network of land, lark and man has now been replaced by this synthetic overlay:

> And sky bound mores in mangled garbs are left
>
> Like mighty giants of their limbs bereft
>
> Fence now meets fence in owners little bounds
>
> Of field and meadow large as garden grounds
>
> In little parcels little minds to please [32]

'Little' takes the strain of the sentiment here. 'The Mores' recognises that human society is an interlinked component of one immense whole and that the concerns of efficiency and 'improvement' are dwarfed by the importance of nature and of harmoniously existing within a landscape.

This awareness of these ties between the landscape and its inhabitants is not a retroactive projection, but something that is evident in the contemporary discourse surrounding enclosure. Neeson writes on how tied to the land critical depictions of commoners were, of how they were seen to be as "wild and unproductive" as commons - "if wastes must be subdued, so must they".[33] "Defenders and critics were not dealing in imagined or archaic notions of rural England", they were aware of the lived experiences of 'peasants' and the inseparability of their way of life and their local landscape.[34] This link between the land and the people who live upon it seems both obvious and profoundly meaningful. The common field system served to anchor the community. The rotation of the fields would dictate the melody of the year, village working to the same revolving calendar.[35] This is what seems vital about the common-field system, not only the individual independence it afforded, but this communal interdependence and cooperation. Neeson writes that "the value of the commons was their social cement" – they bind together, their constituent parts being mixed until they form a cohesive, seemingly permanent whole. [36] On a local scale, the shared use of the land served to involve

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[31] Ibid., lines 70-72.
[32] Ibid., lines 45-49.
[33] Neeson, *Commoners,* 32.
[34] Ibid., 32.
[35] Barrell, *Idea of Landscape,* 105.
[36] Neeson, *Commoners,* 46.

people of different trades and classes in a shared venture, the idea and the reality of the common serving as a coalescent. This is what Robson depicts as "customary praxis, rooted in collective use and ancient memory".[37] It is in the specific uses of the land that this sense of identity is developed, each individual interaction with and usage of the common being replicated by others, so as to create the impression of a 'tribe', united in purpose and action within the landscape.[38]

Under enclosure, this mimesis of interaction was broken up, the individuals involved in it dislocated. The process of rural proletarianization converted people who were semi-independent into the lowest form of labourer, moving from employer to employer dependant on wages.[39] This individuation spread even to the type of crops that were grown, as the fields are cut into individual parcels "smallholdings could best survive if they adopted their own specialised agricultures".[40] Different facets of the new rural infrastructure were deliberately designed to maintain the commoners' new dependence, extending even to ensuring cottage gardens were kept small enough that too much food could not be grown on them.[41] The impression is of a societal divide directly following and mimicking the new rural architecture of enclosure. It is one of a community un-rooted, an individual fenced-in, and of workers dislocated from the land that surrounds them. This societal loosening was underlined by the increasing concentration of land into the hands of large farm owners. There was an imbalance of land-ownership pre-enclosure, but figures show it became increasingly polarised with small farms being incorporated into larger holdings.[42] Criticisms of this concentration of wealth and land in the hands of a land-owning class unites writers on both side of the Improvement debate. Even a pro-enclosure poet such as Thomas Batchelor vehemently criticises the greed of these figures, who live in 'mansions, towering high' and who 'with gun or nimble hounds, / They seek the viewless boundaries of their grounds".[43] The wealth now surrounds the mansion, rather than the village. The 'uncheckt', 'unbounded' freedom which Clare praises in 'The Mores' has been taken over by the newly emboldened land-owning gentry.[44]

As seen, fences, signposts and newly laid hedges formed the material infrastructure of this 'improved' landscape. Political power more regularly manifests itself in terms of scale, obvious examples being stately homes and Cathedrals. With enclosure, the politics of scale is more subtle; rather than being highlighted by a localised monument it now more profoundly shaped the fabric and

[37] Elly Robson, "Improvement and Epistemology". *The Historical Journal*, 60, 3, (2017): 605.
[38] Neeson, *Commoners*, 180.
[39] Ibid., 222.
[40] Ibid., 258.
[41] Ibid., 29.
[42] Neeson, *Commoners,* 204.
[43] Batchelor, *The Progress of Agriculture,* 92-3.
[44] Clare, "The Mores", lines 6-7.

infrastructure of rural life. It is there in the new roads, the drained fen, the tree-nailed sign which reads 'no entry'. There is a permanence to this. With a monument, it is obvious that it was designed and installed there. In the present day, the patchwork of fields and hedges we see everywhere is assumed by people just to be how things are - nobody now sees fences as political.

In nearly every example Neeson gives of physical resistance to enclosure, it is always these fences which are attacked. During an anti-enclosure riot, "the fence posts and the rails were burnt as they lay in the fields ready for construction, and those already erected were pulled down and burnt".[45] In 1765, the *Northampton Mercury* reported that "a great Number of people being assembled […] in order to play a Foot-Ball Match, soon after meeting formed themselves into a Tumultuous Mob, and pulled up and burnt the Fences designed for the Inclosure of that Field".[46] After a parliamentary counter-petition (against enclosure) was dismissed the local commoners "pulled down fences, dismantled gates, lit huge bonfires and celebrated long into the night".[47] These examples continue, and it is easy to see why, the "attacks on fences [combining] symbolic revenge after enclosure with immediate utility".[48] The idea of revenge is interesting – it is personal, and also indicates an element of irrationality, the act not as a thought-out political movement but as a knee-jerk reaction driven by the groundswell feeling of injustice. Fences were both the most visible and most accessible part of this new countryside infrastructure.[49] Furthermore, to the people of limited means destroying these fences, it was a way of causing significant economic damage to the wealthier land owners driving this change as "fencing itself was expensive to buy, and it cost time to put up. Failing to fence within a year brought heavy penalties, which were written into the Act itself."[50]

What is vital is the power dynamic underpinning these acts, the question of how power manifests itself. Legal opposition to enclosure was **"**expensive and often quite futile", with Parliament often turning a blind eye to legal efforts.[51] Against this monolithic combination of Parliamentary process and the creeping, centuries-old development of rural capitalism, it is easy to understand what Neeson depicts as "the fatalism of the cottager".[52] This perceived helplessness moulds the petitions against enclosure. A petition from 1781 is addressed to the "Lords spiritual and temporal in Parliament assembled", and one from 1789 pleads that "Your petitioners therefore most humbly pray your

[45] Neeson, *Commoners,* 191.
[46] Ibid*.,* 191.
[47] Ibid., 278.
[48] Ibid., 279.
[49] Ibid., 194.
[50] Ibid*.,* 194.
[51] Ibid*.,* 260.
[52] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City (*London: The Hogarth Press, 1985), 201: Neeson, *Commoners*, 260.

Lordships that they may be heard".[53] These petitions render the power dynamics inherent in the relationship legible, the humble commoners pleading with those holding the power to shape and sculpt. This sense of helplessness makes it important to take an expansive view of these forms of protest, focusing on the wider communal discontent rather than just flashpoints like riots. These incidents are merely the volcanic spikes which peak out of the ocean, the material products of the unseen, roiling activity below.[54]

Robson engages with the theorist Henri Lefebvre, writing that, "'space' is both socially produced and in itself productive of social relations. It thus constitutes a site of both hegemony and agency, through which authority is coded, lived experience structured, relations of production reproduced, and social practices signified and symbolized." [55] If the division of the land by the surveyors, and the building of the fences at the orders of the landlords, were a form of coding power into the landscape the destruction of those fences was used by the 'landless poor' as a form of 'performative language'.[56] The destruction is articulation. The fence-object is broken, rendered inutile, then transformed into an expressive object. This act manifests the innate expressiveness of the material, something Jane Bennett calls 'thing-power': "the affirmation that 'so-called inanimate things have a life of their own, that deep within them is an inexplicable vitality or energy, a moment of independence from and resistance to us and to other things. A kind of thing-power'".[57] Verbal protests can be ignored, shouted over, but there is a stubbornness to a no longer useable object. It resists the human; it is there and that is it. The broken fence is no longer an enforcer and representor of authority or an impediment to movement but becomes a marker of a contested space in which the aspirations and frustrations inherent within enclosure are made stark.

Bill Brown writes that "Things arise when objects down tools and refuse to cooperate with us, break down, or have their functions mysteriously interrupted. […] when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily'".[58] The cessation of the usual function of objects allows the cracks, usually papered over by their mundanity and utility, to be unveiled, and the mind to interact with them in a fresh way – freed of the inherited perspectives of use and familiarity. They enact a 'spatial disordering', in which

[53] Highclere Enclosure Bill, Petition against, of several of the proprietors of lands in the parish of East Woodhay in the County of Southampton, (1781) Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/JO/10/3/273/15: Chelworth Enclosure Bill: Petition against, of owners of estates etc. in borough of Cricklade, (1789), Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/JO/10/3/281/25.
[54] Neeson, *Commoners*, 262.
[55] Robson, *Improvement and Epistemology*, 604
[56] Ibid., 603.
[57] Jane Bennett, "The Force of Things: Steps Towards an Ecology of Matter" *Political Theory*, 32, (2004): 358.
[58] Bill Brown, *Things*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 4.

the landscape is freshly broken up and able to be re-shaped and therefore re-interpreted.[59] The broken fence lies in the middle of a space, no longer a functioning part of this new political-agricultural system, no longer this statement of the new class relations. Yet the broken fence is not a coherent, complete rejection of those things, it has not been reclaimed entirely as an articulate protest by those who dismantled it. It becomes the contested site in which these arguments and forces meet: the improvement debate, the freedom the commons afforded, the development of a new agrarian capitalist system, the pain of seeing a known and loved landscape change. These and a tangled cacophony of other issues become transcribed on the dismantled wood: "Things give meaning to the world; they are not merely given meaning by the uses we make of them or by the symbolic significance we attach to them in our systems of exchange".[60] There is a stubbornness in their sheer materiality, that gives shape and remains itself even when warped by thought. There is a resistance in that image of the broken fence left in the middle of a partially constructed field, a lack of order in it, a lack of clarity in which the fence-remnants disrupt the processes of thought and perception which initially conspired to place them there. It is this stubbornness that makes them apt for this essay's examination of these issues, and also that made the commoners turn to them in these riotous rejections of enclosure. Their tangibility offers the mind a tethering point. The ethereality of thought, the immensity of forces involved in these changes of the landscape, seem to gravitate to something more manageable, some *thing* which can offer a lens and resting place.

***Section Two: Cut-Down Trees.***

When Batchelor criticises the "brutish, callous tongue of pow'r" and asks "Why must the low, laborious, starveling band / For ever curse *Improvement's* ruthless hand?", he moves towards an exploration of the way this seemingly benevolent desire to improve agriculture is felt so keenly by the commoners.[61] It is the stage in the poem where his language gains a true urgency, the anger driving the lines onward. It is in the felling of trees that the hand of improvement is at its most clearly violent, the stroke of the axe representing a material enactment of this new interpretation of the landscape. When depicting deforestation in his childhood landscape Clare rails against this "tyrants hand" which 'devours' the land:

[59] Robson, *Improvement and Epistemology,* 602.
[60] Mary Jacobus, *Romantic Things: A Tree, a Rock, a Cloud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 16.
[61] Batchelor, *Progress of Agriculture,* 93 & 92.

Ye injur'd fields ere while so gay

When natures hand display'd

Long waving rows of Willows gray

And clumps of Hawthorn shade

But now alas your awthorn bowers

All desolate we see

The tyrants hand their shade devours

And cuts down every tree

Not tree's alone have felt their force

Whole Woods beneath them bow'd [62]

The personification of the landscape, alongside the image of the 'tyrants', works both to emphasise the cruelty of the act and direct the response away from the cold logistics of the Parliamentary Acts, allowing it to metamorphose into something more visceral:

To shrub nor tree throughout thy fields

They no compassion show

The uplifted ax no mercy yields

But strikes a fatal blow [63]

There is a strong element of drama to Clare's depiction of this process, the felling of the trees being recast as something reminiscent of an execution. Further, the image of the 'whole woods' bowing gives some impression of the immensity of forces that are behind enclosure; the weight of parliamentary procedure and developing agrarian capitalism, the trees cowering in turn before the cruelty of this process.

When a tree is cut down it often inspires a depth of response which can seem disproportionate to the act. Through their seasonality they are associated with life, death and rebirth, holding a pivotal

[62] John Clare, "Helpston Green" in Robinson, E. and Powell, D. ed. *The Early Poems of John Clare 1804-1822* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), ii, 11, lines 1-10.
[63] Ibid., lines 13-16.

place in religions and mythologies around the world.[64] Even in contemporary society they hold a status in moments of seasonal ritual, such as the act of bringing evergreens into homes during Christmas.[65] No "tree was ever adored for itself only, but always for what was revealed through it, for what it implied and signified".[66] They appear to be at once woven into matters larger than themselves and urgently personal and tangible. People seem unable to resist the impression "That their merely being there / Means something."[67]

Part of why trees are so primed for symbolism is because of their fundamental stability. It is what ties them to their ideas of continuity, tradition. This can be seen in Clare's 'Langley Bush' (1819-20), a poem addressed to an old whitethorn tree Clare repeatedly returned to.[68] The whitethorn was not destroyed directly by enclosure, Waites identifying that 'the bush finally 'left its hill' sometime in 1823', roughly three years after "the final award for the enclosure of Helpston was published."[69] The titular tree of Clare's poem had been moulded into local folklore by its status as the old "meeting place of the old hundred court of Nassaburgh".[70] As White writes, "Hundred-courts or moots were made up of village elders […] and in essence 'were not only the representatives of the manorial tenants but also the embodiment of the local customary heritage'".[71] These courts had been washed by Clare's time, as local governance 'increasingly became the concern of central government.'[72] This helps explain why Clare doubts the veracity of these passed-down stories of a court operating at this landmark, writing 'what truth the story of the swain alows'.[73] However, the extent of the tree's historical function extends even beyond this, the site also considered to have at times been 'a Bronze-Age barrow, and a Roman Shrine'.[74] This isolated tree seems to have an almost magnetic draw on the communities which surrounded it over the millennia. The 'swain' tells "of honours which thy young days knew" and states in lofty tone "That thou art reverenced […] Both swains & gipseys seem to love thy name / Thy spots a favourite wi the smutty crew".[75] It is 'reverenced', held 'sacred' by each community that moves

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[64] Della Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England: Literature, Lore and Landscape.* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, (2010), 3.
[65] Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*, 101.
[66] Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958), 4, quoted in Łaszkiewicz, W. "Into the Wild Woods: On the Significance of Trees and Forests in Fantasy Fiction". *Mythlore*, 36 (2017): 39.
[67] John Ashbery, "Some Trees" in *Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1986) 19, lines 10-11.

[68] John Clare, "Langley Bush" in *The Early Poems of John Clare*, ii, 250.
[69] Ian Waites, "'the Prospect Far and Wide': An Eighteenth-Century Drawing of Langley Bush and Helpston's Unenclosed Countryside." *John Clare Society Journal*, no. 28, 07 (2009), 13.
[70] Goodridge ed., *The Early Poems of John Clare 1804-1822,* ii, 788.
[71] Simon White, "Landscape Icons and the Community: A Reading of John Clare's 'Langley Bush'" *John Clare Society Journal*, 26, (2007), 22.
[72] White, "Landscape Icons and the Community", 23.
[73] Clare, "Langley Bush", line 5.
[74] Waites, "'The prospect far and wide'", 9.
[75] Clare, "Langley Bush", lines 6 & 9-10.

around it. Waites refutes Whites' argument that the whitethorn 'symbolized popular resistance to remote centralized authority'" due to a gibbet also being situated there at one point. [76] What this clash of ideas reinforces is how the site is primed to be a form of non-discriminatory focal point, used by both the swains and the 'gipseys', the Romans and the hangman. It was a fixture of the landscape that lives have moved around, leaving and returning through generation after generation until it bled into myth. Despite these swirling associations, it does not slip away into abstraction as Clare weaves these different activities around the tangible 'mulldering trunk' which is 'nearly rotten thro', using its physicality as a stabilising point.[77] He understands that things are not exhausted by their relations – that, when he is writing this poem, there is still a tree which stands and rots slowly regardless of the poem and the ideas he surrounds it with.

Clare often uses this fundamental stability of trees as the fixed point around which to spin poems. The start of 'The Fallen Elm' (1822) is built of a temporal and visual movement which revolves around the elm.[78] The elements swirl around but the tree stays - "Storms came and shook thee with a living power / Yet stedfast to thy home thy roots hath been".[79] This physical resoluteness becomes a stability over time, as "Old favourite tree thoust seen times change lower / But change till now did never come to thee".[80] Combining these two strains, Clare writes that "We felt thy kind protection like a friend".[81] In its purest form friendship is a strength of bond built over time, a growing, gradual resoluteness which can withstand that which comes against it. It is this kind of organically growing resolve that the elm embodies to Clare. It forms the warm, animate centre point to these orbiting recollections. This solidity is the foundation of the poem before it becomes explicitly political. When it does turn political, the language becomes inflamed, turning his pen against the 'knaves':

> Who glut their vile unsatiated maws
>
> And freedoms birthright from the weak devours [82]

It's relatively rare to feel this kind of anger in Clare. The gentle anthropomorphism of 'We felt thy kind protection like a friend' has become a violent distortion.[83] The comparison shows how the innate contortion of language can move and flex with emotion. What is key here is the direction of that

[76] Waites, "'The prospect far and wide'", 11.
[77] Clare, "Langley Bush", line 16.
[78] John Clare, *The Fallen Elm*, in Robinson, E. and Powell, D. ed. *Poems of the Middle Period 1822-1837* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996-2003), iii, 440.
[79] Ibid., lines 19-20.
[80] Ibid., lines 15-16.
[81] Ibid., line 12.
[82] Ibid., lines 73-74.
[83] Ibid., line 12.

movement; it is all aimed away from the tree, the elm the stable foundation against which the poem leans as Clare rails against the forces that felled it.

Thomas Reid, writing in 1765, opined that "There is no phenomenon in nature more unaccountable, than the intercourse that is carried on between the mind and the external world".[84] The 'intercourse' flickers; it is never constant, never able to be traced or dissected. We cannot render cartographic the ways in which a tree drives us to feel. This is part of what Jacobus depicts as "the shifting texture of unwitting appropriation and anthropomorphism that envelops us every time we make use of a thing or a word, every time we imagine that a toy is alive or preserve an environment (let alone love, hate, or destroy it)."[85] What seems key is how appropriation is 'unwitting'. It is an almost inevitable part of how we interact with the material world, ever projecting and shaping. We cannot help but make things into something they are not, our perception attempting to process nature's non-verbal but undeniable communication with us – how the shape and tone of our surroundings *make us feel.* Clare addresses the fallen elm as:

> Friend not inanimate – tho stocks and stones
>
> There are and many cloathed in flesh and bones
>
> Thou ownd a language by which hearts are stirred
>
> Deeper than by the attribute of words
>
> Thine spoke a feeling known in every tongue
>
> Language of pity and the force of wrong [86]

Clare really feels this language, 'deeper than by the attribute of words'. It is difficult to articulate this innate expressiveness, as Clare writes, it is 'deeper' than words. Clare himself struggles to transcribe this feeling but knows how it animates his poetry. Note the abstractness of the last four lines. Clare has moved away from his usual particularity to subjectivity and a looseness of focus. At its simplest, Clare's nature poetry is the particularities of a scene articulated via his affection for them. Here, Clare is using this ineffable, illegible dynamic between natural form and perceiving mind and allowing his language to loosen, to step away from the concrete minutiae of the landscape and allow the reader to involve their own perception. Clare's linguistic depiction is perhaps not taking us closer to an 'unmediated concrete or physical reality' but into an undetermined, in-between space that the mind

[84] Quoted in Christopher Hitt, "Ecocriticism and the Long Eighteenth Century." *College Literature*, 31, no. 3 (2004): 138.
[85] Jacobus, *Romantic Things*, 16.
[86] John Clare, "To a Fallen Elm", lines 29-34.

cannot untangle.[87] Stephen Connor's essay, 'Thinking Things', revolves around the 'in-between-ness' of this space. He depicts thinking, and to a lesser extent writing, as a method of constructing a space in which his fear can be held, suspended, 'in protective custody' until he is ready to face it.[88] Poetry seems to work in a similar way, it attempts to tie thought to a materiality, able to be held there as it 'hovers between the condition of a thing and a no-thing'.[89] While it is not precisely what Connor is writing about, this felled tree in Clare's work seems to function in a similar way. There is a displacement of emotion from him to the elm – it forms the material point around which he can coalesce and shape these feelings of loss and grief which he identifies both in himself and in his habitat and community. Being tied to a material site allows an emotion to be concentrated, sustained; the now-fallen elm effectively mimicking the function of a gravestone.

***Section Three: Archiving the Landscape.***

It is through this use as stabilizing focal points that the broken fences and felled trees are linked. Against the encroaching enclosure and hierarchical authority, each became a site of resistance in their own ways; the trees as literary focal points, the fences as local expressions of discontent. Clare turned to the elm and the commoners turned to the fences because they offered a physical thing which was representative of the causes of their grief but which they could manipulate and work with, which they could see and understand. There is something comforting in the resistance of the material, in the sense of mental contact it can provide. This interaction is one of sheltering, a grasping for stability when everything around you is changing. Clare's tree poems become similar objects in the topography of his poetry to the reader. In their legible, physical form they become containers for these swirling thoughts, recollections, feelings. They can be returned to, loosely tied down by Clare on the page, the communities they are part of and the feelings they evoke tangentially tethered by the poem's legible form. As we read and interpret, the poem becomes a porous text-space which we enter into and which is formed from these emotional and physical phenomena which Clare planted there. In this way, they become a form of textual archive of the landscape, set in opposition to the cartographic depictions of the landscape present in the enclosers maps and surveys. Paul Chirico paraphrases a contemporary of Clare who shares in this vision of his verse as near-cartographic, writing that the poet's work can be

[87] Jacobus, *Romantic Things*, 17.
[88] Connor, "Thinking Things"*, Textual Practice*, 24:1, (2010), 8.
[89] Connor, "Thinking Things"*,* 8.

appreciated as "a topographical arrangement of natural features".[90] Both the re-drawing of the landscape by the surveyors under the guise of improvement and the poetic interaction with it by Clare are different ways of interpreting and articulating a landscape that are each in their own way cartographic. As Elly Robson writes, "The relationship posited between viewer and landscape, as depicted in maps, was one of dominion in which knowledge was power over landscape and inhabitants".[91] Surveyors articulated a sterile idea of the landscape, fencing the land into clear lines based on ownership rather than habitation. This represented a new way of interpreting the landscape, one in which officials overrode customary practices and knowledge.[92] Robert Macfarlane writes on the importance of understanding the role maps play in shaping how we perceive a landscape:

"The land itself, of course, has no desires as to how it should be represented. It is indifferent to pictures and to its picturers. But maps organise information about a landscape in a profoundly influential way. They carry out a triage of its aspects, selecting and ranking those aspects in an order of importance, and so they create forceful biases in the ways a landscape is perceived and treated."[93]

The priorities of the surveyors new cartographic lens can be seen in Parliamentary records. Take, for example, a proposal for a new canal in 1838.[94] The land is divided into strips, precise lines demarcating previously flowing, unified land into new parcels ready for new ownership and use. There are categories for ease of reference, with numbers on the land linked to a description of the property, the owners or reputed owners, lessees or reputed lessees and current occupiers. These birds-eye interactions with the landscape work to delineate ownership, to translate habitation of a space into market-ready units and a legalistic framework, able to be sold, given away or re-sculpted. To look at the map is to look at a system of governance based on efficiency and cold economics. Here are the two clashing value systems, defining how people interact with nature. Clare's is one of emotional attachment, of there being worth in the living presence of the natural world, the other is one of the land as a capital resource primed to be divided up and parcelled off for use.

Both the surveyors and Clare created translations of the actuality, wherein something is lost, changed and developed as its creators try to give a durability to their vision, both maps and poem looking to the future as well as the present. In this way, Clare's poems are at once separate to and fundamentally tied to these objects of the landscape around Helpston. They form a poetic overlay of nature; aesthetic, socio-topographical depictions of the original subject which are at once tied to and

[90] Chirico, P. *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 53.
[91] Robson, *Improvement and Epistemology*, 623.
[92] Ibid., 600.
[93] Robert Mcfarlane, *The Wild Places* (London: Granta Books, 2017), 9.
[94] *A Map or Plan describing the Line and situation of the proposed new Canal in the Meadow called the West Croft in the Parish of Saint Mary*, (1838) Parliamentary Archives, HC/CL/PB/6/plan1838/81.

distinct from them. It is as the original landscape of his youth is lost that the poetry came not to sit alongside reality but to jar against it. The poems become increasingly detached from their real subjects, becoming artefacts rather than being part of an interwoven, dynamic relationship. This effect is explicitly commented on in 'The Round Oak' (1846), "Sweet apple top't oak that grew by the stream / I loved thy shade once – now I love but that name".[95] This is part of what makes Clare writing about landscape both right and important. It is a document of a landscape in the process of being lost, an emotionally involved form of archiving. Rather than the traditional concept of the archive as a static form of knowledge displaced from its original habitat, Clare is here creating a different form of archive, one built out of an enduring affection. These are lived landscapes, and Clare is articulating this lived experience, weaving the social and personal experiences of the landscape through his articulation of it, ready to be preserved by the page and re-animated by the reader.

He is aware of the need of this preservation, aware of how the memory of this landscape will dim with time:

> For all the cropping that does grow
>
> Will so efface the scene
>
> That after times will hardly know
>
> It ever was a green [96]

It is here that the role of the poet comes under inspection:

> All I can do is still to tell
>
> Of thy delightful plain
>
> But that proves short – increasing years
>
> That did my youth presage
>
> When every new years day appears
>
> Will mellow into age [97]

Age will inevitably whither and mellow the memory – all Clare can do is tell, to try and keep his vision of the landscape alive. His poetry becomes archival, a textual relic of the land. And so what remains

[95] John Clare, "The Round-Oak" in *The Later Poems of John Clare* ed. Robinson, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), i, 450, lines 31-2.
[96] John Clare, "Helpston Green", lines 45-48.
[97] John Clare, "Helpston Green", lines 51-56.

now are poems and a changed landscape, and records of the enactors of that change. Greg Garrard writes that when we discuss literature eco-critically, especially now, "We need to retain a sense of proportion. The contribution of humanistic approaches to the environmental cause is not likely to be great, and we are unlikely to recover the romantics' unimaginable confidence in the social importance of poetry as public discourse."[98] While Clare comes from the same period in which people felt this 'unimaginable confidence', his view seems more closely aligned with the contemporary lack of faith Garrard identifies. The distinction revolves around Clare's social position as a socially aware member of the labouring class. He writes against the background of the 'fatalism of the cottager' which Neeson depicts.[99] He is not a Wordsworthian figure, remote in the Lakes and able to imagine poetry as something which can shape and redeem. Clare has no faith here in his poetry's ability to save his fallen elm or take down the new fences and signposts. Rather, he is using his voice only as a lament, a protest which recognises that the die is cast.[100] His poetry is born out of this awareness of the limits of verse when set against the weight of parliamentary enclosure and these new, sterile ways of interacting with the landscape.

[98] Greg Garrard, "Radical Pastoral?" *Studies in Romanticism*, 35, 3, (1996), 450.
[99] Neeson, *Commoners*, 260.
[100] Neeson, *Commoners*, 260.

## *Chapter Two: The Woodman.*

### *Section One: Working in the Woodland.*

While it did not undergo the process of fencing and re-drawing which beset the fields, efforts were still made during this time to maximise the economic potential of the woodland. It is worth noting here the different ways in which the woodlands operated as a resource during this time, as opposed to the agricultural use of the open fields. Less clearly demarcated, the woods were nonetheless largely a managed space. While crops will grow back the next year, woodland has to be managed differently. Felling a tree is a violent rupture of the woodlands rolling temporality and in order to maintain the steady progression of growth alongside functionality "woodmen made full use of other methods of regeneration by which a stand of trees could be maintained indefinitely with little or no need for seedlings".[101] Rather than the field-cycle of planting and harvest, these practices allow an on-running growth. There are two generally divergent ways of managing wood, either through 'coppicing or allowing it to grow on into timber.'[102] Coppicing and pollarding are "the basis of nearly all historic management of woodland", they involve partially cutting growing trees, "after each felling they constantly produce *spring*, coppice shoots" allowing a constant re-growth.[103] This produces underwood, thinner branches which were more widely used and more socially vital than the timber from the trunks, operating as a form of small-scale fuel crop.[104]

Due to the emphatic switch to coal during this time, by around the 1790's "it is rather rare for the Board of Agriculture to consider wood very seriously as a fuel," if underwood is discussed it is mostly for smaller-scale personal usage.[105] This was extremely localised economic activity, the woodland the space "Where stickers stroll from day to day / And gather loads of rotten wood".[106] Stickers, or sticklers, is a name used for commoners engaged in wood-collecting. In this way, it did not provide fully-fledged economic independence but was still an opportunity to glean from the land outside of the commercial market, part of the common-right system's ability to allow for forms of marginal economic activity for all demographics. Commoners were permitted to glean "Snapwood – wood

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[101] Oliver Rackham, *Trees & Woodland in the British Landscape* (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), 20.
[102] Oliver Rackham, *Woodlands,* (London: Harper Collins, 2006), 17
[103] Rackham, *Woodlands,* 16.
[104] Rackham, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape,* 23.
[105] Paul Warde, *Woodland Fuel, Demand and Supply* in ed. John Langton and Graham Jones – *Forests and Chases of England and Wales c.1500-c.1850* (Oxford: St John's College Research Centre, 2005), 85.
[106] John Clare, "Walk in the Woods"*,* in Robinson, E. and Powell, D. ed. *Poems of the Middle Period 1822-1837* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996-2003), iii, 567, lines 49-50.

easily snapped off a tree or pulled down with a pole and a hook – or the lops and tops of trees, or dry and fallen wood, but not the timber itself."[107] Bigger trees were left to grow normally, with the trunks of these trees eventually being felled for timber.[108] This timber would provide material for both architectural and naval construction, vital at this time of Britain's burgeoning navy, and was not for use by the commoners.[109] Woodland was also sometimes used as pasture in spaces where the trees were more widely spaced.[110] As Clare writes, "the pastoral cows / Who through the hedges broken gaps intrude / & in the wood lands browze in happy mood".[111] Livestock could graze in these spaces while the fallen leaves could be used as fertiliser and foodstuff, but this was only allowed in at certain times to stop them eating the regenerating coppices.[112]

The woodmen in Clare's poetry seem to be involved in a variety of woodland management. His early prose passage on the figure contains his most extensive depiction of the specific tasks this figure is involved in.[113] Here, the woodman is "ready to begin his winters labour; to cut down the wood in the still forest and plash the hedge to stand as a fence to the intruding cattle".[114] He can be found laying a hedge elsewhere, as well or stopping gaps in another.[115] Hedge laying is a learned skill, involving layering underwood in a line, implanting stakes along the length of it and allowing plants to grow through and around, forming a living fence. The woodman of the prose passage is elsewhere found 'twisting a band binding up a faggot or chopping down the underwood", just as a similar wood-cutter in another Clare poem "toils & labours i' the wood / & chops his faggot twists his band & sings", others elsewhere collecting billet, or fuel, wood to take back to the village.[116] A picture emerges of the woodman as a figure who is engaged in a variety of tasks: laying hedges to demarcate the land and keep livestock from the woodland, collecting wood as fuel and chopping the underwood both as material and so as to re-generate the woodland as a resource site. What is clear about this woodman figure is that he undertakes an arduous, entirely out of doors form of work that feels elemental, a base level of interaction with the world which has for centuries been a vital part of humanity's ability to

[107] J. M. Neeson, *Commoners: common right, enclosure and social change in England, 1700-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 160.
[108] Rackham, *Woodlands*, 19.
[109] Neeson, *Commoners*, 160.
[110] Rackham, *Woodlands,* 26.
[111] John Clare, "Bushy Close" in *Poems of the Middle Poems,* iii, 466, lines 28-30.
[112] Williamson, *Management of Trees and Woods*, 222.
[113] John Clare, 'The Woodman or the Beauties of a Winter Forest', in Grainger ed., *The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).
[114] Ibid., 3.
[115] John Clare, "The Woodman" in *Poems of the Middle Period,* iv, 212, line 1: Clare, "Walk in the Woods", line 16.
[116] Clare, 'The Woodman or the Beauties of a Winter Forest', 7: John Clare, "The Woodman", in Robinson, E. and Powell, D. ed. *The Early Poems of John Clare 1804-1822* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), ii, 287, lines 21-22.

function and grow. This primal level of interaction is part of the appeal of the figure, the impression that it is a role in society which has always been vital, and which was now in decline.

***Section Two: The Woodman at Home.***

On a more textual level, a further role of the woodman is as a form of extra within the social types of Clare's verse. He is found dotted around the poems at different points, for example in the alehouse: "Old woodman rob up soon & late / & doomd to water porridge fate / Dips now i' beer".[117] The different real-life woodmen Clare must have known are subsumed within this figure, their individuality melded within these varied and yet coherent aesthetic depictions. This absorption of different people and traits within the figure of 'the woodman' at times leads to an idealisation. And there is the sense, particularly within the previously cited prose passage, that Clare is trying to convert the woodman into this form of pastoral, literary figure. Chirico's analysis of this text is based around the several unaccredited quotations which appear within it, its purpose being to "investigate the genealogy and structure of the piece, considering it strictly as a new text, the complex product of Clare's creative appropriations", rather than to see it as a character portrayal, linked to Clare's other woodman depictions.[118] However, the passage has value in how it shows Clare's early attempts to engage with the woodman figure, in his youthful lack of conviction in his own talent painting the figure in a more traditionally aesthetic mode. Grainger highlights, for example, his changing of 'shoes' for the less current 'shoon', Clare "deliberately aiming for the rustic flavour thought suitable for pastorals."[119] Written around 1820, the passage "was intended to be carried on in a series of Charicteristic & Descriptive Pastorals in prose on rural life & manners",[120] and shows the hallmarks of Clare's earlier work. Less confident in his own voice, Clare adopts a lexicon from outside the bounds of his usual speech and surroundings. Clare's publisher John Taylor even expressed doubt about whether the passage was Clare's own work.[121] This adoption of phrases and motifs which Clare undertook contributed to the effect Chirico describes here: "the piece is marked by an uncomfortable, erratic stasis, so that Grainger is right to identify another source in the 'studiously contrived posture of many

[117] Clare, "Ale", in *The Early Poems of John Clare*, ii, 280, lines 55-57.
[118] Paul Chirico "'The Woodman' and the Natural Anthology", *John Clare Society Journal*, 19 (2000): 43.
[119] Grainger, *Natural History Prose Writings*, 3.
[120] John Clare, quoted in Grainger ed., *Natural History,* 2.
[121] Chirico, "'The Woodman' and the Natural Anthology", 44.

eighteenth-century paintings and poems".[122] In his study of the representation of the rural poor in landscape paintings such as these, John Barrell quotes a *Guardian* review from 1713: "Thus in writing Pastorals, let the tranquillity of that life appear full and plain, but hide the meanness of it; represent its simplicity as clear as you please, but cover its misery."[123] The 'simplicity' is seen as better than, and able to be separated from, the socio-economic situation which has created it. This aspiration for the pastoral leads to a slight loss of focus on the lived reality of work which underpins the woodman. Clare here is following the advice of Alexander Pope, who writes, "We must therefore use some illusion to render a Pastoral delightful; and this consists in exposing the best side only of a shepherd's life, and in concealing its miseries."[124] And it is true that elements of Clare's most extended poetic depiction of the woodman in the poem of the same name, 'The Woodman' (1819-20) seem to engage with this instruction.[125] From the first stanza, a very virtuous image of the father's role is stressed – he must forgo the comforts of his bed to leave and provide for his family, smacks his lips with joy at the sight of his 'rosey sleeping boy […] Wi all a fathers feelings fathers joy'.[126] The woodman is keen to return home from the windswept day: "Well pleasd from the chill prospect to retire / To seek his corner chair and warm snug cottage fire".[127] The family are eagerly waiting at home, 'The suppers ready stewing on the hook', in their excitement thinking each approaching footstep is their father's.[128] They seem to glow, a seemingly postcard-perfect depiction of a peasant's life.

However, Clare does not invest in this idealisation, but rather weaves together the real and the romanticised. Though the family are illuminating the house, the winter woods beyond are bleak. The usual birds are silent and

> The milk maids songs is drownd in gloomy care
>
> And while the village chimleys curl their smoke
>
> She milks and blows and hastens to be there

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[122] Ibid., 44.
[123] John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: the rural poor in English painting, 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 1.
[124] Alexander Pope, quoted in Raymond Williams, *The Country and The City* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985), 19.
[125] Clare, "The Woodman"*,* in *The Early Poems of John Clare*, ii, 287.
There are two poem by Clare titled 'The Woodman', the longer piece discussed above written 1819-20 and a sonnet written 1830. Going forward the date shall be supplied with the title to help distinguish between the two.
[126] Ibid., lines 15-17.
[127] Ibid., lines 134-35.
[128] Ibid., lines 140-41.

And nature all seems sad and dying in despair [129]

Clare has worked out in the fields, has felt the sapping cold and has dreamt of the comfort and warmth indoors. Further, the depiction of the woodman at work can seem to glorify the figure:

Wi this he toils and labours i' the wood

And chops his faggot twists his band and sings

As happily as princes and as kings

Wi' all their luxury [130]

However, this feeling is of regal bliss is due to the fact that the 'little' amount he gains from this work is enough to 'Make both ends meet and from long debts keep free'.[131] The debts are chain-like and, through incarceration in debtor's prisons, could be literally imprisoning. He is able to be as happy as royalty, but only because he is able to avoid debt. It is not a romanticisation based on joyous labour but an awareness of the precariousness of the labourer's socio-economic situation and the vital role that this work plays in keeping him away from the imprisonment of poverty. His family's blissfulness hovers above their true financial precariousness, they are only able to stay in bed and sleep until eight because of his long hours of labour - 'Wi out his labours wage coud not do so / And glad to make them blest he shoffles thro the snow'.[132] It is an enduring of personal suffering for family duty, and while this is couched in overly idealised, romanticised frame, it does not look to provide the 'reassurance' to the upper classes that Barrell discusses.[133] Take how the woodman's wife asks her children to calm down:

Chiding her children rabbling about

Says theyll 'stroy more than what their father earns

And their torn clohs she bodges up and darns [134]

This is lived speech, you can see it, hear it, can feel the stresses of poverty wearing through the words as she roughly patches up their torn clothes.

[129] Ibid., lines 42-45.
[130] Clare, *The Woodman*, lines 21-24.
[131] Ibid., line 26.
[132] Ibid., lines 8-9.
[133] Barrell, *Dark Side of the Landscape,* 21.
[134] Clare, *The Woodman* (1819-20), lines 156-158.

This is part of how Clare embeds a lived reality in the poem, lacing through it a methodical sense of process. The poem moves through the morning routine of the wood-cutter: he wakes, his wife has laid out tinder and flint the night before and now lights a candle, allowing the poem to show us the sleeping son, and then the woodman has a porridge breakfast before heading out into the cold. Clare wants to take us through that process. This could be interpreted as a way of voyeuristically engaging with this life from a position of comfort, in line with Barrell's suspicion of the introduction of more realistic elements in artistic depictions of the working class at this time. He argues that these developments were not meant to kill off the figures of Pastoral, but to 'inoculate them with a dose of the new critical rationalism that would otherwise have wiped them out'.[135] There is an element of camouflaging, dressing up these virtuous labourers as the actual working poor. However, Clare's grounding of the workman is built from experience: he integrates the realistic elements of the woodman's life not to prolong the survival of an idealised type, but to amplify the actual lived reality of the woodman. He borrows traits and language from these Pastoral modes in order to show the dignity of the worker. In this way, the woodman figure is at once glowing romanticisation and a showcase of the struggle and precarity of labour, a pastoral figure and a family trying to keep their children's patchwork clothes intact.

When depicting the woodman figure, Clare always remembers the actual labour involved, as seen in the examples of his various tasks given above. Clare too worked in the woods, he writes of "when I have been pilling bark in the woods in oaking time", and he does not allow that known labour to be washed away in its translation into verse.[136] This is not the Edenic land seen in some pastoral depictions, one in which everything is provided through the natural order.[137] These depictions, as Raymond Williams notes, are enabled by their "simple extraction of the existence of labourers. The actual men and women who rear the animals and drive them to the house and kill them and prepare them for meat; […] who plant and manure and prune and harvest the fruit trees: these are not present; their work is all done for them by a natural order."[138] Clare weaves the labouring figure into the landscape:

> Knee-deep in fern he daily stoops
>
> And loud his bill or hatchet chops
>
> As snug he trims the faggot up

[135] Barrell, *Dark Side of the Landscape*, 14.
[136] Grainger, ed. *Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare,* 56.
[137] Williams, *Country and the City*, 30-31.
[138] Williams, *Country and the City*, 32.

Or gaps in mossy hedges stops

While echo chops as he hath done

As if she counted every one [139]

He fills hedges, traipses through ferns and collects bundles of underwood, all while his strokes echo and reverberate around the landscape. He doesn't exist in an Edenic land but rather is the figure who manages and engages with it.

However, Clare largely skirts away from the woodman's direct role in felling trees and enclosure. It is only really in Clare's *The Parish* (1820-24) that we meet this kind of woodman:

A shadow reigns yclypd a woodland king

Enthroned mid thorns & briars a clownish wight

My Lords chief woodman in his titles hight [140]

In his given authority as manager of this woodland, he works to restrict access to it by the locals:

The bug-bear devil of the boys is he

Who once for swine pickt acorns neath the tree

& starving terror of the village brood

Who gleand their scraps of fuel from the wood

When parish charity was vainly tryed

Twas their last refuge—which is now denyd

Small hurt was done by such intrusions there

Claiming the rotten as their harmless share

Which might be thought in reasons candid eye

As sent by providence for such supplye

But turks imperial of the woodland bough

[139] Clare, "Walk in the Woods", lines 13-18.
[140] John Clare, *The Parish*, in *The Early Poems of John Clare,* ii, 697, 2099-2101.

Forbid their trespass in such trifles now [141]

The woodman here is an enforcer of new enclosure land laws that disrupted previously common practices of arboreal agriculture such as the gleaning of nuts (in this case acorns) for livestock, and the collecting of dead wood for fuel. Clare sees these acts as non-damaging, extractive in a renewable, non-disruptive way – the acorns will come again, the wood has already fallen. He asserts that the foragers are only "Claiming the rotten as their harmless share", meaning that this is not prime timber that they are taking, but rather waste-wood, of no use to the state for ship-building or to the landowner for construction but of huge use to the local poor. The access to the woodland and its resources acts as a form of natural social security net: "When parish charity was vainly tryed / Twas their last refuge". Further, this communal use seems divinely validated, these resources "Which might be thought in reasons candid eye / As sent by providence for such supplye". The woodman seen here seems mostly concerned with policing and restricting access to the woodland. This is underscored by the background violence which is inherent in the woodman figure:

The woodman he from top to toe

In leathern doublet brushes on

He cares not where his rambles go

Thorns briars he beats them every one

Their utmost spite his armour foils

Unhurt he dares his daily toils [142]

This violence is usually involved in depictions of the woodman through his hatchet but here he seems almost equipped for battle, ready with his 'armour'. He 'dares' undertake his tasks, 'beats' the thorn briars. His work is almost courageous, soldierly. Armoured in his 'leathern doublet', "he cares not where his rambles go", a strange mix of imperious and meandering. In this way, the woodman is not just some charming, industrious rural figure. There is a political element to him, a violence inherent in him as the cutting edge of enclosure.

***Section Three: The Woodman in the Landscape.***

[141] Clare, *The Parish*, lines 2104-21.
[142] Clare, "Walk in the Woods", lines 7-12.

When situating him in the landscape, Clare aims to generate an interwoven depiction of the woodman. In the prose passage, Chirico notes how "Unlike the shepherd and the milk-boy, who spend as little time as possible outdoors before hurrying back to the cottage fire, farmyard or stables, the woodman is unique in his cheerful and prolonged exposure to the elements".[143] Clare dwells on the labourer's hardiness and experience, 'or how coud he be found / To weather out the blast and daily stand his ground'.[144] The woodman and the landscape wear against each other like regular footfall wears a path, almost an interlocking part of the landscape. If he is ill, which would put his entire family at risk due to their reliance on him working, he doesn't turn to doctor's medicine 'But to such drugs as daily are displayd / Een round his walks and cottage door prefuse'.[145] He seeks and 'herds' these natural remedies up in summer, his health stemming from the land which cares for him as he tends to it. The woodmen's relationship to birds further entwines them in the complex interrelation of the woodland. He feeds the robin which pays attention to him, a motif Clare uses elsewhere as a motif for the symbiotic relationship his woodmen have with the wood and their inhabitants.[146] In his natural history sketches, he writes of how the Robin is "the woodmans companion for the whole day & the whole season who considers it as his neighbour & friend".[147] The transaction is represented as a form of exchange, a gift-giving of song and food that bonds these two woodland figures together. In these ways, the figure of the woodman is substantiated by these diverse micro-interactions in the woodland; each minor detail ties him into this shifting framework of interlocking parts, each part orchestrated to emphasise a worn familiarity. Their language is even inflected with the woodland, Clare noting, of some birds, how "the woodmen call them in their way".[148] They have an occupational dialect, borne out of lifetimes working in the woodlands. Here opposed to the more ethereal 'learning', it is a language which is rooted, which grows from interaction with the landscape. This symbiotic relationship is also apparent in Robert Bloomfield's depiction of a forester;

> Born in a dark wood's lonely dell,
>
> Where echoes roar'd, and tendrils curl'd
>
> Round a low cot, like hermit's cell,

[143] Chirico, "'The Woodman' and the natural anthology", 42.
[144] Clare, "The Woodman", (1819-20), lines 89-90.
[145] Ibid., lines 110-17.
[146] John Clare, "The Wood-Cutters Night Song" in *The Early Poems of John Clare,* ii, 19, line 20.
[147] Grainger ed., *Natural History*, 53.
[148] John Clare, "Birds Nesting" in *Poems of the Middle Period,* ii, 169.

Old Salcey Forest was my world.

I felt no bonds, no shackles then,

For life in freedom was begun [149]

Clare knew Bloomfield's verse well.[150] He too was a labouring class writer, someone Clare described as "our best Pastoral Poet".[151] The forester seems different to Clare's woodman in that he is largely concerned with hunting rather than general wood-management, however Clare used the two terms interchangeabley elsewhere.[152] The woodland is a distinct zone, 'my world'. Here its encircling nearly completely drives the lines. There is the completeness of the birth and the cot, then echoes roar, tendrils curl. The image is one of circularity, complete in its nest-like insularity. The impression is compounded later in the poem, as the forester-narrator claims "Wild as a woodbine up I grew".[153] The encircling wood becomes more personal. The forester figure is shaped by it as he grows, merging man and wood.

This impression of being a harmonious, interactive part of nature is reinforced by how the woodman figure is embedded within the most fundamental rhythms, moving with the sun, waking with it and returning home as it sets. The 1830 sonnet titled 'The Woodman' begins with "Now evening comes and from the new laid hedge", 'The Fern Owls Nest' with "the weary woodman rocking home".[154] The woodman is persistently tied to these times of transition, such as the end of the workday when he can leave the woodland and return to his family. In this way he merges slightly with this natural cycle, the structure of his day not an individually determined chronology but instead obeying the dawn and the dusk. Clare uses him as transition into nature and into subject, his conduit into the inner woodland. Within the texts the figure becomes an almost cartographic presence, a literary fixture by which the woodland can be navigated - "And see the woodman in the forest dwell, / Whose dogs run eager where the rabbit's gone".[155] The woodman here operates as a bridge in the poem, diverting the sonnet's attention and focusing the list-like series of the first nine lines onto the woodman's dog

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[149] Robert Bloomfield, "The Forester", Goodridge, J. and Lucas, J., ed., *Selected Poems* (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 1998), 121, lines 1-6.

[150] John Goodridge, *John Clare and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013*)*, 1.
[151] Written in a letter to Alan Cunningham, quoted in Goodridge, *John Clare and Community,* 86.
[152] John Clare, "Love of the Fields"*,* Robinson, E. and Powell, D. ed. *Poems of the Middle Period 1822-1837* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996-2003), iv, 109, lines 17 & 24.
[153] Bloomfield, "The Forester", 121, line 15.
[154] John Clare, "The Woodman" (1830) in *Poems of the Middle Period*, iv, 212, line 1: John Clare, "The Fern Owls Nest", in Robinson, E. and Powell, D. ed. *John Clare Major Works*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 209, line 1.
[155] John Clare, "A Walk in the Forest" in Robinson, E. and Powell, D. ed. *The Later Poems of John Clare 1837-1864* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), i, 24, lines 10-11.

whose activities form the final two couplets. The poems flow around and by these figures; foxes run by them as "The woodman threw his faggot from the way / And ceased to chop and wondered at the fray."[156] They become a form of reference point as Clare goes about his meanderings: "I askd some Woodmen who were planting under wood at the time wether they knew the bird & its song seemd to be very familiar to them they said it always came with the first fine days of spring & assured me it was the wood chat".[157]

However, unlike the fleeing fox, the woodman is not entirely of nature. Rather he works through and around boundaries. Moving between the village and the wood, he is at turns a fixture of the deepest recesses of the woodland and the bedrock of a domestic family unit. 'The Wood-Cutters Night Song' is one of the lighter depictions of this transitional figure:

All day long I love the oaks

But at' nights yon little cot

Where I see the chimney smokes

Is by far the prettiest spot [158]

In this more than lyrical take on his character, the woodman cares for both his green work-space and his fire-warmed home. Note the use of Clare's favourite refrain, 'I love'. Before he is summoned by the day's end to return to his family, he travels further than anyone else (bar Clare) into the deep wood: "He and he only knows and sees the beauties and horrors of winter mingled together", inhabiting a space where 'wild strawberries' are 'Uncropt, unlooked-for, and unknown'.[159] The woodman figure allows Clare's verse to take this journey, allowing his poems to move from the village into the woodland, giving a sense of process and movement to his text.

This transitional position is encapsulated in his practice of bringing home tokens from the woodland. He returns from work with little objects, artefacts almost, from this other space that he inhabits. This is routine behaviour for Clare's woodman, exhibited in numerous poems:

And in his wallets storing many a pledge

Of flowers and boughs from early sprouting trees

[156] John Clare, "[The Fox]", in Robinson, E. and Powell, D. ed. *John Clare Major Works*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 245, line 21-22.
[157] Grainger ed., *Natural History Prose Writings*, 61.
[158] Clare, "The Wood-Cutters Night Song", lines 21-24.
[159] Clare, "The Woodman or the Beauties of a Winter Forest", 3-4: Clare, *Walk in the Woods*, line 83.

And painted pootys from the ivied hedge

About its mossy roots – his boys to please [160]

These 'presents' are "Gained far afield where […]nor night nor morn […] flowers but rarely from their stalks are torn".[161] The inner woodland which the woodman ventures into is here represented as some form of sanctuary, a nature undisturbed by people. 'Pootys' are snail shells, prized by Clare for their colours and patterns. Alongside ivy and flowers, these brightly coloured natural phenomena seem almost a form of natural jewellery, the woodman being like a magpie attracted to colour and pattern. This practice of collecting 'pledges' from the forest is something Clare also habitually did:

& now I meet a stoven full

Of clinging woodbines all in flower

They look so rich & beautiful

Though loath to spoil so sweet a bower

My fingers hitch to pull them down

To take a handful to the town

So then I mix their showy blooms

With many pleasant looking things

& fern leaves in my poesy comes

& then so beautifully clings

The heart leaved briony round the tree

It too must in a poesy be [162]

He and Clare are the only two figures in the latter's poetry who perform this ritual activity, Clare talking of it extensively in both his verse and natural history writing. The title of his planned volume *The Midsummer Cushion* is the name for "a very old custom among villagers in summer time to stick a piece of greensward full of field flowers & place it as an ornament in their cottages which ornaments

[160] John Clare, *The Woodman,* (1830), lines 5-8.
[161] Ibid., lines 11-13.
[162] Clare, "Walks in the Woods", lines 127-138.

are called Midsummer Cushions".[163] The title indicates that this is how Clare saw his collections, as bundles of flowers and objects collected from the natural world and brought back to show to society. This is reinforced by his use of 'poesy' above to describe these floral collections. This concept of a poetry collection as collected natural gifts has precedence, the word 'anthology' stemming from the Greek for collecting flowers. Further, in his analysis Chirico claims that the naming of the prose piece on the woodman correlates to this idea, pointing out that the latter part of the piece's title 'Beauties of a Winter Forest' is reminiscent of the anthology *The Beauties of Shakespeare*, an 1818 volume in Clare's library.[164] Clare and his woodman are unified slightly by this shared practice, bonded by the appreciation and respect it shows for the natural world they both know so deeply.

The degrees of this appreciation is also a key strain of the woodman figure. He is cast as a form of connoisseur of the woodlands, sharing in Clare's appreciation of its hidden interior. He has a form of untaught natural warm appreciation – "his simple soul is warmly and venerably inspired when he views the beautiful clumps of mizzeltoe growing on the leafless branches of the aged thorn".[165] There is a kind of boyish naivety in how he 'wonders' at the owl's cry.[166] He does not have a cultured, discerning eye rather his perception of nature is one of warm, caring familiarity:

> The pleasing prospect does his heart much good
>
> Tho tis not his such beautys to admire [167]

Clare is not necessarily condemning the woodman. He can admire this 'prospect', a more technical term, associated with aesthetic landscaping, even though 'tis not his' as it is not what a man in his social position would usually admire.

It is this dual existence, between nature and society, that Clare seems to identify with most, and I would argue there is a degree of autobiography in his depictions of the woodman figure. They both go farther into the woodland than anybody else, both collect flowers and trinkets to bring back to the cottage, both share in a warm, deep appreciation of the landscape. However, the woodman does not seem to share in Clare's anxiety about these two 'homes':

> All day long I love the oaks,
>
> But, at nights, yon little cot,

[163] John Clare, *The Midsummer Cushion*, (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1979), 2.
[164] Chirico, "'The Woodman' and the natural anthology", 42.
[165] Clare, "The Woodman or the Beauties of a Winter Forest", 5.
[166] Clare, "The Fern Owls Nest", line 2.
[167] Clare, "The Woodman" (1819-20), lines 131-3.

Where I see the chimney smokes,

Is by far the prettiest spot. [168]

Clare lends the woodman his favourite phrase, 'I love', and the woodman's relationship to both home and the woods seems to share in that warm affection that Clare's use of the phrase usually signifies. Elsewhere, Clare yearns to dwell in nature, yearning for a simple habitation of space away from the complications of society:

As hid in green bushes he goes

Brushing through the green ferns by the hugh spreading tree

O I think what a joy must the forresters be [169]

In the woodman's embedded life, he seems to see a figure who can dwell both in the woodland and in the village, a figure who, unlike Clare, is not torn between the two, but belonging to both.

***Section Four: Conclusion.***

There are many facets to the woodman figure. There is a woodman who happily collects trinkets from the woodland to bring back, another is shocked to see Clare do so.[170] There is the woodman of *The Parish*, fiercely guarding the landowner's property, but also the friendly woodmen who will talk to Clare as he wanders under the canopy. It must be remembered that while there are elements of creating a woodman character or figure, in other instances Clare may well be referencing real people he knew and who worked in the area. This feeds into the malleability of this figure. The poet's experience of labour and financial precarity allows him, perhaps forces him, to weave the woodman into a complex figure who is deeply related to the landscape and village around him. Williams boldly asserts that "Clare marks the end of pastoral poetry, in the very shock of its collision with actual country experience."[171] This can be seen in the underlying precarity of the woodman's domestic life, in the sense of rugged difficulty which flows alongside the harmonious interaction of his movement within the forest. Clare idealises from the ground up, elevating the humble. He takes some of the air

[168] Clare, "The Wood-Cutters Night Song", lines 21-24.
[169] Clare, "Love of the Fields", lines 22-24.
[170] Clare, "Walk in the Woods", lines 146-50.
[171] Williams, *Country and the City*, p.141.

of the Pastoral, that image of the gilded countryside life where people co-exist happily with their landscape, but works it around the humble and everyday, the porridge and the harsh wind.

If you reduce someone purely to their job or task, then they become a solely economic unit. You strip away the surrounding humanity, leaving them not as individuals but as motifs, projected ciphers for how you wish they were. Barrell reminds us that if something is 'admired for the truth of its representation […] what was it, we must ask, that its admirers wished to believe was true about the rural poor, and that is apparently confirmed by this image?'[172], and part of the strength of the woodman figure is the frayed edges around him, how he resists this clear categorisation. Instead, he acts as a focal point for these different qualities and involvements. He is more than his work, operating as a form of focal point which connects these different spaces he moves between: a patriarchal figure and member of the village, someone connected to the wider market, a figure of the liminal times and spaces, and someone who knows and can appreciate the deepwood while also being involved in the new management and felling of woodland. He can at once be tightly woven into the domestic family structure as his children scurry around him and at other times seem to be a true woodland being, as 'he rustles in his leathern guise', an autumnal leaf-figure once he's below the canopy. [173]

[172] Barrell, *Dark Side of the Landscape*, 115.
[173] Clare, "The Woodman" (1830), line 2.

## *Chapter Three: Dwelling in the Woodland.*

### *Section One: 'Social Loneliness': Seclusion and the Woodland.*

As seen in his writings on the figure of the woodman, Clare is drawn to this possibility of a life spent in the woodland. In his 'Love of the Fields' (1832) Clare seems to yearn for the seemingly simple lives of people who spend the majority of their time alone in nature, proclaiming 'O I cannot help wishing [their] pleasures were mine'.[174] This yearning signifies a distance as Clare looks at these figures from afar, seeing his life in the village as less contented than theirs. Bate describes Clare's poetry as 'the record of his search for a home in the world', and it is in his woodland verse that the deepest expression of the ideas of shelter and belonging involved in domesticity are seen.[175] His poems are built from a mode of habitation which goes beyond living in a space, one in which they attempt to enmesh themselves in the fabric of that place.

The woods are populated by these natural forms of homely possibility. People are drawn to places that can give them a sense of safety. As Bate writes, referring to Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space,* "Bachelard's argument is that we especially love the spaces which afford us protection, first those within the house - secret rooms, drawers, chests, wardrobes - and then their equivalents in the world, especially nests and shells, the respective refuges of vertebrates and invertebrates […] His central theme is what he calls inhabiting, which is what I call dwelling with the earth."[176] To my mind, dwelling is a mode of interaction with a space which extends beyond merely being present. It is built out of attention, an engagement through sight, hearing and tactile interaction as your memories become ensnared in the landscape's physical phenomena. It necessitates an awareness that you are not self-contained but a functioning part of the environment, part of its constantly re-orientating structure of action and response, thought and feeling. This chapter first discusses Clare's yearning for seclusion, before turning to motifs of the woodland in Clare's poetry, looking at how they feed into this notion of dwelling and their appeal to the poet.

In this moment from 'Pastoral Poesy' (1824-32), Clare depicts the stillness of a landscape:

> Unruffled quietness hath made
>
> A peace in every place,

[174] John Clare, "Love of the Fields" in Robinson, E. and Powell, D. ed. *Poems of the Middle Period 1822-1837* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996-2003), iv, 109, line 32.
[175] Jonathan Bate, *The Song of The Earth* (London: Picador, 2001), 153.
[176] Ibid., 154-5.

& woods are resting in their shade

Of social loneliness [177]

In that seeming paradox of 'social loneliness' lies the impression that the woods are away from social affairs, removed from human society. But the possessive 'their' also suggests that there is the tantalising sense of community in this removal, that the woods 'own', are content in and in control of their loneliness. The space is undisturbed - 'unruffled' - Clare using the startled movement of a bird (it is nearly always feathers which are ruffled). In this way, an 'unruffled quietness' is one in which the bird has not been given cause to fly off because there is no human intruder. Though alone, the woods unspool a tranquillity which envelopes him. While the space is lonely in the sense that there are no other humans here it represents an integral community of sorts if it is looked for.

Spending time alone in the landscape appealed to Clare throughout his life. It is a constant desire, from his early years when Helpston's villagers would talk of the strange boy off reading by himself, "drove to the narrow necessity, of stinted oppertunitys, to hide in woods, & dingles of thorns, in the fields on Sundays to read these things", through to the asylum years when he was permitted to walk the forest grounds unattended. [178] The woodland is primed to allow a momentary escape from society. Clare writes of how once through the trees' border and sheltered by the canopy

We feel at once shut out from sun & sky

All the deliciousness of solitude

[…] & the mind

Yearns for a dwelling in so sweet a place

From troubles noise such stillness seemeth bye

Yet soon the side brings some unwelcome spire

To bid the charm of solitude retire [179]

The woods represent a heady but temporary space of isolation to him. He dreams of 'dwelling' here, but his dream is punctured by the spire, reminding him of the village, the Church and all the trappings of society they imply. This poem was written c.1832, following the years of Clare's early success, during which the poet's cottage became something of a tourist attraction to well-wishers and admirers. The

[177] John Clare, "Pastoral Poesy", *Poems of the Middle Period,* iii, 581, lines 41-44.
[178] John Clare, Northampton MS 14, 9. in George Deacon *John Clare and the Folk Tradition* (London: S. Browne, 1983), 39.
[179] John Clare, "Footpaths", *Poems of the Middle Period,* iv, 317, lines 48-56.

appeal of this sheltered space away from 'troubles noise' seems obvious. Away from the complications of society, the majority of Clare's writings on the themes of seclusion or isolation in nature do not give the impression of being *lonely*. He is the only human presence, but there is an implicit sense of companionship, of community, with the flora and fauna that surround him. The question is how the individual frames themself against the surrounding landscape, what alternative forms of belonging and inhabiting are possible in these secluded spaces.

***Section Two: Hollow Trees***

One of the most obvious examples of trees and dwelling in Clare's verse is the selection of hollowed out trees which he depicts. They are landmarks in his writings. 'The Hollow Tree' (c.1832) is typical of this form of poetry:

> How oft a summer shower hath started me
>
> To seek for shelter in an hollow tree
>
> Old hugh ash dotterel wasted to a shell
>
> Whose vigorous head still grew & flourished well
>
> Where ten might sit upon the battered floor
>
> & still look round discovering room for more
>
> & he who chose a hermit life to share
>
> Might have a door & make a cabin there
>
> They seemed so like a house that our desires
>
> Would call them so & make our gipsey fires
>
> & eat field dinners of the juicy peas
>
> Till we were wet & drabbled to the knees
>
> But in our old tree house rain as it might

Not one drop fell although it rained till night [180]

There is an emphasis on how domestic the tree can appear ("They seemed so like a house that our desires / Would call them so") that is also stressed in other depictions, e.g. his desire "To make a cot [cottage] een of a hugh hollow tree".[181] This similarity is underscored by the use of wood to construct human buildings themselves. The image of eating field peas in the tree is repeated in '['A hugh old tree all wasted to a shell']', wherein the hollowed tree is "The cowboys house to live in lonely ease / Who hurried there to eat his stolen peas".[182] The repetition implies that this is something Clare himself has done, or at least seen been done, and more fully transforms the trees into truly domestic spaces, wherein an individual can relax and eat. They are ready-made homes, democratic in their accessibility. It is not only the 'cowboy' who shelters here but in the same poem a shepherd also hides from the rain.[183] It provides a practical, functional space, one which Clare likely used during his years of field work, with one poem beginning "How oft a summer shower hath started me / To seek for shelter in a hollow tree".[184] They do not discriminate but offer a temporary home to any who need it. This work-adjacent status of the tree is underscored by it being 'dotterel', meaning pollarded.[185] The tree is not some perfect island of nature, but rather is a managed element of sylvan-agriculture.

Bate writes: "'The Hollow Tree' offers what Bachelard calls a 'primal image' which gives us back 'areas of being, houses in which the human being's certainty of being is concentrated', so that 'we have the impression that, in images that are as stabilizing as these are, we could start a new life, a life that would be our own, that would belong to us in our very depths'."[186] What is key here is this notion of the hollow tree image as 'stabilizing'. These trees hollow out as they age, Clare capturing this dynamic of simultaneous decay and growth in the reference to his tree being 'wasted to a shell' but "Whose vigorous head still grew & flourished well".[187] A hollow tree is a marker of a depth of time, fixed in one space. In this sense, there is a profound stillness to the tree. The quickest movement of the tree is the rolling of the seasons, its deepest the slow, wending chronology of a tree's life, growing and hollowing over centuries. To the human perception this is fixed, grounded. And this stability, this stillness, seems to feed directly into this notion of dwelling, of truly existing as an interacting part of your environment which you call home.

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[180] John Clare, "The Hollow Tree" in *Poems of the Middle Period,* iv, 298, lines 1-14.
[181] Clare, "Love of the Fields", 41.
[182] Clare, "['A huge old tree all wasted to a shell']" in Robinson, E. and Powell, D. ed. *John Clare Major Works*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 270, lines 5-6.
[183] Ibid., line 3.
[184] Clare, "The Hollow Tree", lines 1-2.
[185] Bate, *Song of the Earth*, 155.
[186] Bate, *Song of the Earth*, 156.
[187] Clare, "The Hollow Tree", lines 3-4.

However, I believe it is this transitory nature of the shelter that undermines Bate's analysis of the space as somewhere where "we could start a new life, a life that would be our own".[188] The hollow tree is not truly about the isolation and concentration of an individual's being and the possibility starting a new life. Rather, the hollow tree image embraces both the emphatic stillness of the tree and the transitory, temporary nature of its inhabitants. It offers a form of community in that it is an easy, practical shelter for anybody nearby. Clare notes the tree's size, how you could fit so many people inside it, and uses 'we' and 'our' towards the close of "The Hollow Tree".[189] It is a communal space to him, involving not only the people involved in the 'we' and 'our' but all those others in the history of the tree who have temporarily stopped there before. Here, it is possible both to be alone and, through shared usage stretched over time, to be part of a community. As Jacobus writes, "The natural habitat of the human is relational and social; it contains other lives—working or at rest, reaping, sleeping" – a habitat exemplified by this tree.[190] It is a space which does not entirely belong to any one figure or group. It offers respite to the worker, a place to shelter from the elements, an island of calm in an environment of labour and the elements in the midst of its 'social loneliness'.[191]

***Section Three: Bird Nests.***

Clare depicted a significant number of birds' nests in his verse, both in pieces dedicated to them and as features of the landscapes of other poems. Opposed to the transitory usage of the hollow tree, these are fragile yet profoundly fixed places. While there are many nest poems set in open land, when found within Clare's woodland they seem to share in some of its essential qualities. 'The Robins Nest' (1832) is one of the finest of these works, containing many of the recurring themes and ideas of the other birds' nest poems.[192] Fuelled by a rolling sense of wonder, it is both rooted and dreamlike, drawing on many of the key aspects of woodland in Clare's poetry, that is, in the sense of its secluded privacy, it's deeply textural, tactile quality, its sense of being submerged nature. Before depicting the nest, Clare situates it within the depths of the woodland:

> … spell bound to their homes within the wild
>
> Where old neglect lives patron & befriends

[188] Bate, *Song of the Earth*, 156.
[189] Clare, "The Hollow Tree", lines 12-13.
[190] Mary Jacobus, *Romantic Things: A Tree, a Rock, a Cloud* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), 33.
[191] Clare, "Pastoral Poesy", line 4.
[192] John Clare, "The Robins Nest" in *Poems of the Middle Period*, iii, 532.

Their homes with safetys wildness – where nought lends

A hand to injure – root up or disturb

The things of this old place – there is no curb

Of interest industry or slavish gain

To war with nature so the weeds remain

& wear an ancient passion that arrays

Ones feelings with the shadows of old days

The rest of peace the sacredness of mind

In such deep solitudes we seek & find

Where moss grows old & keeps an evergreen

& footmarks seem like miracles when seen

So little meddling toil doth trouble here

The very weeds as patriarchs appear

& if a plant ones curious eyes delight

In this old ancient solitude we might

Come ten years hence of trouble dreaming ill

& find them like old tennants peaceful still [193]

What is key about this nest is its privacy, how deep in the woodland it is. It is part of what Clare perceives as the deepwood – a form of untainted inner sanctum "to seek & harbour in / Far from the ruder worlds inglorious din".[194] The actual nest depiction is at the end of the poem, becoming the focal point of these disparate themes:

Here on the ground & shelterd at its foot

The nest is hid close at its mossy root

Composed of moss & grass & lined with hair

[193] Clare, "The Robins Nest", lines 49-67.
[194] Ibid., lines 6-7.

& five brun-coloured eggs snug sheltered there

& bye & bye a happy brood will be

The tennants of this woodland privacy [195]

This is the cyclical nature of the nest, the warm passing of time so assured in that '& bye & bye'. There is also such a warm domesticity in how this 'happy brood' are 'snug', held by the nest as they develop. The impression is of a homely security which is afforded by the encircling woodland – a space in which life can be regenerated at its own pace, secure among the trees and away from human interference. This again draws on the impression Clare creates of a form of a deepwood, un-meddled-with space, the only human presence perhaps being a meandering poet or woodman. However, the existence of such a space implies its own vulnerability, it is only special as an island of seemingly 'pure' nature if the rest of the landscape has already been controlled by society.

It is along this axis of security and vulnerability that the bird nest poems exist, particularly 'The Nightingales Nest' (c.1830).[196] The poem draws heavily on this notion of a difficult to reach deepwood, "Where solitudes deciples spend their lives" and "safetys guard / Of pathless solitude shall keep it still".[197] It is a nest which you have to earn the right to see, that you do not stumble across but have to crawl and creep "on hands and knees through matted thorns / To find her nest and see her feed her young".[198] This mention of the chicks feeding is part of the poem's repeated emphasis on the nest as a domestic site, at turns "Her curious house", "her secret nest" , or simply "her home".[199] This reinforces the sense of intrusion which marks the poem, the idea that Clare's being there and by extension the poem itself is violating this place of safety, this home. The poem moves, and asks the reader to move, with a sense of nervous delicacy - "Hush let the wood gate softly clap – for fear / The noise may drive her from her home of love".[200] Clare is aware of the fear his presence is causing the bird and is also aware of the fragility of the situation: "But if I touched a bush or scarcely stirred / All in a moment stopt".[201] The profound sense of reliance of the poem on the Nightingale as its focal point gives a constructed precariousness to the poem, a sense that if Clare is too disruptive and she flies too far away the poem will fade away with her.

[195] Ibid., lines 96-101.
[196] John Clare, "The Nightingales Nest" in *Poems of the Middle Period*, iii, 456.
[197] Ibid., lines 86 & 62-63.
[198] Ibid., lines 13-14.
[199] Clare, "The Nightingales Nest", lines 44, 53 & 61.
[200] Ibid., lines 3-4.
[201] Ibid., lines 28-9.

'The Ravens Nest' (1832) is lodged on the other end of this spectrum of fragility and vulnerability.[202] Here, the nest attains an almost mythic status in its strength and isolation. The nest is depicted in almost a siege situation, as repeated generations try to scale the tree and pilfer the nest:

> With iron claums and bands adventuring up
>
> The mealy trunk or else by waggon ropes
>
> Slung over the hugh grains and so drawn up
>
> By those at the bottom one assends secure [203]

The effort put into trying to invade this small island of security spans 'year after year'.[204] Clare builds on this weight of time, repeatedly stressing the age of the nest. He seems aware of the mythic potentiality of this situation, generation after generation of people trying and failing to conquer this one small natural space. It becomes both real (the actual nest) and a form of local folklore, these birds living "In memorys of the oldest man was known".[205]

This resolute security and surrounding folklore translates into a mythic old age for their settlement. The tree is a 'hugh old oak', its inhabitants "old birds living the woods patriarchs / Old as the oldest men so famed and known".[206] The nest attains a near-mythic status in the poem not only through this age but through its security, through its resistance to repeated attempts by individuals and the community to complete this almost impossible task. This emphasis on how old the space is also forms a key feature of 'The Robins Nest'. Ancient is repeated continuously: "in this old ancient solitude", the weeds "wear an ancient passion", the 'ancient tree[s]' exude the 'silence of their ancient reign'.[207] This repetition of 'ancient' creates the impression that the nest and its habitat is a venerable space. Opposed to the transitory shell of the hollow tree, this is a settlement, from which the birds 'never seem to have a wish to roam'.[208] It is a space in which things *stay*, in which they put down roots and become embedded in the landscape, 'Where moss grows old' and where 'The very weeds as patriarchs appear'.[209] In the use of patriarch there is not only a gift of status to the weeds, plants normally seen as in-utile irritations, but there is also the creation of a lexicon of inheritance and the implications of settlement that carries. He uses a similar phrase in 'The Ravens Nest', "As old birds living the woods

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[202] John Clare, "The Ravens Nest" in *Poems of the Middle Period*, iii, 559.
[203] Ibid., lines 25-28.
[204] Ibid., line 2.
[205] Ibid., line 31.
[206] Clare, "The Ravens Nest", lines 1 & 21-2.
[207]Clare, "The Robins Nest", lines 65, 56, 32 & 40.
[208] Ibid., line 91.
[209] Ibid., lines 60 & 63.

patriarchs", however here this lexicon of status forms a key strain of the poem.[210] This inner woodland space becomes court-like, as the attendant flowers pay Clare 'kindness like a throned king', each tree has 'their ancient reign' and "the wood robin rustling on the leaves / With fluttering step each visitor receives".[211] This is not the timid Nightingale, who is ready to fly away at the first point of human contact, but rather a bird confident in its home, who receives human visitors like visitors to court who have to provide a gift of bread-crumbs.[212] This is cast as an ancient social order, existent before enclosure. This court has an internal dynamic; as well as receiving the occasional outside guest, it is "where birds their passions pledge / & court & build & sing their under song", a space in which there is an on-running, interlinking series of behaviour which is key to any settlement.[213] These are the 'feathered heirs of solitude' – those who have inherited this place, receiving it from solitude as though 'solitude' is some background deity; a reflection of the invocation "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5).[214] This biblical echo is reinforced by the use of 'patriarch', with its connotations of the patriarchs of the Old Testament; Abraham, his son Isaac and his son Jacob. All of these instances come together to create a patterned lexicon of inheritance and of relation, creating a form of social web which runs through the poem and through this place, binding the birds to this inner sanctum of the woodland over time, as each action and interaction weaves together to create one rooted tapestry of dwelling.

Another linguistic framework Clare situates the birds within is their status as 'tennants':

> & thus these feathered heirs of solitude
>
> Remain the tennants of this quiet wood
>
> & live in melody & make their home
>
> & never seem to have a wish to roam [215]

Tenant can have a variety of meanings, from "One who holds or possesses lands or tenements by any kind of title.", to a more figurative "One who or that which inhabits or occupies any place; a denizen, inhabitant, occupant, dweller" as well as the more standard sense of someone who temporarily "holds a piece of land, a house" (OED). The phrase is repeated three times in 'The Robins Nest': "& find them like old tennants peaceful still", "Remain the tennants of this quiet wood", "The tennants of this

[210] Clare, "The Ravens Nest", line 20.
[211] Clare, "The Robins Nest", lines 22, 40 & 68-69.
[212] Ibid., lines 76-77.
[213] Ibid., lines 45-46.
[214] Ibid., line 88.
[215] Clare, "The Robins Nest", lines 88-91.

woodland privacy".[216] In each instance it is conditioned by an aura of calm, at turns 'peaceful', 'quiet' and private. Clare's use is perhaps inspired by Thomson's in 'Spring' in *The Seasons* (1730), using the term following a description of different forms of bird-life:

> While thus the gentle tenants of the shade
>
> Indulge their purer loves [217]

It is easy to see the appeal of this moment to Clare; the birds sharing a harmonious, gentle co-existence in the passage. He uses the phrase at different points in his verse throughout his career, concerning a range of subjects.[218] Each instance of its use concerns natural subjects, wearing away the term's possible market-based connotations. In his hands the phrase seems purer than that, revolving around a simple inhabitation of a place, conditional not on outside market forces but a gentle, rooted existence - a dwelling. Tenancy does not have the strength of owning a property, of it being yours and yours alone, rather it is a recognition that your inhabitation is temporary, that this place is yours but will belong to others after you. Tenant comes from the French *tenir,* to hold, and these birds seem to hold the land as it holds them. It is a softer tenancy, a tactile contact between bird and space.

This tactile nature of their inhabitation is grounded in the attention paid to the materiality of the nests. Clare repeatedly pays attention to the minutiae of what these nests have been built from: "How true she warped the moss to form her nest / And modelled it within with wood and clay".[219] There is a sense of process to Clare's nests; they do not appear and stand alone in the landscape but are 'warped' from it, sculpted from the materials in the local environment. The robin's nest is 'Composed of moss & grass & lined with hair', while the ravens in 'The Ravens Nest' spend time 'repairing' their near-impenetrable home. Moss is a repeated feature, at turns 'velvet' and 'as green as silk'.[220] Moss is likely the softest, most cushioning texture in the British woodland. Beyond a functional part of their construction, it shares in the decadent texture of these expensive fabrics: "Where moss did into cushions spring, / Forming a seat of velvet hue".[221] This rich natural fabric allows the nests to extend beyond functionality and into comfort, a marker of domesticity, of an existence which is beyond trying to survive and moves instead into trying to live.

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[216] Clare, "The Robins Nest", lines 67, 89 & 101.
[217] James Thomson, *Spring*, in Sambrook, J. ed., *The Seasons and The Castle of Indolence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), lines, 786-9.
[218] Clare, "Summer Haunts", in Robinson, E. and Powell, D. ed. *The Early Poems of John Clare 1804-1822* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), ii, 576, lines 14: Clare, "Wood Pictures in Summer", P*oems of the Middle Period*, iv, 241, line 14: Clare, "The Flitting", *Poems of the Middle Period*, iii, 479, line 129.
[219] John Clare, "The Thrushes Nest" in *Poems of the Middle Period*, iv, 186, line 7-8.
[220] Clare, "The Nightingales Nest", line 79: Clare, "The Robins Nest", line 13.
[221] Clare, "The Flitting", lines 81-82.

Clare's Nightingale, Robin and Ravens all maintain their homes as an ongoing process, using elements of their habitat to guard themselves against the elements and external threats in an ongoing dialogue with their environment. As seen, the permanence of the ravens' nest fascinates Clare:

> Repairing their nest – where still they live
>
> Through changes winds and storms and are secure [222]

The nest *almost* seems suspended in the trees, but Clare always gives focus to how this lofty suspension needs care and attention. Their security does not happen by chance but is the product of gleaning from the land and weaving their findings together, the birds aware of the potential fragility of their home, its vulnerability to people and the elements, and labouring to secure it. Jonathan Bate writes that "Clare's poems are round" and "birds are essential to the roundness of Clare's world."[223] Nests are cast as spherical islands, in which the cyclical regeneration of life takes place. But they do not appear and exist independently. Bate again quotes Bachelard: "A bird, for Michelet, is solid roundness, it is round life. […] And in this rounded landscape, everything seems to be in repose. The round being propagates its roundness, together with the calm of all roundness. […] Being is round."[224] Because of their status as these almost perfectly formed natural homes, it is tempting to abstract them into these spherical motifs, but Clare's verse never allows this temptation. Through their materiality, their vulnerability and the stories which are laced through and around them, the birds and the nests stand not as distinct, isolated 'round' spaces but as interwoven elements of the landscape. They are the end point of an on-running process, tied to one place through these continuous interactions.

Clare seems to pay no attention to any metaphysical sphericity of the nests, and a more suitable image or metaphor might instead be found within his verse itself:

> & thus these feathered heirs of solitude
>
> Remain the tennants of this quiet wood
>
> & live in melody & make their home [225]

Rather than living in a suspended, contained roundness, it seems that these birds live instead in 'melody'. Their existence is open and harmonious, coherent and yet involving different strands, the moss and tales which are interlaced through their nests weaving them into the landscape. They do not stand and live alone but communicate, interact, touch and move among that which surrounds them,

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[222] Clare, "The Ravens Nest", lines 44-45.
[223] Bate, *Song of the Earth*, 156.
[224] Bate, *Song of the Earth*, 156-7.
[225] Clare, "The Robins Nest", lines 89-91.

their music moving among and over leaf and branch just as the forest is brought into their nest through their gleaning and construction. It is vital therefore not only that they 'live in melody' but that they '*make* their home'. These birds and their nests analysed here share in the true essence of Clare's woodland in that they do not stand alone, but are part of one dynamic, melodic whole.

***Section Four: The Intertwined Woodland.***

This notion of interrelated, interwoven melodic living seems key to Clare's concept of dwelling. There are several poems in which Clare sketches a form of ideal cottage. They share similarities with the bird nest depictions in that they build an image of an interwoven dwelling, here, one in which the human and the natural co-exist harmoniously. His 'Proposals for Building a Cottage' (c.1819), from his early years in Helpston, is perhaps the most extensive.[226] It begins

> Beside a runnel build my shed
>
> Wi' stubbles coverd oer
>
> Let broad oaks oer its chimley spread
>
> & grass plats grace the door [227]

Fauna and flora are orchestrated so that they encircle the cottage, weaving around it. The 'runnel' (stream) flows alongside it, the trees holding it as they spread over. Clare wants to leave 'holes within the chimney top / [for birds] To paste their nest between" and pull out parts of the thatch, 'here and there' so that sparrows can 'hid[e] their heads'.[228] This motif of birds nesting in the roof is repeated in a later idealised cottage depiction. Written during his asylum years, 'My Early Home was This' again depicts a cottage which is a focal point for human and natural co-existence, albeit this time with an undercurrent of loss and pain. Here too, Sparrows and Stock-doves make their nests in the roof.[229] This is a house which facilitates comfort, the ability to stay, to dwell. But not only for Clare. It is not only the human architecture providing comfort for the plant and animal life which exists around it, they return the favour. Take, for example how the oaks and grass grow around the cottage in the

[226] John Clare, "After Reading in a Letter Proposals for Building a Cottage" in *The Early Poems of John Clare*, ii, 60.
[227] Clare, "Proposals for Building a Cottage", lines 1-4.
[228] Ibid., lines 27-28 & 24.
[229] John Clare, "My Early Home was This" in Robinson, E. and Powell, D. ed. *The Later Poems of John Clare 1837-1864* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), i, 435, lines 1-2.

quoted lines above. The poem depicts a functioning, orchestrated habitat which shares in the practical underpinning which marks his birds' nest poems as well. A key feature of the representation of this symbiosis is the movement of the natural around the human, how they twist around each other. The depictions are all movement and growth, wrapping around the cottage:

> The red breast from the sweet briar bush
>
> Drop't down to pick the worm
>
> On the horse chesnut sang the thrush
>
> O'er the home where I was born [230]

The bird comes from the bush, drops to the worm, the thrush sings over the home. Everything is densely co-existent, near and around the cottage, the human habitation a focal point around which nature wraps. Clare writes that the song of the black-cap, a well-known warbler, 'made the paradise complete'.[231] This song, floating on the wind around the cottage, becomes the final adhesive, binding together the natural and the human into one 'complete' whole. In these depictions, the human and the 'natural' are not so much embedded in one another but mutually interdependent and interwoven.

This pattern of interrelation seen in the cottage depictions is replicated in different forms throughout Clare's writings. His view of a landscape is one of connectivity, of things existing in a dynamic, moving relationship with one another. The woodland is emblematic of this form of community. To isolate a part of the wood is to attempt to fracture its overlapping continuity, its densely co-existent particularity. Take these lines from 'Wood Pictures in Winter' (1832):

> The woodland swamps with mosses varified
>
> And bullrush forests bowing by the side
>
> Of shagroot sallows that snug shelter make
>
> For the coy morehen in her bushy lake
>
> Into whose tide a little runnel weaves [232]

Clare gives each element an equality of representation as he adds them line by line. The interdependence of the woodland dwellers is implicit. The bulrushes droop by the side of the willow which again shows the near-domesticity of trees as it makes a refuge for the moorhen, who is followed

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[230] Ibid., lines 9-12.
[231] Ibid., line 7.
[232] John Clare, "Wood Pictures in Winter" in *Poems of the Middle Period* ed. Robinson, iv, 240, lines 1-5.

by an almost personalised 'runnel', or stream, which again moves in a weaving motion. Chirico writes that Clare's landscapes are "constituted by living organisms which have learned their ways of being, their behaviour, songs and displays, within developing communities, and which are able to reinvent themselves in dialogue with other organisms", and this interrelational network of existence seems particularly relevant to the woodland.[233] Throughout the poems, nothing seems to stand truly independent in the woods.

A key expression of this intertwining nature of the woodland is the woodbine. While it can be a generic name for various climbing plants such as convolvulus and ivy, it is more commonly used as a synonym for "The common honeysuckle […] a climbing shrub with pale yellow fragrant flowers" (OED). Woodbines are found interlaced throughout Clare's works, his poems moving among, and becoming, a space "Where the wild roses hang and the woodbines entwine".[234] In 'Walk in the Woods' (1832) he writes:

> Through thickest shades I love to go
>
> Where stovens foiled to get above
>
> Cramp crook & form so thick below
>
> Fantastic arbours—O I love
>
> To sit me there till fancy weaves
>
> Rich joys beneath a world of leaves
>
> Its moss stump grows the easiest chair
>
> Agen its grains my back reclines
>
> & woodbines twisted fragrance there
>
> In many a yellow cluster shines [235]

Here is the intertwining woodland. There is a dense physicality in the first few quoted lines, the arbours offering comfort and fancy 'weaves' new worlds here beneath the leaves. The woods twist around Clare, encircling, holding. As in so many other depictions of moments such as this, the

[233] Paul Chirico, *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 52.
[234] Clare, "Mossy Green Lane" in *The Later Poems*, ii, 975, line 2.
[235] Clare, "Walk in the Woods" in *Poems of the Middle Period*, iii, 567, lines 20-28.

woodbine is present, fragrant and embracing: 'clinging woodbines all in flower […] so rich and beautiful'.[236] In 'The Summer Shower' (1828), Clare writes:

I love it well oercanopied in leaves

Of crowding woods to spend a quiet hour

& where the wood bine weaves

To list the summer shower [237]

Here, in a similar deepwood space, the woodbine shares in the same motion as 'fancy' in the previous quotation – both weaving around and through the scene. In this way, the woodbine moves in a similar way to the phrase Clare often uses to describe how his imaginative thought works within his landscapes. Steven Connor depicts thought as "like the most ravenously and in the end ruinously reactive gas […] oxygen, in that it binds vigorously to most of the other elements with which it comes into contact."[238] Clare's' fancy' and his woodbines work in this way, perhaps minus the violence Connor implies, binding and contorting around their subjects.

There is a literary heritage to this climbing plant. Rodger Edgecombe has shown how, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the woodbine is an embrace, initiated by Titania as Bottom lies passive ('sleep thou') and she wraps around him.[239] In its fragrant, colourful embrace the woodbine is ripe for this, the image substantiated by the plant's "sweetness and 'amorous' tendency to wind round woods".[240] Woodbine functions in a similar way in Chaucer's *Troilus & Criseyde*

Whan she his trouthe and clene entente wiste,

And as aboute a tree, with many a twiste,

Bytrent and writh the swote wodebynde,

Gan ech of hem in armes other wynde.[241]

*When she knew his truth and clean intent, as about a tree with many tendrils encircles and wreathes the sweet woodbine, so they began to wind each other in their arms.* (my translation)

[236] Ibid., lines 128-29.
[237] John Clare, "The Summer Shower" in *Poems of the Middle Period*, iii, 425, lines 1-4.
[238] Steve Connor, "Thinking Things" *Textual Practice,* 24:1, (2010): 12.
[239] Rodney Sterling Edgecombe, "Titania's Reference to Woodbine in A Midsummer Night's Dream, IV. I". *The Upstart Crow*, XXI, (2001): 82.
[240] Ibid.*,* 83.
[241] Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, in Christopher Cannon, ed. *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2008), 471, iii, 1229-1232

The embrace is underpinned by the completeness of a climbing plants entwinement. It is not a brief contact of an overlapping branch but a circular enrapture that grows, flowers and does not let go; twisting around and bringing the two objects together in one fecund, floral joining. It is this recurrent amorous nature of the plant which seems to prime it for Clare's use and his interest. It is a plant which enacts a relationship, not coldly biological but fecundly personal.

This 'amorous' nature of the woodbine seems to be part of its appeal to Clare – that sense of affection and familiarity it carries, the way in which it holds things and how crucial this sense of tactile, caring interaction is for dwelling (as seen in the birds nest poems above). Ashton Nichols argues that a broad range of Romantic natural history "emphasised not *separate* but rather *connected* creation, a unified tree or web of life and living things", and I would argue it is this form of interconnected ecological living that Clare's woodbines embody, it enacts the twisting complexity of the ecology of the woodland, the way in which nothing stands independent but is ever in relation to something else.[242] Woodbines rely on trees and hedges to give structure to their growth, just as woods and other features of the landscape give shape and focus to Clare's poetry. In its affectionate entwining it seems to offer a metaphorical lens through which to look at how Clare inhabits and interacts with space – through tactile interaction and a warm affection.

***Section Five: Bowers***

Clare often seems to yearn for submersion in the woodland:

> … there let me be
>
> By the grey powdered trunk of old oak tree
>
> Buried in green delights [243]

This possibility of immersion is encapsulated in the form of the 'wild wood bower'.[244] Bower is a varied word. It can mean some fluid form of partially or fully idealised fixed abode, either "A dwelling, habitation, abode. […] A cottage", "a vague poetic word for an idealized abode, not realized in any actual dwelling" or "A fancy rustic cottage or country residence." (OED) In the woodland, it still seems

[242] Ashton Nichols, *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Towards Ubernatural Roosting* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 16.
[243] Clare, "The Robins Nest", lines 13-15.
[244] John Clare, "To a Bower", *The Early Poems of John Clare*, ii, 231, line 5.

to carry these possibilities of dwelling, of fixed habitation, but is also the idea of "A place closed in or overarched with branches of trees, shrubs, or other plants; a shady recess, leafy covert." (OED) Bower is therefore a word which can be flexible in its precise meaning, but works around a loose centre of dwelling, of a settled space to live in which is more natural than a regular house. Bate describes these "secluded spots, the bowers where he encloses himself under an old ivy-covered oak in Oxey Wood or Langley Bush or below Lee Close Oak" as 'harbours of security'.[245] They share with the hollow trees role as a temporary shelter - "Labour sought a sheltering place / Neath some thick wood woven bower".[246] But they are also a far more fecund, floral space to Clare, leaving a far more pronounced mark on the senses:

> While the woodbines sweet perfume
>
> & the roses blushing bloom
>
> Lovly cieling of the bower
>
> Arches in & peeps a flower [247]

They combine this fragrant, colourful quality with the security of the hollow tree. However, what truly sets them apart is the immersion within nature which they afford. As seen before, the hollow tree image offers a tantalising glimmer of a hermits life but is rather a transitory space to its temporary inhabitants. Bowers in contrast both offer and enact an immersion:

> When happy feelings cross the mind,
>
> That fill with calmness all the heart
>
> When all around one boughs are twined
>
> When naught but green leaves fill the eye [248]

It is telling the 'bower' can also act as a verb: both 'To embower; to enclose' and 'To lodge, shelter, make one's dwelling.' (OED), giving the possibility that this is not a static fixture of the wood but something which is active, which can envelop and submerge you. They are an extension of the entwinement of the woodbine – wherein the tendrils do not only encircle a trunk but join branches, flowers, shrubs and the resident individual in order to offer a completely entwined space – one which allows each of the individual's senses to be embedded by the natural surrounds.

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[245] Bate, *John Clare A Biography*, 31.
[246] John Clare, "Recollections After a Ramble", *The Early Poems of John Clare*, ii, 187, lines 125-26.
[247] John Clare, "Solitude", *The Early Poems of John Clare*, ii, 338, lines 83-86.
[248] Clare, "Walk in the Woods", line 104-07.

The interlinking between the two woodland features can be seen in how often they are brought together by other writers. In Thomson's *The Seasons* (1730) we can find this encircling nature of the woodlands, these "twining woody haunts" which lead people "into their leaf-strewn walks".[249] They are almost absorbent in their complexity, drawing in poetic attention and corporeal investigation. It is in the bowers of the woodland that this essential character is crystallised, these "secret-winding flower-enwoven bowers, / Far from the dull impertinence of man".[250] These flowers gain names elsewhere - "Nor in the bower / Where woodbines flaunt and roses shed a couch".[251] The bower extends the interrelational, weaving quality of the woodbine into a more immersive space which the whole body can relax into. As each of these examples reinforce, the link between the woodbine and the bower is clear. They strike to the essential heart of the nature of the woodland, that is, its densely co-existent ecology, in which everything relates to every other thing, and how, if the individual pays attention to this and relaxes into this co-existent web, they too can be enveloped within it.

This conception of the bower image is reinforced in this passage from one of the cottage depictions seen above:

> The dew morn like a shower of pearls
>
> Fell o'er this 'bower of bliss' [252]

The 'shower of pearls' image is slightly more fantastical than Clare usually deploys and draws on the allusion which follows. The Bower of Bliss is the enchanted home of Acrasia in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590). It is easy to see why the passage which surrounds the bower would appeal to Clare and stay with him to be referenced in this late poem. There are

> The painted Flowers, the Trees upshooting high,
>
> The Dales for Shade, the Hills for breathing space,
>
> The trembling, Groves, the Crystal running by [253]

The entwining seen above is there in the depiction of the gate-like entrance to the bower:

> No Gate, but like one, being goodly dight
>
> With Boughs and Branches, which did broad dilate

---

[249] Thomson, *The Seasons*, lines 92 &115.
[250] Ibid., 31, lines 1059-60.
[251] Ibid., 29, lines 979-80.
[252] Clare, "My Early Home was This", lines 13-14.
[253] Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 375 Book ii, Canto XII, 57.

Their clasping Arms, in wanton Wreathings intricate. [254]

It is a space of fecund decadence. Clare's knowing allusion weaves in this fantastical space, gilding the interlaced natural movements around the cottage. Seen in the wider context of his work, this literary allusion is further deepened by Clare's other bower depictions. There is a depth of colour and floral, vivid life lying beneath the word.

However, there is also a lurking pain in the reference. 'My Early Home Was This' is a retrospective poem, written during Clare's asylum years and following the widespread changes to his native landscape. Like so many other woodland and green spaces which Clare knew and loved, Spenser's fantastical 'bower of bliss' is destroyed:

But all those pleasant Bowers, and Palace brave,

Guyon broke down, with Rigour pitiless;

[…]

Their Groves he fell'd, their Gardens did deface,

Their Arbors spoil'd, their Cabinets suppress,

Their Banket-houses burn, their Buildings raze,

And of the fairest late, now made the foulest place. [255]

Writing from the incarceration of the asylum and looking back at his early home, it is easy to see how the destruction of these 'pleasant Bowers' would stick with Clare. To his eyes, his native landscape underwent a similar razing. As local trees are felled and his natal landscape was re-drawn, Clare charts how the scene becomes comprised of "O samely naked leas, so bleak, so strange! / […] No shelter grows to shield, no home invites to rest".[256] It is this loss of the chance of finding a home within the land which Clare seems ever drawn to. Lending his voice to the quarried area Swordy Well, he writes "The butterflyes may wir and come / I cannot keep em now".[257] This changed landscape is unable to 'keep' its previous inhabitants. Now re-shaped by human interference, it is unable to hold its flora and fauna, to provide a home for them. These changes were further compounded by his move to Northborough, living outside of his native Helpston for the first time:

[254] Ibid., 374, Book ii, Canto XII, 53.
[255] Ibid., 381, Book ii, Canto XII, 83.
[256] John Clare, *The Village Minstrel* in *The Early Poems of John Clare*, ii, 123, lines 1228 & 1236.
[257] John Clare, "[The lament of Swordy Well]", in Robinson ed., *John Clare Major Works*, 147, lines 93-94.

Here every tree is strange to me

All foreign things where eer I go

Theres none where boyhood made a swee

Or clambered up to rob a crow

No hollow tree or woodland bower [258]

There are not the birds nests he sought out as a boy, not the trees where he made a swing nor the hollow trees and bowers in which he found temporary lodging. This poem shows how crucial these forms of shelter are to him, to his sense of personhood: "Strange scenes mere shadows are to me / Vague unpersonifying things".[259] Bate highlights the second quoted line as an 'astonishing turn of phrase', and it seems key to how these natural forms of shelter seem to substantiate Clare, seem to directly relate to his ability to prosper psychologically. [260] As seen above, Clare is always drawn to these forms of natural space which can offer him shelter and security, which can allow him to dwell in a place. Without these natural forms of shelter the landscape is exposed, open. Without the possibility of rest, of a shelter in which you can stay, you merely move along the landscape, there is none of the opportunity for immersion, for caring attention to a space which seems vital to Clare's ability to dwell. E. P. Thomson wrote that "Clare may be described, without hindsight, as a poet of ecological protest: he was not writing about man here and nature there, but lamenting a threatened equilibrium in which both were involved."[261] These forms of dwelling seem key to this equilibrium. They are spaces which allow the individual to be entwined, embowered within a space, to be woven into a landscape.

[258] Clare, "The Flitting", lines 97-101.
[259] Clare, "The Flitting", lines 89-90.
[260] Bate, *John Clare A Biography*, 389.
[261] E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Penguin, 1993), 180-81.

## *Chapter Four: Wildness and the Woods.*

### *Section One: Wildness, the woodland and its loss.*

"wild land can be said to be self-willed land. Land that proceeds according to its own laws and principles, land whose habits – the growth of its trees, the movement of its creatures, the free descent of its streams through its rocks – are of its own devising and own execution."[262]

As civilisation grew, the woodland supplied the materials to construct the outward manifestations of human society while also providing its boundaries. It is that which we frame ourselves against, "the classic refuge of the wild and dispossessed", the hidden antithesis to the burgeoning villages and towns. [263] Macfarlane writes on the strong etymological links between wildness and the woodland, wild "drawing from the Old Teutonic root *walthus*, meaning 'forest', *Walthus* entered Old English in its variant forms of 'weald', 'wald', and 'wold', which were used to designate both 'a wild place' and 'a wooded place', in which wild creatures – wolves, foxes, bears – survived. The wild and the wood also graft together in the Latin word *silva*, which means 'forest', and from which emerged the idea of 'savage', with all its connotations of ferality."[264] The woodland has always been associated with those elements of life which lie outside of human control.

In literature, the wild has been routinely depicted "as a dangerous force that confounds the order-bringing pursuits of human culture and agriculture."[265] Thomas Miller's *A Day in the Woods* (1836) calls back to this un-tamed landscape:

> Majestic grandeur stamped that solemn scene,
>
> For weary miles an outstretched forest lay,
>
> But seldom trod by things of mortal mien;
>
> Here Nature sat enthroned in wild array [266]

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[262] Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places*, (London: Granta Books, 2017), 30.
[263] Mary Ward, "The Wooded Landscape of Old English Poetry", *Landscape History*, 34:1 (2013), 27.
[264] Macfarlane, *The Wild Places*, 92.
[265] Ibid., 30.
[266] Thomas Miller, *A Day in the Woods; A Connected Series of Tales and Poems* (London: Smith, Elder and Co. 1836), 301.

He identifies an expanse of waste common near Gainsborough in Lincolnshire as a remnant, or at least a relation of this 'majestic' wilderness:

"Corringham Scroggs has ever been considered the wildest scenery in Lincolnshire: not a single trace of cultivation is visible for many miles around. From time immemorial, it has stood a wide solitude, where nature was left to reign alone; and as if conscious of her security, she hath decked herself in her rudest habiliments."[267]

The "*General View of Agriculture of the County of Lincoln* in 1794 opined that 'this large tract of county' was 'barbarous in the extreme', and in 1851 "the Royal Agricultural Society stated that 'It is a sudden blow to the feelings of an agriculturalist when he enters upon this dreary region of unprofitableness.'"[268] It was a profoundly uncultivated, un-utile space, one in which the land has formed itself over centuries. Contemporary writers such as Robert Macfarlane have reinforced the concept of 'the wild' as a space completely untouched by mankind, nature in its raw primal state. However, to writers of Clare's time the landscape it denotes does not need to be completely untainted by human use. Clare writes of the cows going 'to the wild pasture as their common right' and the woodman enters 'the wild forest'.[269] This isn't the developed sense of 'wild' space we have now, but rather the term is used to denote non-agricultural land, spaces where the landscape has not been tamed by agriculture or aesthetics, which is self-formed.

This form of 'wild' landscape obviously held a huge appeal to Miller, here describing Corringham Scroggs:

"Stubborn old crab-trees, jagged and withered, and twisted into unimaginable forms, stand […] and are twined into a thousand grotesque shapes of springing serpents […] Impenetrable barriers of wild sloes arise in various parts, and overtopping the humbler briars and brambles, bid defiance to all intruders. Dwarf oaks, and ashes of every variety, are crowded together, stem to stem, and their boughs interwreathed so closely, as to render them impervious. Perhaps there is no scenery in England which so resembles one of those savage ancient forests which the earliest romancers loved to describe as this."[270]

The passage is built out of texture and lines. The trees twist against and around one another to make an impenetrable barrier – difficult even to move among never mind put livestock to pasture in or plant

[267] Miller, *A Day in the Woods,* 160-1.
[268] Ian Waites, *Common Land in English Painting, 1700-1850*, (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2012), 111.
[269] John Clare, "The Mores", in Robinson, E. and Powell, D. ed. Poems of the Middle Period 1822-1837 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996-2003), ii, 347, line 26: John Clare, 'The Woodman or the Beauties of a Winter Forest', in Margaret Grainger ed., *The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 5.
[270] Miller, *A Day in the Woods,* 161-2.

crops in. Time has accumulated here, year upon year of nature contorting itself into its own shape, 'leaf upon leaf'.[271] The twining seen in Chapter Three is here a central movement of the woodland, accumulating over centuries. Miller is drawn into this 'disorder', feeling within it the potency of Macfarlane's 'self-willed land'. He pleads: "May the hand of improvement never reach that spot; but as it was first turned rudely rugged from the hand of the Creator, so let it remain, as a solitary specimen of what the earth once was in its savage silence!"[272] Corringham Scroggs was enclosed in 1852, little more than a decade later.[273]

This is emblematic of the pace of landscape change around this time. As Bate notes, "With the Enlightenment, the forest became a place neither of mystery nor sanctuary but rather something to be managed' the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries seeing a rise in and professionalisation of forest management.[274] Woodlands became resource sites rather than places of danger. Miller is acutely aware that the majority, if not all, of this form of landscape is lost. Depicting it, he writes:

> No habitation graced that rugged scene,
>
> No pathway bore the track of man or steed;
>
> Dark trees the dell from steaming sunbeams screen,
>
> Where hungry wolves on slaughtered wild deer feed,
>
> […]
>
> No cultivation here smoothed Nature's face,
>
> No nodding corn, nor hedge-engirded mead,
>
> Across this savage scene the eye could trace [275]

Now he lives among 'nodding corn' and 'hedge-engirded mead', calm and tranquil, the vibrancy and danger drained out of the land. Miller is in some sense yearning for a nature which is wild, uncontrolled. This calmed landscape has been stripped of its immensity, its 'majestic grandeur'.[276] The tamed woodland is not the wild space it once was, but it is as close as you can get to that within England. As Macfarlane notes, "The deepwood has been in decline since the beginning of the Neolithic period. […] The Domesday Book records the forested area of England to compose about 15 percent of

[271] Miller, *A Day in the Woods,* 162.
[272] Ibid., 163.
[273] Waites, *Common Land in English Painting*, 111.
[274] Jonathan Bate, *The Song of The Earth* (London: Picador, 2001), 168-9.
[275] Miller, *A Day in the Woods,* 304.
[276] Ibid., 301.

the total land surface."[277] Williamson details how, by the eighteenth century, only a limited proportion of trees in the landscape were left to grow naturally.[278] Driven by a developing agrarian capitalism and the need to provide for a burgeoning population, the woodlands were increasingly controlled, increasingly less wild. In a landscape in which human society was increasingly dominant, the appeal of this must have grown; as new land management colonised an increasing amount of the landscape it seems unavoidable that wild spaces would have become increasingly attractive.[279] As John Muir wrote at the turn of the twentieth century: "Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wilderness is a necessity".[280] There is an inherent appeal in seeing a naturally formed landscape; witnessing the result of millennia of geological, climatological and evolutionary activity, knowing that these processes are coiled below the landscape, present in the curve of rock and flow of hill. This is the vibrancy of the wild – the sense that it is uncontrolled, that it has a vivid energy which resists the human. It is difficult to articulate this in language, the cackle of energy from being among a wild space seeming to resist verbal shackles. Standing in a wild place releases the structures of thought which govern how we see the world and places us on a scale that is larger, grander, than the day to day concerns of society. It allows a re-situating of the self, a re-framing of where the individual stands and how they relate to the world. It is as these spaces become overtaken by civilisation that we lose that sense of scale: "now the fens is bean tamed efry thing gets smaller".[281]

***Section Two: Order, aesthetics and the wild.***

Alongside the widespread changes in the landscape which enclosure and other new agricultural developments necessitated, as seen in Chapter One, new modes of aesthetics such as the picturesque and the development of parks and landscaped gardens during the era created a new idealised version of how a landscape should be presented. [282] No longer should the natural lines of the land only be re-shaped to be more productive, now they were coerced into shapes to satisfy aesthetic requirements. James Woodhouse is another labouring class poet, but one who is much more closely tied to the upper

[277] MacFarlane, *The Wild Places*, 96.
[278] Tom Williamson, *The Management of Trees and Woods in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2012), 221.
[279] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985), 128.
[280] John Muir, *Our National Parks* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1901), 9.
[281] Paul Kingsnorth, *The Wake* (London: Unbound, 2015), 4.
[282] Ian Waites, "'the Prospect Far and Wide': An Eighteenth-Century Drawing of Langley Bush and Helpston's Unenclosed Countryside." *John Clare Society Journal*, no. 28, 07 (2009): 16.

classes, in particular the poet William Shenstone, who spent much of his life aiming to beautify his estate 'The Leasowes'. In his theory of the picturesque, William Gilpin espoused the idea that "Nature is always great in design; but unequal in composition". It fell to landowners such as Shenstone to re-balance that composition, to trim and hone that greatness into socially accepted forms.[283]

Woodhouse's descriptive works, largely due to his relationship with Shenstone, are focused on these kinds of maintained, designed green spaces. His longest descriptive poem, 'Norbury Park: A Poem' (1803), is dedicated to the place of the same name, owned by William Lock at this point:

> To pace thy curvey slopes—thy sudden swells—
>
> Sequester'd tracks of deep umbrageous dells—
>
> Thy greensward woodland walks and groves antique,
>
> Where Purity may sport, and Love may speak—
>
> Chaunt all thy chaste delights, with rapture high'r,
>
> Than Pindus' heights by Heliconian choir [284]

Lock bought the estate in 1774, after a decade during which thousands of walnut trees had been felled throughout the park. He knew Gilpin personally and shared in his enthusiasm for the picturesque, the estate eventually being presented as a prime example of this new theory of vision and landscape, Gilpin later even dedicating one of his works to Lock.[285] Woodhouse's depiction of this landscape is written in a much more profoundly classical, Pope-influenced tone. The language is heavy, verbose. The objects are always modified by description, becoming a site where abstracts such as 'purity' can frolic. This quoted section offers a glancing survey of the landscape, following its lines, its 'slopes' and 'swells'. Its shape is always harmonious, flowing from the eye and gilded by the lofty references that accompany it.

While working within the bounds of ordained Creation, because 'Materials – tools – ev'n Artists – all are God's!", Woodhouse suggests that people have the power, perhaps even the responsibility, to modify and change this landscape into its most pleasing and harmonious form, not only physically in the form of re-modelling the and 'form or dry a flood, or drain a fen' but also, by extension, re-

[283] Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye* (1782) (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1991), 31.
[284] James Woodhouse, "Norbury Park: A Poem" in Woodhouse, R. I. ed., *The Life and Poetical Works Of James Woodhouse (1735–1820)* (London: 1896), 68-74.
[285] Joan Percy, *In Pursuit of the Picturesque: William Gilpin's Surrey excursion; the places he passed and their claims to fame* (Surrey: Surrey Gardens Trust, 2001), 66-84.

orchestrating the landscape in their poetic depictions of it.[286] His Popean couplets are designed to reinforce the dignity and orchestrated aesthetic of the landscape with a tightly structured smoothness and a pristine finish. He does not spend time on the gritty minutiae of a space but rather seeks to evoke the broad shape, the flowing whole. While no verse is a transparent lens to nature, here it is an obvious, and in Woodhouse's eyes, morally right channelling; forcing the features into constricted lines, re-arranging it at the behest of form and a superimposed concept of dignity and status.

The example of Woodhouse's verse highlights part of what is so distinctive about Clare's linguistic articulation of the woodlands. In 'Pleasant Spots', Clare's narrator rejects these forms of enforcing organising principles upon the land:

> There is a wild & beautiful neglect
>
> About the fields that so delights & cheers
>
> Where nature her own feelings to effect
>
> Is left at her own silent work for years [287]

Clare yearns for this natural progression of growth over the artificial lines of both enclosure and artistic representations of landscape. The quoted lines above do not depict the kind of legacy wilderness space of Corringham Scroggs, rather these are fields which 'neglect' has allowed nature to re-shape, to begin to form its own lines again. This conversion of what would be deemed by the Royal Agricultural Society as a term of mismanagement into the lyrical praise of 'wild & beautiful neglect' encapsulates the difference between the discourse of Improvement and Clare's positions. Not only is the appearance itself aesthetically satisfying, but the fact that it forms itself gives it a depth of beauty that renders superimposed 'prospects' and designs superficial in comparison.

It is an outdated viewpoint to see Clare's writing as some form of completely spontaneous, free-flowing mediation on the natural world. Works such as Mina Gorji's *John Clare and the Place of Poetry* have shown the depth of his awareness of poetic craft, of other writers and how his verse exhibits this learning and intertextuality.[288] However, there is a freedom to his writing, a fluidity to his deployment of form. With a possibly affected show of effortlessness he writes "I cant contain myself in summers prime / & turn my idle wanderings into rhyme".[289] He is creating the image that he is not, in this case, articulating pre-planned sentiments but rather is gently shaping these meanderings. While his more

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[286] Woodhouse, "Norbury Park: A poem", lines 496 & 488.
[287] John Clare, "Pleasant Spots" in *Poems of the Middle Period* ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell 5th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), iv, 299, lines 1-4.
[288] Mina Gorji, *John Clare and the Place of Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008)
[289] John Clare, *Gathering Wild Flowers* in *Poems of the Middle Period*, ii, 289.

extended poems obviously have a more regulated structure, Clare is not constrained by received forms but rather partakes of their structure when it delivers for either his verse or the subject.

Take, for example, his use of sonnets. Rather than drawing on their traditional structures, Lodge writes that Clare "sought a new English form for the sonnet, a form that would emphasize intensity of feeling rather than rhetorical stateliness […] The sonnet was a form for self-reflexive meditation on the constraints and pleasures of form itself; it was also a form framed for comparison". [290] Clare takes this form and unbalances it. His 'Wood Pictures in Spring' moves away from the Shakespearean ABAB rhyme structure to easy-flowing couplets:

> The rich brown-umber hue the oaks unfold
>
> When springs young sunshine bathes their trunks in gold
>
> So rich so beautiful so past the power
>
> Of words to paint—my heart aches for the dower
>
> The pencil gives to soften & infuse
>
> This brown luxuriance of unfolding hues
>
> This living luscious tinting woodlands give
>
> Into a landscape that might breath & live
>
> & this old gate that claps against the tree
>
> The entrance of springs paradise should be
>
> Yet paint itself with living nature fails
>
> —The sunshine threading through these broken rails
>
> In mellow shades—no pencil eer conveys
>
> & mind alone feels fancies & pourtrays [291]

The sonnet takes the form of a loose iambic pentameter, built not upon the hinges of a volte-face or a final twisting couplet, but rather is relatively shapeless, held together by the 14-line limit and rhyme. The tone is decadent, the heavy alliteration of the l's spills over lines 6-8 and gives the illusion of

[290] Sara Lodge, "Contested Bounds: John Clare, John Keats, and the Sonnet." *Studies in Romanticism*, 51, no. 4 (2012): 533.
[291] John Clare, "Wood Pictures in Spring" in *Poems of the Middle Period* ed. Robinson, iv, 242, 1-14.

abundance. The poem revolves around the deficiencies of language. Mina Gorji writes of how "much of his best verse is characterised by a self-consciousness about levels of language and style and sensitivity to ways in which language could place poet and reader", and here Clare is directly addressing the nature of his linguistic vehicle.[292] The final quoted lines declare the inefficiency of depiction through direct representation. There is a naturality and purity in the 'mellow shades' of this threading sunshine which "no pencil eer conveys / & mind alone feels fancies & pourtrays". Here, Clare is asserting that nature and the imagination both have a potency beyond that of writing. The 'picture' does not aim to be what we would now consider as photographic. There is a deep awareness of the limits of what his writing can do in the face of these flowing shades, a maturity of recognition of the inefficiency of writing compared to the natural form. He counteracts these limitations by working in broad brushstrokes of hues and variations alongside concrete particularities, 'living luscious tinting' alongside the old gate and oak trunks. The question then is to why use the sonnet form at all. In the dense co-existence of the woodland, the narrower lens necessitates some focus, stopping the poem from wandering off under the canopy. The metre gives the poem a pleasing fluidity that works with the hues of this 'brown luxuriance'. The rhyme, still based in couplets, is built out of an unforced, organic language. It is not made bulky by imported references or overtly decadent terminology, but rather acts as a delicate skeleton-like form which gives shape to this language. Clare draws on the size and scope of the sonnet, but has loosened it up, allowed his topic to dictate the direction of the poem while still using the form as a focal lens. He does not aim to smother or overly control the subject, rather relaxes his focus, recognises the gaps which surround all depiction and lets the reading mind fill in the colour. In this way, the natural form of the object, its inherent appeal and potency, remains and is allowed to shine through the verse lens.

The freedom of his writing is most evident in his prose, where the removal of poetry's infrastructure and Clare's lack of attention to formal grammar allow the language to cascade. Gorji writes on 'effusion' as a poetic style, associated with originality, "one in which wildness, irregularity and warmth were called on as signs of genuine feeling, imaginative transport and poetic genius".[293] This effusion is at its most vibrant and abundant in the following passage from Clare's journal:

"I always admire the kindling freshness that the bark of the different sorts of trees & underwood assume in the forest – the 'foulyroyce' twigs kindling into a vivid color at their tops as red

[292]Mina Gorji, *John Clare and the Place of Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 3.
[293] Gorji, *John Clare and the Place of Poetry*, 28.

as wood pigeons claws the ash with its grey bark & black swelling buds the Birch with its 'paper rind' & the darker mottled sorts of hazle black alder with the greener hues of sallows willows".[294]

To 'kindle' is to inflame, to arouse (OED). It is defined by Margaret Grainger in her notes to this passage as 'growing brighter', and helps show the cumulating, swelling impetus of the colour and quantity of the passage. The near complete absence of punctuation allows Clare to almost pour these trees onto the page as the passage engages in the enthusiastic process of collection. The 'black swelling buds' merge into the birch, while the colours of the wood pigeon's claws flow into the gray bark of the ash. It is one fluid intermingling of object and colour. Ian Waites comments on Sir Joshua Reynolds' ideas that art should depict nature generally rather than minutely, "The detail of the natural world was considered too lowly, too base, and always needed to be sacrificed to a greater, more idealised whole."[295] Here, Clare has worked in precisely the opposite way, pouring the detail onto the page before any concept of structure or aesthetics. He does not smother these objects with description, restricting his representation of the ash above to noting its "grey bark & black swelling buds". The passage is pure and fecund in its sparseness of description, comprised of only colour, object and movement. The freedom from the chronological progress of sentence structure and strict grammar allows the text a simultaneity of impression. Approaching the landscape with a style of representation *a priori* inevitably leads to a form of 'framing', "creating a landscape by restabilising formal boundaries in an otherwise open-ended environment, within which the various elements of the landscape can be harmonised and composed".[296] It necessitates a contortion of the original space, a distancing of the reader from the real, living scene. This passage does not afford the reader a perspective from which to approach this passage outside of the basic consecutive progress of the language. Clare's mode of representing the woodland here resists being coalesced into an orchestrated scene, and the passage suggests that woodland is antithetical to classical ideas of perceiving a landscape. The woodland does not allow you the distance to see it all at once, does not give you the elevation that allows a 'prospect', the eyes and body instead hemmed in by the encircling trees.

The act of writing landscape-based poetry necessitates a negotiation with this idea of order in the natural environment. If the written text is given such responsibility to amplify and sustain the landscape, then its form is a vital component, the vehicle which sustains that operation. While Clare's verse is evidently in no sense 'wild', rather than approaching the landscape via received theoretical modes and trying to overly control the landscape he is depicting, Clare uses the linguistic and poetic

[294] Clare in Grainger, ed., *The Natural History Prose Writings,* 45-46.
[295] Waites, "'the Prospect Far and Wide'", 19.
[296] Scott Hess, "John Clare, William Wordsworth, and the (Un)framing of Nature" *John Clare Society Journal*, 27 (2008): 28.

structures to give shape to his impressions without distorting them. There is a vibrancy and dynamism, a kind of groundswell of latent energy in nature's own form, its wildness. Clare tries not to dampen that vibrancy, not to smother that energy, but rather to use structures to give it a coherency.

***Section Three: Immersion and religion in the woodland.***

To the fundamentally religious audience of the time, these underlying ideas of order and form within nature seem inextricably linked to ideas of Creation, the structuring which writing necessitates meaning that the author must engage with the warring ideas of nature having a self-generated 'divine' order. Note above how Woodhouse sees this interaction with the landscape in explicitly religious terms.[297] It is here in the woodland's less societally-controlled state where Clare is able to trace the patterns of Creation's natural growth more easily. And Clare's language seems to be at its most religious when in the woodland. His verse is rarely lecturing or overly pious, rather it is flecked with references to divinity. Take this moment from his depiction of an autumnal wood:

> Thy pencil dashing its excess of shades
>
> Improvident of waste till every bough
>
> Burns with thy mellow touch
>
> Disorderly divine [298]

Autumn is cast as an artist. The life and the abundance of the colour which autumn is providing here animates each of these lines., contagiously spilling over each bough. The vivacity of the colour is there in the burning, while the 'mellow touch' brings with it the peacefulness of the actual transition of autumn. Clare did not approach faith lightly, in his own words he had 'thought seriosly of religion'.[299] By keeping the 'divine' merely as descriptive Clare allows the scene to share the qualities of God's divinity without making it explicitly religious. The holy is animating, giving colour and form, but without obscuring leaves themselves. As Sarah Houghton-Walker writes, "Nature is not therefore divine in itself. Nature is, and God is, and the one intimates the other's presence", nature is not sacramental

[297] Woodhouse, "Norbury Park: A Poem", 496.
[298] John Clare, "Autumn" in *Poems of the Middle Period* ed. Robinson, iii, 267, 101-04.
[299] Robinson, E. and Powell, D. ed., *John Clare by Himself* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1996), 78.

but only points towards the divine.[300] Clare's poetry thus expresses a faith almost of intuition, of looking at the world and feeling the impression of there being something *more.*[301]

As seen in the previous chapter's discussion of 'The Robins Nest', there is an emphasis on the age of the woodland.[302] Here, this 'this old spot' morphs into a form of spirituality:

> Lost in such extacys in this old spot
>
> I feel that rapture which the world hath not
>
> That joy like health that flushes in my face
>
> Amid the brambles of this ancient place
>
> Shut out from all but that superior power
>
> That guards & glads & cheers me every hour
>
> That wraps me like a mantle from the storm
>
> Of care & bids the cold[est] hope be warm
>
> That speaks in spots where all things silent be
>
> In words not heard but felt—each ancient tree
>
> With lickens deckt—times hoary pedigree
>
> Becomes a monitor to teach & bless
>
> & rid me of the evils cares possess
>
> & bids me look above the trivial things [303]

The place provokes a pleasure which 'the world hath not', which is invoked by this woodland but which is not of this world. Everything else is shut out from this space except 'that superior power', God implied but not named. Here, the supernatural is a protective presence which is directly linked to the landscape, only speaking in specific 'spots', and in which the trees themselves become instructive presences. These spiritually vocal trees work alongside the implicit Christianity of a term such as 'rapture' and the traces of paganism in this depiction to cast the woodland as a semi-sacred space. Christianity enacted a clear hierarchy between man and nature in place of the paganism which came

[300] Sarah Houghton-Walker, *John Clare's Religion* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009), 148.
[301] Ibid., 198.
[302] John Clare, "The Robins Nest" in *Poems of the Middle Period*, iii, 532, 23-26.
[303] Clare, "The Robins Nest", lines 23-26.

before it, which was characterised by Della Hooke in relation to Anglo-Saxon England as "the indivisibility of the natural world, the subsuming of individuality into the stream of life […] and the existence of meaningful relationships between humans and the trees, beasts, water bodies and landforms that constituted the context of their lives".[304] There is a sense in which Clare's verse shares in these beliefs more than those of traditional Christianity. When immersed in these natural spaces there is the impression of his individuality merging with the environment, of their edges fraying and bleeding into this space, of them being "Lost in a wilderness of listening leaves".[305] Clare's faith is not abstract but rather is comprised of his feelings towards the real objects of the land around him. Rather than organised religion, this seems to be a more primal spirituality. It is the simplest form of relationship with God: "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made".[306] There is no need for a mediator between Clare and Creation, rather his faith is animated by his exposure to nature.

This sense of an animating divinity combines with Clare's desire for immersion in nature to render the woodlands a space with a potentiality not only to escape the complications of society, but to leave those behind for something more elemental. It is in this isolating form of nature that Clare is most distant from man and closest to organic life in. This escape in the woodlands is an essential part of Clare's relationship to them, seen at its simplest in these lines: "I love to roam the woods… Till hidden as it where from all the world / I stand and muse upon the pleasant scene".[307] The woodlands are able to be this immersive space through their different fundamental features: the shade of the encasing canopy, the permeable yet opaque frontier of trees, the "strange play with volumes" which serve to confuse your sense of depth and perspective.[308]

Away from society, the 'wild' can be a space which allows a purity of focus and relationship between the individual and Everything. This is seen most clearly here, as Clare leaves behind any human presence and becomes

> One unembodied thought
>
> Thinks the heart into stillness as the world

[304]Hooke, D. *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England: Literature, Lore and Landscape* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 2010), 22.
[305] Clare, "The Nightingales Nest", lines 32.
[306] Holy Bible, KJV, ed. Robert Carroll and Stephen Pricket, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Romans I, 20.
[307] John Clare, *The Woods* in *Poems of the Middle Period* iii, 545, lines 1-6.
[308] Robert P. Harrison, *Forests – The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press Ltd., 1992), 206.

Was left behind for something green & new [309]

There is a meditative quality to the lines, as Clare seems to leave behind his body, become still and find something 'green & new'. This strain of thought draws on a long Christian tradition of reckoning with God and your place within the universe through an isolation in nature. Macfarlane recounts how, in Britain between 500 and 1000 Ad, 'an extraordinary migration occurred […] Monks, anchorites, solitaries and other devout itinerants began to travel in their thousands to the bays, forests, promontories, mountain-tops and islands of the Atlantic littoral."[310] They became known as the *Peregrini,* and sought to leave society, searching for wilderness so as to "achieve correspondence between belief and place, between inner and outer landscapes."[311] It is interesting to note the similarities between some of these works by these *Peregrini* and those by Clare, a telling example being an untitled work by a tenth century unknown Irish author: "I have a hut in the wood, none knows it but my Lord; an ash tree this side, a hazel on the other, a great tree on a mound encloses it".[312] The hut is situated in 'the path-filled forest', with 'a lintel of honey-suckle' (also known as woodbine) around the door.[313] Hermit huts and declarations of yearning for solitude appear throughout Clare's writing, as seen in the previous chapter. Many of the poems share in Clare's focus on the minute particularities of the scene, focusing not on an overhanging power but on immediately at hand natural phenomena. While these early Christian hermits went far deeper into a wilderness than Clare ever ventured into, the essential dynamic remains the same. He cannot find true isolation on a windswept, sea-beaten island, but he can venture deep enough into the woodland that he seems to be

The only one that treads

The each at such a time […]

So vacant is the mass

That spreads around me one huge sea of leaves

& intertwining grains of thickest shades [314]

There is a textural depth to the imagery, built out of thick shades and the sea. Again, the dominant image of the woodland is weaving, 'intertwining'. Through the near-paradoxical image of shades as

[309] Clare, *The Woods*, lines 16-18.
[310] Macfarlane, *The Wild Places*, 24.
[311] *Wild Places,* p.24.
[312] Anon. "[The Hermit's Hut]" in Kenneth H. Jackson, *A Celtic Miscellany: Translations from the Celtic Literatures* (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 68.
[313] Ibid. 68.
[314] Clare, "The Woods", lines 8-12.

'grains' and the leaves as sea Clare creates a surface which is both fluid and fractured. There is a purposeful tension between the connectivity of the 'intertwining' and the distinctly fragmentary 'grains'. Both words are organic, derived from nature. The imagination struggles to resolve the image and it is that charged, visual ambiguity that gives the image a linguistic energy, the image of the sea as leaves suggesting waves flickering with the sea shining down upon it, refracting light, always in motion and yet always constant. The impression is of the individual happily lost within this swirling, solid depth.

While they cannot provide the awe-fear sublimity of the ocean or mountain ranges, the features of the woodland give this openness to Creation a more pronounced immediacy:

> The woods are like a ocean
>
> All moving at his breath
>
> Praise spreads the wild commotion
>
> Around above beneath [315]

The final quoted line reinforces the encirclement of the woods, but here that visual surrounding is reinforced with the movement of the wind, 'his breath', and the all-animating divine presence it brings. The immersion becomes spiritual as well as visual, whilst the religious element is restricted to the simple and indirect 'his' and merely serves to coalesce and aggrandise the scene rather than deflecting the reader's attention to the Heavens.

This role of the wind helps explicate why the woodland seems to gain a more spiritual impression in Clare's writings. There is a richness and variety of auditory impressions offered by the woodland. There is even an instrumental quality to the way in which wind and wood combine. Clare complains of the

> Monotony of home when field[s] are full
>
> Of beauty & the woodlands ceaseless chime
>
> Aerial music mysterys grand sublime [316]

While both the fecundity of the fields and the woodland are contrasted to the mundanity of the home, it is in the woodland that the language gains an expressiveness, swelling in its scale to mimic the heightened visual and aural impressions of the woods. It is the music of the air, a union of two parts

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[315] John Clare, "Natures Melodys The Music of the Storm" in *Poems of the Middle Period* ed. Robinson, iii, 421, 8-11.
[316] John Clare, "Gathering Wild Flowers" in *Poems of the Middle Period* ed. Robinson, ii, 290.

of nature in one overhanging swaying mass. This is not random sounds, but rather 'the song of wood & wind […] natures melody", it is patterned, fluid, musical. [317] Here is the rapture in nature which gently animates so much of Clare's work. He cannot travel to the Alps, cannot, as Byron does, claim that "My altars are the mountains and the Ocean".[318] In the largely flat and open landscape he inhabited he found the sublime in the height and texture of the woodland. This sense of the sublime is further reinforced by the use of 'chime' above, with its attendant connotations of church bells, the 'ecclesiastic measures of everyday rhythm'.[319]

This swaying, wind-tuned canopy becomes nature's church roof, a holy place of Creation and is part of Clare's use of the "terminology of ecclesiastical architecture" when depicting nature.[320] It is in the vaulted ceilings of the canopy and the encircling walls of the trees that this language becomes most ecclesiastical, "The arching groves of ancient lime / That into roofs like churches climb".[321] The woodland becomes a cathedral with the interwoven branches church ceilings. This was an idea that held sway in leading intellectual and architectural theory of the time, "Goethe, Schlegel, Coleridge and Chateaubriand likened the Gothic cathedral to a petrified forest". [322] There is a deep-rooted tie in form between the forest and ecclesiastical architecture, made material in numerous church ceilings such as King's College Chapel, Cambridge. It is not so much that the Gothic and ecclesiastical architecture grew directly from the use of this form of construction, but that the latter form was designed to mimic the other, these free-growing nature-cathedrals.

In this way, the woodlands are linked by design to the central sacred spaces of western society. This relationship existed even more directly before the arrival of Christianity. Sacred groves held a prominent place in European pagan faiths, and tree worship in groves was still present up to the eleventh century in England.[323] While Clare himself does not return to these pre-Christian woodland beliefs in any prolonged manner, his ecclesiastical woodlands seem to grow out of them. They are spaces in which it is possible, maybe even necessary, to contemplate something beyond the natural, which divert the mind to the enormity of existence. This semi-wild space offered Clare a retreat from the village and the chance of immersion in something deeper. It is as these natural, wild spaces are taken over that the world seems to shrink as the human reach grows. This wildness is tamed in the

[317] Clare, "The Wind & Trees" in *Later Poems of John Clare*, ed. Robinson, i, 422, lines 17-20.
[318] Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, in Quiller-Couch, A. *Byron: Poetry & Prose*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1943), III, 104, line 22.
[319] Emma Mason, "Ecology with religion: kinship in John Clare" In *New Essays on John Clare – Poetry, Culture and Community* – ed. Simon Kövesi and Scott McEathron (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 106.
[320] Houghton-Walker, *Clare's Religion*, 205.
[321] John Clare, "The Progress of Rhyme", *Poems of the Middle Period,* Robinson ed., iii, 496, lines 173-4.
[322] Simon Bell, Ingrid Herlin, Richard Stiles eds., *Exploring the Boundaries of Landscape Architecture* (London: Routledge, 1996), 19.
[323] Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*, 31.

woodland, managed by the woodman and the outside agriculture, but it is still there. Clare cannot completely lose himself here. As seen in Chapter Three, he is torn between these natural spaces and the village. They are not the isolated outposts that those early Christians escaped to up and down the Atlantic coast, but they are the modern descendants of those wild spaces, islands of that vibrancy and energy which keeps drawing Clare in.

## *Conclusion*

As has been seen, Clare's lifetime saw radical changes in how communities and individuals were able to exist in rural England. Enclosure changed the shape of the landscape Clare grew up in, re-choreographing how local communities and individuals were able to function. Although increasingly managed by figures such as the woodman, in this context the woodland remained as a bastion of less-controlled nature, a space in which it is possible to dwell in a radically different way to the increasingly capitalist, market-driven English countryside. In a landscape re-articulated by the Enclosure Acts as one of ownership in a new precise, legalistic framework, Clare's writing has true value in giving a voice both to the lower classes who were most profoundly impacted by these changes and to the landscape which was being quarried, fenced-off and re-drawn.

This latter point is one of the main appeals of Clare's writing. As Bate writes, "Because we are post-Enlightenment readers, I will never convince you by rational argument that the land sings, that a brook may feel pain, but by reading Clare you might be led to imagine the possibility. In Adorno and Horkheimer's phrase, the poem might re-enchant the world. It can only do so if it is understood as an experiencing of the world, not a description of it."[324] Clare performs this voice-giving both in the hope that it may allow the reader to feel the landscape as he does and as a lament for how in so many of these instances it is too late for empathy to have any effect. His verse is an awareness both of the pleasures of a harmonious existence with nature and a marker of the damage human societies have inflicted upon the natural world.

Opposed to the surveyors emphasis on delineating ownership of a space, Clare's interaction with the woodland revolves around the possibility of dwelling, of putting down roots and becoming personally intertwined in a space. While he can rest for a moment and wait out a summer shower in a hollow tree, it is this rooted dwelling which Clare is truly drawn to. So much of Clare's writing is about loving and belonging, belonging to a place and loving the phenomena that make it up, this thesis has argued that is the woodland which is the richest space for these feelings. It should be remembered that for all his writing of hermits huts and the deepwood, Clare never did go to live alone in nature. As much as he was drawn to these possibilities of secluded dwelling, he never disentangled himself from society, never left behind his family and literary career. His writings on the woodland offer us the temptation of a different form of living, one outside of the market and interwoven in the deepwood, but these are spaces remain ephemeral, tantalising possibilities. Yet the strength of their appeal to Clare and his consequent readers shows the human urge for a sense of belonging which has a true depth to it, a sense of belonging which is a relationship not only with the society that surrounds you

[324] Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2001), 167.

but the landscape as well – in which the environment substantiates the sense of self. In an ideal world, this nature-based sense of dwelling would have a profound strength to it, rooted in the immovable ground, but the events and changes seen during Clare's life underscore the fragility of this bond, its vulnerability to political change.

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