THE REPRESENTATION OF POPULAR CULTURE IN THE WORK OF JOHN CLARE 1815-1827

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the representations of popular culture in the early work of John Clare (1815-1827). It argues that they form a crucial and hitherto neglected strand of his work, and that close study of them sheds much light on the fractures and instabilities in his poetry arising from his ambivalent and compromised status as 'Peasant Poet'.

The argument begins with an examination of the role of popular culture in the autobiographical prose, an aspect of Clare's work which has previously been largely ignored, and continues with a discussion of Clare's contrasting attempt at creating a poetic genealogy for himself in 'The Village Minstrel'. These chapters bring out the ways in which his writing about popular culture betrays Clare's anxieties about his entitlement to the realm of polite literature, and the following chapter explores this further by setting his work in the context of contemporary antiquarian discourse about popular culture, showing how this discourse created a socially-inflected authorial identity which distorted Clare's sense both of himself and his material.

The fourth chapter continues this line of argument to examine Clare's 'collection' of folk songs, an aspect of Clare's work which has been largely ignored since its documentation by George Deacon in 1983. It argues that this body of work is misunderstood if it is seen as a proto-folkloric exercise, but should rather be read in tandem with the 'gossip tales' of the early-1820s as an artistic project aimed at rendering the locality of Helpston in all its cultural as well as physical aspects. The fifth chapter serves as a conclusion to the thesis, and draws together its strands in an examination of *The Shepherd's Calendar*, arguing that in it Clare achieves a fragile and temporary balance between the opposing forces which dogged his representations of popular culture.

DECLARATION

Some of the material included in this thesis, particularly in the concluding chapter's discussion of *The Shepherd's Calendar* draws on material from my MA dissertation *The Representation of Folk Culture in John Clare's Early Poetry: 1819-1827* which was submitted as my dissertation for the MA in Romanticism in the Department of English and Related Literature at the University of York in 1994.

ABBREVIATIONS

Cottage Tales	*John Clare: Cottage Tales*, ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell and P.M.S. Dawson (Ashington and Manchester: Mid Northumberland Arts Group and Carcanet Press Ltd, 1993)
Critical Heritage	*Clare: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Mark Storey (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973)
Early Poems I	*The Early Poems of John Clare 1804-1822 Volume I*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989)
Early Poems II	*The Early Poems of John Clare 1804-1822 Volume II*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989)
JCBH	*John Clare: by Himself*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1996)
Letters	*The Letters of John Clare*, ed. Mark Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985)
Midsummer Cushion	*John Clare: The Midsummer Cushion*, ed. Kelsey Thornton and Anne Tibble (Northumberland: Mid Northumberland Arts Group and Carcanet Press, 1990)
Oxford Authors Clare	*The Oxford Authors: John Clare*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984)
Prose	*The Prose of John Clare*, ed. J.W. and Anne Tibble (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1951)
Shepherd's Calendar	*John Clare: The Shepherd's Calendar*, ed. Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993)

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INTRODUCTION

1: ORIENTATIONS

> The most important thing to understand about Clare as a poet, despite his debts to Cowper, Thomson, Milton, and the Cavalier Poets, is that he grows out of popular culture - a popular culture not narrowly defined by the professional folklorist but reflective of the wide gamut of popular taste in his period. Ballad and broadsheet, vaudeville and pantomime, poster and woodcut, jig and sailor's hornpipe, neck-verse and bawdy, sermon and moral tale, spelling-book and fairy story, sailor's lies and fairground prattle, all are close to his heart and are reflected in his poetry. The ballad-singer, the ploughman, the quack, the ranting minister, the milkmaid, the foddering boy, the parish clerk, and many others all occur in his cast of characters. Clare creates an all-encompassing world in which one's imagination may journey endlessly, but above all it is a world of the people.[1]

This quotation is taken from the introduction by Eric Robinson and David Powell to the first volume of their edition of the early poems of John Clare, and they continue by suggesting some of the ways in which they think his work can be seen as emerging from popular culture. They point to the close links between Clare's verse-tales and the traditions of story-telling in his village (*Early Poems I*, pp. xvi-xvii) and insist that it is impossible properly to appreciate his songs without an understanding of the traditions of popular song with which they link them - 'we should never forget that [Clare's songs] are written by a purchaser of street-ballads, a fiddler at public houses, a lover of gypsies and gypsy music, and a frequenter of concerts and the vaudeville' (*Early Poems I*, p. xix). Robinson and Powell give over much of their introduction to this insistence on the importance of the relationship between Clare's work and popular culture, and since this introduction stands at the head of the massive, still incomplete Oxford edition of Clare's poetry, its importance cannot be underestimated. To place such a strongly-worded claim at the gateway of scholarly access to Clare's work amounts to an attempt to establish the terms of critical debate through which Clare's work in its entirety is to be apprehended, and their argument thus takes on a significance far beyond anything it could possess through its intrinsic merits.

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[1] *Early Poems I*, p. xiv.

However, Robinson and Powell are not alone in suggesting that the concept of popular culture is crucial to an understanding of Clare's work. For instance, John Lucas represents Clare's beginnings as a writer as a passage from an oral popular culture into a print culture -

> Clare's purchase of Thomson's *The Seasons* in 1806 marks his entry into print culture. It is a kind of rite of passage away from the oral culture into which he was born ... Parker Clare [Clare's father] could read a little but he certainly couldn't write. On the other hand, he knew over a hundred ballads by heart, and he would often sing them to his family. Commentators tend to marvel at this and at his son's capacious memory for song, ballad and the Bible. But there is nothing unusual about this among people who have to depend upon memory; it's what oral culture is.
>
> Clare drew on this culture and its traditions all his life. He loved the ballads he learned from his father and into which, as he sang them back, he would sometimes introduce verses of his own.[2]

This draws heavily on Clare's own account of his childhood in his autobiographical prose work *Sketches in the Life of John Clare*, but when Lucas goes on to state that 'Clare's deep commitment to this ballad tradition is crucial for a proper understanding of his work' (Lucas, p. 7), he is making a claim for the importance of Clare's background in and debt to popular culture which is of a similar strength to that made by Robinson and Powell in their introduction.

In this thesis I will be arguing that both of these passages are right insofar as they draw our attention to the importance of Clare's relation to popular culture. However, like almost every other critic who has touched on this matter, they skirt far too lightly over the key terms in the matter, both in their confidence that they, and we, can know more or less intuitively what a 'popular culture' might consist of, and in their assumption that it is sufficient simply to say either that Clare 'grows out of popular culture' or that he 'drew on this culture and its traditions all his life'. Both of these formulations serve to mask the extreme complexity of that which they seek to explain - neither the nature of popular culture nor the relationship

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[2] John Lucas, *John Clare* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), p. 5.

between it and Clare's work are sufficiently self-evident for such formulations to do any sort of justice to them.

There has been no previous in-depth consideration of these issues, most critics tending either to ignore the subject altogether or to be content with brief formulae like those of Robinson and Powell (who, for all the importance they attach to this concept, do little to provide a framework within which to understand the nature of the relationship between Clare's work and 'popular culture') and Lucas. The only full-length work which has addressed itself to any aspect of this subject is George Deacon's groundbreaking study of Clare's song and tune collecting, to which all Clare scholars are deeply indebted[3]. However, despite the enormous value of his work in its amassing of evidence, revealing for the first time the sheer extent of Clare's activities as a collector, Deacon's reflections in his introduction on the nature of Clare's relation to popular culture are severely vitiated, both by his adherence to an unsophisticated and picturesque notion of 'folk culture', and by his inadequacy as a literary critic. For instance, his attempt to provide a framework within which to understand '[Clare's] response to the folk tradition' (*John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, p. 75) consists of suggesting that there are 'three phases' into which it falls:

> The first is that period in which he is venturing to imitate the songs that he has heard or read ... Some of these were included in *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* but the majority of the poems in that volume come from what I should regard as the second phase in Clare's development. He had by this time become aware of a larger literary world, which bore little relation to the poetry he had been brought up with. In this period Clare writes only tentatively about his village tradition, unsure of its merit as a stylistic base or theme for his own works. With the publication of *Poems Descriptive*, however, he gained access to a circle of writers and scholars ... [he] also acquired a selection of those books which concerned themselves with aspects of the folk tradition and represented it as something of literary value ... Thus we come to the third phase of Clare's use of the folk tradition. The confidence he gained as a result of finding the tradition as he knew it represented in "proper" books as opposed to cheap broadsides and chapbooks manifests itself in his writing ... Clare now begins to write with an assurance that was perhaps missing from his earlier work ... the ill-fitting language he had acquired from literary works was abandoned in favour of his own natural speech. (*John Clare and The Folk Tradition*, pp. 75-76)

This is clearly inadequate on a number of levels. Firstly, on a general level, it does not come anywhere close to doing justice to the complexities and ambiguities of Clare's relationship with and mediation of popular culture. This relationship certainly was subject to change, but not, as will become clear throughout my thesis, in anything like the simply chronological way which Deacon here suggests. Secondly, in its claim that Clare's earliest poems were solely influenced by the popular songs of his parents, it fails to acknowledge Clare's own account in *Sketches in the Life of John Clare*, wherein he claims that his first attempts at writing poetry were in fact occasioned by his encounter with Thomson's *Seasons* (*JCBH*, pp. 10-11). Thirdly, it illustrates a problem with the whole of Deacon's introduction, in that he is too prone to make statements such as 'the ill-fitting language [Clare] had acquired from literary works was abandoned in favour of his own more natural speech' (*John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, p. 76), without any attempt to analyse either the 'ill-fittingness' of literary language or the 'naturalness' of Clare's 'own speech'. I should emphasise here that in dismissing Deacon thus I am not in any way calling into question the enormous value of his research, merely suggesting that his commentary on his own work is far from adequate to the scope of the questions he has raised. In fact, all Clare scholars owe an enormous debt to Deacon for displaying through his research both the extent and the intimacy of Clare's involvement with the traditions of popular song. His introduction, for all the flaws I have identified with it, is nonetheless also valuable in that it indicates the sheer panoramic wealth of Clare's engagement (both in poetry and in prose) with all forms of popular culture: not only with the traditions of song and verse which are his main subject, but also with the cultural practices - customs, festivals and superstitions - which he refers to in his section on 'John Clare and the folk customs of Helpston' (Deacon, pp. 67-74).

However, since Deacon's work, there has been surprisingly little consideration of the relationship between Clare's work and popular culture. This is perhaps partly a function of the way in which Clare criticism has remained trapped in the categories established for it in the

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[3] George Deacon, *John Clare and the Folk Tradition* (London: Sinclair Browne Ltd, 1983).

nineteenth century, whereby he is seen almost exclusively as a descriptive poet of the natural world, a genius maybe, but a *natural* genius, unreflective and with little or nothing of interest to say about the human world. The comment attributed by Taylor to Keats on Clare's poem 'Solitude', together with Taylor's response to it, provides an exemplary instance of how this has affected the response to Clare down the years - 'When I read Solitude to [Keats] he observed that the Description too much prevailed over the Sentiment. - But never mind that - it is a good fault' (*Critical Heritage*, p. 120). Whether siding with Keats' implied censure, or with Taylor's reversal of the value judgement, it has seemingly remained axiomatic with most Clare critics that the categories of description and observation are the crucial ones to any reading of Clare's work, and that the 'sentiment' (if we take this in an enlarged sense as connoting the human, social and cultural content of his work) is both negligible and irrelevant to his true worth. It is only comparatively recently, since John Barrell[4] demonstrated that even Clare's most apparently 'pure' descriptive writing nevertheless carries a social and cultural charge embedded in its very syntax, that Clare scholars have begun to realise that his poetry contains a good deal more 'sentiment' than would at first appear to be the case.

Nevertheless, despite this gradual shift in focus, Deacon's groundbreaking work has proved surprisingly unfruitful in terms of critical reflection on the nature of Clare's relationship with popular culture. The cursory formulations of Lucas and of Robinson and Powell are typical of most critical gestures in this direction, and even those who take it more seriously can hardly be said to exhaust the subject. For instance, Elizabeth Helsinger, in an interesting article which explores the political connotations of the concept of the 'peasant poet', and the ways in which Clare's work responds to it, suggests that Clare found a way out of the dilemmas and restrictions inherent in this concept by means of a recourse to some forms of popular culture:

> Clare's solution to this dilemma - finding a political voice outside a middle-class rhetoric, in the absence of any audience for a political poetry of rural labour - was expressed as a formal choice. His poetry increasingly empowers a

[4] John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge: CUP, 1972).

> countering term, "song", and the cultural tradition it represents. ... he recognized that his own poetic roots were divided between a popular culture of rural song and story, and descriptive poetry of the rural scene.[5]

She goes on to suggest that this choice of song as an alternative tradition provided Clare with a political identity which in some way escaped or revalued the restrictive terms of the notion of 'peasant poet'. This idea has the virtue that it at least suggests a way in which Clare's 'debt' to popular culture can be conceived of, and hints that it could play a significant part in a reading of his work as a whole, which is more than can be said for Lucas and Robinson and Powell. However, it is no more than a suggestion, and in the brevity of its treatment by Helsinger it is hardly more satisfactory than their formulae, tending as it does to a simplistic equation between popular culture and political radicalism. There is more to be said on this subject, and I will return to it later in my thesis, but for my purposes here it is sufficient to note that Helsinger's argument can hardly be said to constitute an exhaustive exploration of Clare's relationship to popular culture.

Similarly Johanne Clare, in one of the best full-length studies of Clare's work[6], fails to provide anything like a satisfactory treatment of this subject. Despite the sensitivity and acuity with which she traces the contours of the social and political 'bounds of circumstance' which hedged about Clare's status as a poet, Johanne Clare fails (and indeed, hardly attempts) to provide an adequate account of Clare's engagements with popular culture. She is too prone to accept at face value what are always selective and partial representations, as when in her chapter on *The Village Minstrel* she refers comfortably to the 'oral culture of the collective village' (*The Bounds of Circumstance*, p. 104). It is perhaps worth quoting the passage to which she is referring here, as it provides such a fine example of the centrality of the issue of popular culture to Clare's work –

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[5] Elizabeth Helsinger, 'Clare and the place of the Peasant Poet', *Critical Inquiry* 13 (Spring 1987), pp. 509-531. This quotation is from p. 529.

[6] Johanne Clare, *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987).

& when old women overpowrd by heat
Tuckt up their tails & sickend at the toil
Seeking beneath the thorn the mole hill seat
To tell their tales & catch their breath awhile
Their gabbling talk did lubins cares beguile
& some woud tell their tales & some woud sing
& many a dame to make the children smile
Woud tell of many a funny laughing thing
While merrily the snuff box charm went pinching round the ring

Here lubin listn'd wi a struck supprise
When hickerthrifts great strength has met his ear
How he killd jiants as they were but flies
& lifted trees as one woud lift a spear
& not much bigger then his fellows where
He knew no troubles waggoners have known
Of getting stalld & such dissasters drear
Up hed chuck sacks as one woud hurl a stone
& draw whole loads of grain unaided & alone

& goodys sympathy woud fetch the tear
From each young listner seated by her side
When cruel barbary allen they did hear
The haughty stubbornness of female pride
To that fond youth who broke his heart & dyd
& jack the jiant killers tales shed say
Which still the same enchanting power supplyd
The stagnant tear amazment wipd away
& jacks exploits were felt for many an after day

These were such tales as lubin did delight
But shoud the muse narate in goodys strain
& tell of all she told from morn till night
Fays ghosts & jiants woud her songs detain
& be at days return resumd again
Wi cinderella she has charmed awhile
Then Thumbs dissasters gev a moments pain
Thus true thought legends woud each soul beguile
As superstition willd to raise the tear or smile

& as the load joggd hom ward down the lane
When welcome night shut out the toiling day
His followings markt the simple hearted swain
Joying to listen on his homward way
As rests warm rapture rousd the rustics lay
The thread bare ballad from each quavering tongue
As "peggy bond" or the "sweet month of may"

As how he joyd to hear each "good old song"
That on nights pausing ear did echo loud & strong[7]

I discuss this passage in some detail in my own second chapter, and as I show there, Clare's representation of the culture of the village as 'oral' is itself a fact that is charged with a significance which Johanne Clare loses by taking the passage as a piece of value-neutral description. This is a flaw which is in evidence throughout much of her book: despite her admirably sensitive accounts of the social and political constraints which dogged Clare's poetic career, she makes little attempt to engage with the specific cultural forms and practices in which they were embedded, nor to read Clare's representations of them as significant in themselves as traces both of those constraints and of his attempts to manoeuvre within them.

There are promising signs that interest in this area is growing, in that the 1996 edition of the *John Clare Society Journal* took as its theme Clare's relationship to popular culture, with David Blamires[8] providing a valuable archival account of chap-books mentioned in Clare's work, and Bridget Keegan[9] a thought-provoking (though, as I show in my later discussion of her article, severely flawed) analysis of the representations of popular culture in 'The Village Minstrel'. Nevertheless, such articles can do no more than scratch the surface of this topic, and the field is thus wide open for a full-length study of the relationship between Clare's work and popular culture, which is what I hope to achieve in this thesis.

However, as I have suggested, there are serious questions to be addressed about the nature of popular culture before we can consider it in its relation to Clare, and the rest of this introduction will be devoted to an exploration of their nature and scope. There are two related but distinct problems here: firstly, that of determining the nature and status of the 'popular culture' which it is claimed is so important to an understanding of Clare; and secondly that of understanding how it is that Clare's work can be said to 'grow out of' it, i.e. what exactly the relation of Clare's work to this culture consists in. In the next section I will be exploring the first of these problems.

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[7] *Early Poems II*, pp. 145-147.
[8] David Blamires, 'Chapbooks, Fairytales and Children's Books in the Writings of John Clare: Part I', *John Clare Society Journal*, No 15, (July 1996), pp. 27-54.

2: WHAT IS 'POPULAR CULTURE'? DEFINITIONS AND DISTINCTIONS

This first area of difficulty - that of determining and defining what is meant by the phrase 'popular culture' - is one that has increasingly come to exercise the minds of historical scholars in this field. Again, the problem can be broken down into two elements - firstly, the question whether the concept of popular culture is meaningful at all, i.e. whether it is possible to provide a definition which is sufficiently coherent to render it as a plausible and discrete area of study; and secondly, given that such a definition might be possible, whether adequate sources of knowledge exist to make such a study possible. These two problems are clearly inextricably intertwined - if there are no adequate sources of knowledge about the nature of popular culture, it will be impossible to provide a coherent definition of it as a field of enquiry. Conversely, if no definition can be given and the concept of popular culture is declared incoherent, it is clearly impossible that there can be any reliable sources - one cannot have a reliable source of knowledge about something that does not exist in any meaningful sense. The ramifications of these problems will become clearer if we explore the state of recent debate amongst historians of early modern popular culture.

In his introduction to a recent collection of essays on this subject Tim Harris sets out to examine some of the ways in which the concept of popular culture has been troubled by recent theoretical and practical debates. He begins by acknowledging Peter Burke's *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* as the seminal text for recent historians of popular culture, and uses it to give a sense of how the topic appeared to its practitioners before these questions surfaced –

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[9] Bridget Keegan, 'Broadsides, Ballads and Books: The Landscape of Cultural Literacy in "The Village Minstrel"', *John Clare Society Journal*, No 15, (July 1996), pp. 11-18.

> Culture [Burke] defined as "a system of shared meanings, attitudes and values, and the symbolic forms (performances, artifacts) in which they are expressed or embodied"; by popular culture he meant the culture of "ordinary people" or the "subordinate classes", those below the level of the elite (though not necessarily excluding the elite). In the Europe of 1500, according to Burke, "popular culture" was everyone's culture. Although there existed a separate culture of the learned and educated few - the "great tradition" - the elite at this time also participated in the "little tradition" of the rest. The following three centuries, however, saw an increasing polarisation between these two traditions, with the result that by 1800 European elites "had abandoned popular culture to the lower classes, from whom they were now separated, as never before, by profound differences in world view". ... By the early nineteenth century the gap had become so large that the elite needed to rediscover popular culture, and some educated men began to collect and record popular songs, beliefs and festivals which appeared both exotic and quaint, belonging to a world that was now totally alien to them.[10]

Harris acknowledges the immense importance of Burke in helping to establish the study of popular culture as a field of historical enquiry in its own right, and in providing such an over-arching historical narrative. However, drawing on more recent literature in this field, he goes on to suggest that Burke's work, both in its definitions of the field of study in general, and in its account of the historical morphology of its subject, is no longer adequate.

Some of his arguments to this effect need not concern us here, as they are concerned with a broad historical period, stretching from before the Civil War to the mid-nineteenth century, and are thus of limited relevance to a study which is focussed on the significance of popular culture in the work of just one writer at one time. However, much of what he says is of crucial importance, in that it has to do with the way in which we think of popular culture in general as well as with its particular historical manifestations. By questioning the meanings of the key terms 'popular' and 'culture', Harris comes to suggest that the phrase should be viewed with extreme caution, as it tends to construct its subject-matter dualistically, according to a series of binary oppositions, all of which are liable to collapse under a careful scrutiny of the historical evidence –

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[10] Tim Harris, 'Problematising Popular Culture', in Tim Harris ed., *Popular Culture in England, c. 1500-1850* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1995), pp.1-27. (this quotation comes from p. 1).

> Most scholars have defined "popular" in juxtaposition to what it is not - it is not official culture, it is not the culture of the elite, or the educated classes. Such a strategy has led to the development of a bi-polar frame of analysis. As a result, we have come to think in terms of a series of dichotomies: between elite and popular; patrician and plebeian; high and low; rulers and ruled; learned and unlearned; literate and illiterate; godly and ungodly. Under critical examination, however, many of these alleged dichotomies break down.
>
> (*Popular Culture in England*, p. 14)

In this respect, Harris' argument is similar to, and no doubt owes a debt to, that of Morag Shiach[11]. She, as the subtitle to her work (*Class, Gender and History in Cultural Analysis, 1730 to the Present*) suggests, is concerned not so much with recent historical work on popular culture as with the ways in which it has been constructed in the past (though it is crucial to her argument that much modern work recuperates the conceptual structures and discursive manoeuvres which she uncovers in the history of writing about popular culture), and her argument concentrates on the discursive function of the phrase 'popular culture'. Shiach does in fact write about Clare in her chapter on the history of the term 'peasant poet' (*Discourse on Popular Culture,* pp. 35-70), but her book is at its weakest when she is engaging directly with literary texts. While her discussion provides an adequate introduction to some of the problems faced by Clare as a consequence of his being marketed as a 'peasant poet' - i.e. as a specimen of popular culture in his own right - her treatment of his actual texts is disappointingly brief and superficial, and completely ignores the manifold and complex ways in which Clare himself was mediating popular culture in his own work. She is more persuasive at the theoretical level, and she provides a useful attempt to map out the problems inherent in talking about popular culture at all.

Her main contention, as laid out in her introduction, is that 'Debates about popular culture are always crucially involved with other debates or problems within the dominant culture' (*Discourse on Popular Culture*, p. 6). She claims that discourse about popular culture is always primarily constituted by instabilities within, and anxieties about, the dominant culture

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[11] Morag Shiach, *Discourse on Popular Culture: Class, Gender and History in Cultural Analysis, 1730 to the Present* (Oxford and Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

- that it both arises within the dominant culture and is addressed to it, and that it therefore tells us more about that dominant culture than it does about the popular culture which it is supposedly describing. A stern critic could claim that even in making such an argument Shiach is in fact falling into the very trap of creating reified binary oppositions which Harris identifies as endemic to the study of popular culture - she rightly points to the slippery and overdetermined nature of the concept of popular culture, but in doing so seems to assume that the notion of a 'dominant culture' is somehow self-evident in a way in which that of 'popular culture' by her own admission is not. She recognises this problem, and does try to address it in her introduction as –

> ... a theoretical problem: the relations between cultural forms and social power emerge repeatedly throughout this book, and the domain of the "popular" is repeatedly confirmed as secondary and marginal, yet, at the same time, any attempt to specify the content of cultural spheres, "high", "learned" or "popular", comes up against the opacity of historical relations. I have thus used the concept of "dominant culture" as a means to indicate the relation between social power and cultural production, without assuming that the cultural forms and practices which constitute the "dominant culture" are either unchanging or completely specifiable. (*Discourse on Popular Culture*, pp. 15-16)

Whether or not this argument is considered convincing, it does at least serve to provide further evidence of what an awkward terrain this is in which to manoeuvre, and this difficulty does not seriously hamper Shiach's overall argument, which can be seen to be broadly in sympathy with that developed by Harris.

Both authors, then, suggest that most discussion of popular culture tends to reify what was in fact a very complex and shifting field of cultural realities, constructing it by means of an implicit (or explicit) series of binary oppositions to what is variously conceived of as 'elite', 'dominant' or 'literary' culture. Shiach's main concern is to trace the various histories of such discourses through different cultural and historical situations rather than to sift out from them a 'true' historical record of the culture to which they refer. Harris, however, is more concerned with modern historical scholarship, and with the possibility of achieving some sort of access

to the realities which such discourses are an attempt to map. He argues that the problem with such binary oppositions is that they do justice to neither term, and obscure the fact that the reality was one of much greater complexity than they suggest, artefacts and practices moving between classes, between the city and the country, and between the literate and the illiterate, with much greater fluidity than they can account for. As E.P. Thompson has argued, in a similar warning about over-generalised accounts of popular culture –

> ... a culture is also a pool of diverse resources, in which traffic passes between the literate and the oral, the superordinate and the subordinate, the village and the metropolis; it is an arena of conflictual elements, which requires some compelling pressure ... to take form as "system"[12]

Thompson goes on to suggest that talk of 'culture' in this context can serve to mask social divisions and fractures, and impose an over-consensual and uniform view on what was a diverse and heterogeneous reality. This is an obvious corollary to the arguments of Harris and Shiach - just as the phrase 'popular culture' can falsely suggest that there was a culture of the people which was wholly discrete from that of the elite, both of which can be adequately defined in terms of their opposition to each other, so too it can suggest that 'the people' were in possession of a unitary culture which contained no political or ideological divisions. The common thread of these arguments lies in their assertion that unqualified talk of 'popular culture' is misleading and inadequate to map out an extremely complex historical reality.

Having established that 'popular culture', far from being the self-evident and discrete category that most Clare critics seem to assume it to be, is rather a concept fraught with ambiguities and difficulties of definition, I want now to turn to the second of the two problems which I identified above: even given that it might be possible to provide a workable definition of popular culture, how can we know anything reliable about it?

Although there are a number of difficulties involved here, they can be seen to resolve broadly into the single question of how 'popular' cultural practices and texts are mediated - how they were mediated to contemporary audiences, and consequently how they are

mediated to us today, separated doubly by time and social position from the originals. Our access to them is almost always indirect, and distorted by the personal, cultural and political biases of the reporters and commentators (generally writing from within, and for the readership of, the 'dominant' culture) who chose, for a variety of reasons and with very different ends in view, to set down their experiences and impressions of popular culture. Morag Shiach, in explaining her own use of the concept of 'mediation', provides a useful working indication of the scope of what it implies –

> ... texts and practices from different historical moments or different cultural spheres are not available to us directly, but only through an active process of appropriation and reinterpretation. "Mediation" implies an attempt to render a text meaningful and valuable in terms of the dominant culture. It refers to the movement of cultural texts within a hierarchical set of social and cultural relations, and signals the extent to which the meaning and significance of a particular text is related to its position within this hierarchy. The use of the concept of "mediation" is thus intended both to indicate the complexity of the process by which cultural texts are made available and to preserve the dimension of power within this process. (*Discourse on Popular Culture*, p. 18)

There are a number of ways in which this process of mediation can be seen to operate.

Firstly, with respect to cultural practices such as festivals, customs and all forms of communal activity; although we have many descriptions of these events, nevertheless the purposes for which they were written, and the audiences to whom they were addressed, play a very large part in determining both the content and the tone of these descriptions. For instance, in the numerous instances where popular activity might be seen as a threat to the established order, accounts from within the culture that was at threat must obviously be treated with a great deal of caution - a reformer or a magistrate reporting on popular disturbances or unruly customs had at best a vested interest in over-emphasising the unruly and the disturbing features of the practices he was dealing with, and certainly no interest in trying to come to a genuine understanding of what the participants themselves thought they were doing or of their reasons for were doing it. Even when there is no such obvious motive for bias and distortion, as in the case of the early folklorists - antiquarians such as Henry

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[12] E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London and New York: Penguin, 1993), p. 6.

Bourne, John Brand and even the ex-radical William Hone - their position within the dominant culture, with all its attendant preconceptions, and the fact that they are writing for an audience from that culture, will distort and call into question the reliability of their evidence. David Vincent has suggested, in the course of a discussion of the role of superstition within the lives of self-taught writers of the early nineteenth century, that

> the folk-lore movement, whose growth ran exactly parallel to the emergence of working-class radicalism, represented a reaction against the political threat mounted from below. The study of popular culture and its oral traditions was a means of bringing the classes together on ground emptied of conflict. ... [William Hone's Year Book] was compiled and published in the midst of the Reform Bill crisis, and in its pages an anxious middle-class readership could encounter a vigorous, colourful, authentic working-class world which had no apparent connection with the contemporary political unions and riotous crowds[13]

Vincent is thus suggesting that without deliberately intending to mislead, and not necessarily with any conscious political intent, the work of the early folklorists nevertheless served an important political function by obscuring and misrepresenting the political dimensions of the working-class behaviour it described. An antiquarian writing about popular superstitions would be interested, not in the meaning those superstitions had for those who believed them, nor what role they played in their understanding and conduct of their lives, but rather in their supposed status as quaint and picturesque survivals from a Roman Catholic or pagan antiquity. However, Vincent has shown in this article that for working-class writers of the time the subject had a political charge which is completely absent from the work of the antiquarians who recorded its manifestations in such detail[14].

If we turn from the problems associated with evidence of popular custom and ceremony to the question of popular literature and song, the situation is no better. Our access to the culture

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[13] In his essay 'The Decline of the Oral Tradition in Popular Culture' in Robert D. Storch ed., *Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth-Century England* (London, Canberra and New York: Croom Helm, 1982), pp. 20-48. My quotation is from pages 35-36.

[14] See 'The Decline of the Oral Tradition in Popular Culture', pp. 31-36.

of the illiterate, to the 'oral tradition', can only be at best second-hand, and is frequently far further removed. The distorting and bowdlerising effects of most 'folk-song' collectors are well documented[15] - operating with preconceptions as to the essentially rural nature of folk-song; hampered by the reluctance of the 'folk' to share their less respectable materials with a collector who was often a priest and always a member of a different class; and working with standards of decency and taste which required them to censor even such materials as they were given access to, the collections which they amassed can be regarded as reliable neither in the overall picture they provide of the oral tradition nor in the details of individual song texts. As for popular literature, while a mass of evidence survives in the form of tracts, chapbooks and broadsides, formidable difficulties of interpretation remain. Margaret Spufford[16], Tessa Watt[17], and Jonathan Barry[18] amongst others, have all drawn attention to these problems. It is extremely difficult to estimate literacy rates for the working-class population when so little evidence, and that ambiguous, is available to us - our only reliable evidence shows how many of the poor were able to write, and yet many who were unable to write may well have been able to read, at least after a fashion (see *Small Books and Pleasant Histories*, pp. 19-44). Equally, it is hard to interpret the contents of this literature, given that we cannot know with any certainty who wrote it, with what purpose it was written, nor what the attitude of its readers was towards its contents[19].

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[15] See in particular A.L. Lloyd, *Folk Song in England* (London: Panther Books, 1967) and Dave Harker, *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British 'Folksong' 1700 to the Present* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985).

[16] Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Methuen, 1981).

[17] Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety 1550-1640* (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: CUP, 1991).

[18] In his essay 'Literacy and Literature in Popular Culture: Reading and Writing in Historical Perspective' in Harris ed., *Popular Culture in England, 1500-1850*, pp. 69-94.

[19] See Barry, 'Literacy and Literature in Popular Culture: Reading and Writing in Historical Perspective' in Harris ed., *Popular Culture in England, 1500-1850*, pp. 72-75.

To sum up, in this section I have tried to provide a brief overview of the current state of debate amongst historians of British popular culture, giving some indication of the scope of the theoretical and methodological problems inherent in this field. It should have become clear that these problems are of a major scale, but it should not be assumed that they are insurmountable: to return to Tim Harris again –

> We should not paint too bleak a picture. Historians always have to confront the methodological problems of their sources, and although the difficulties facing the student of popular culture might be particularly extreme, with the right approach and with sensitive handling the sources can be extremely revealing. On the other hand, it must be recognised that trying to reconstruct something we might label popular culture in early modern England is an extremely difficult task. Rather than struggling to overcome the limitations of the sources, which might not, in the end, be particularly productive, a better approach could be to play to the sources' strengths. That is, since the sources tell us about the interaction of elite and popular culture, maybe we should make the nature of that interaction the focus of our study, rather than the attempt to isolate what was purely popular, which could end up being a futile endeavour.
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> (*Popular Culture in England*, pp. 9-10)

Harris' suggestion here - that the study of the interactions between popular and elite cultures is a more fruitful avenue of approach than the study of popular culture in isolation - is one that is particularly relevant to my thesis. My concern is with the ways in which Clare represents popular culture in his work, which is to say the manner in which he, as a working-class writer writing for a middle-class readership, presents popular culture for a learned and elite audience. In other words, I will be treating Clare's work as just such a focal point for the interaction between popular and elite cultures as Harris enjoins us to examine, and in the next section of this introduction I want to explore this hint further, with a view to explaining both how I situate my work in terms of the debates about popular culture explored above, and how I will be approaching the second of the two problems I identified above: i.e. how we are to understand the nature of Clare's 'debt' (a sadly inaccurate and misleading word to denote such a complex and ambivalent relationship) to popular culture.

3: CLARE AND POPULAR CULTURE: APPROACHES AND ORIENTATIONS

In the previous section I provided a brief overview of some of the problems which modern historiography identifies in the study of popular culture, in order to suggest that critics who pass over the question of Clare's relationship to popular culture with a few brief phrases or paragraphs cannot hope to do justice to a highly complex subject. Without some consideration of what we mean by 'popular culture' it is pointless even to attempt to move on and consider what part it played in Clare's life and work, and such consideration is almost entirely absent from the work of those critics who have suggested that Clare's relationship to popular culture is a potentially fruitful area for study. However, my discussion was not intended to suggest that the difficulties involved in discussing popular culture are insurmountable, merely that they must be acknowledged and taken into account if we are to address our subject with a due degree of subtlety. This being the case, I now want to provide an outline of the nature of my own approach to this subject and, in particular, to give some suggestion of how I believe it avoids falling into the worst of the theoretical and historical pitfalls outlined in my previous section.

The first and most important point to make is that, unlike most of the authors discussed in the previous section, my primary aim is not historical, in that I am not aiming to provide an exhaustive historical account of the popular culture of Helpston during Clare's lifetime, nor is my attention focussed directly on the nature of that popular culture at all. Rather, as my title indicates, my research is directed at Clare's *representations* of popular culture, and the distinction is crucial. Whereas for a historian any distortions, evasions or inconsistencies in Clare's accounts of popular culture would raise serious problems of interpretation and evidential value, for me such problems hardly arise. For it is my argument that Clare's representations of popular culture constitute a site in which his manifold anxieties and uncertainties about his cultural, social and political identity are played out again and again throughout his work. It is thus the significance of these very inconsistencies and evasions that

I propose to examine, in the belief that a careful reading of them throws a great deal of light both on Clare's own self-understanding of his role as a poet, and on the nature of the 'spiked trap' (as Tom Paulin has called it[20]) in which he found himself caught as a consequence of the clash between his social status and the ambitions inherent in his desire to be a poet.

This being the case, I can afford to be content to use a fairly *ad hoc* definition and understanding of popular culture: for my purposes it is sufficient to use the term as indicating that picture of the culture of Helpston - of chapbook and broadside, oral song and story, popular superstition, festival, custom and music - which grows out of and is implicitly proposed by Clare's work itself. I can and will draw on historical scholarship in support of this, but I do not need to provide an *a priori* all-encompassing definition of popular culture in advance, so to speak, since in taking Clare's *representations* of it as my subject I am precisely proposing to read the distortions, mystifications and contradictions which his work inevitably contains, as significant in themselves, and it is this significance, rather than their evidential historical value, which is the primary subject of my research. A couple of examples should help to clarify how this approach works in practice.

Firstly, there is the difficulty of ascertaining the authorship, and the make-up of the readership, of the chapbooks, which is a serious problem for historians. For my purposes this problem hardly arises since I am concerned only with the ways in which Clare represents himself and his fellow-villagers as using chapbooks, and not with trying to build up a coherent picture over a wide geographical and temporal area. For instance, one of the subsidiary problems in assessing the status of chapbook literature is that of its close mutual imbrication with oral traditions, which has made the task of disentangling the twin threads of 'oral culture' and 'print culture' almost impossible. However, for my purposes, I can afford to acknowledge this problem while leaving it unresolved, as I do in my chapter on *The Village Minstrel*. There I make much of the fact that Clare's account of old women telling tales in the fields at harvest time represents those tales as purely oral in nature, whereas the titles he

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[20] Tom Paulin, *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p.

mentions are amongst those most commonly to be found in chap-book form. To make this point I do draw on some external historical evidence, but it would not matter if such evidence were non-existent, since my point is that Clare himself elsewhere represents such tales as central to chapbook culture, and it is thus the deliberately selective nature of his representation that I am reading as significant, rather than that which is represented.

A second illustration of my approach can be gleaned from a phrase I used earlier in this section. I referred to the 'culture of Helpston' (see p. 13), which may seem to beg several questions, as may the phrase 'rural popular culture' which I use on occasion throughout my thesis. What sense does it make to talk of 'the culture of Helpston' when we cannot know how much of this culture was or was not shared with innumerable other villages; or of 'rural popular culture' when many, if not all, of the printed materials in that culture were produced and avidly consumed by the expanding urban classes, and were by no means confined to the poor or the labouring classes? Firstly, there are senses in which talk of 'rural popular culture' does indeed make sense in that certain festivals and customs, particularly those pertaining to the round of the agricultural year, were more or less confined to the countryside as opposed to the cities, and it is generally when concentrating on such customs that I make use of the phrase. Nevertheless, the nature of these customs varied greatly from place to place, and the phrase could be criticised for suggesting a far greater degree of homogeneity and uniformity than was in fact the case[21]. Secondly, then, as was the case in the previous example, my defence lies in the nature of the task which I have set myself. If my primary focus were historical, such questions of precision in definition would indeed loom large, but as the objects of my study are Clare's representations of popular culture - not so much for what they can tell us about popular culture, as for what they can tell us about Clare - I think that such

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[21] See e.g. David Underdown, 'Regional Cultures? Local variations in Popular Culture during the Early Modern Period', pp. 28 -47 in Harris, *Problematising Popular Culture*, and Bob Bushaway, *By Rite: Custom, Ceremony and Community in England 1700-1880* (London: Junction Books, 1982).

phrases are permissible. To do away with them would result in an unacceptable degree of periphrasis and qualification when the contexts in which I use them do not generally require such precision - when it is required, I will either avoid such phrases or draw attention to their potentially misleading aspects.

None of this, of course, is intended to disparage the status of Clare's work as a potential historical source for students of popular culture. It does indeed contain a wealth of potential evidence: about the circulation, contents and readership of chapbook material; about the status and strength of the oral tradition in Helpston (both through Clare's descriptions of oral singing and storytelling and through the songs and tunes which he collected - see Deacon); and about agricultural customs and festivals, particularly with regard to their changing character. However, the caution about sources of information about popular culture which was discussed in the previous section is particularly necessary with regard to Clare's work. For instance, as Deacon has made clear, it is very difficult to be sure whether many of the song texts 'collected' by Clare were not in fact at least partly written by him[22], and it is also hard to know how much weight to give to accounts of the changing nature of festivals such as Harvest Home when they occur in the context of poems which are closely modelled on works such as *The Deserted Village*, where a lament for the passing of a friendlier age has become a literary convention[23], and is combined with Clare's own particularly acute sense of the loss of childhood happiness.

More generally, the question of mediation is especially important and complicated with regard to Clare: not only was he in an unusual situation as a working-class writer mediating working-class culture to a middle-class audience, but he was also himself being mediated as a specimen of popular culture, as Morag Shiach shows in her discussion of the presentation of 'peasant poets' in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (*Discourse on Popular*

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[22] My Chapter 4 is largely concerned with precisely this issue, and I hope shows that it is vital to any understanding both of Clare's activities as a "collector" and his "original" work.

[23] See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973).

Culture, pp. 35-70). The reliability of the evidence he can supply about popular culture is thus severely called into question by his peculiar status as a contested site in which different cultures meet and vie for dominance. As I said earlier, in studying Clare's representations of popular culture I am following Tim Harris' recommendation to study the interaction of popular and elite cultures, and it seems to me that such a study is necessary before the question of Clare's reliability as a source can be adequately dealt with. This is not to dismiss Clare's status as a source of knowledge about early nineteenth-century popular culture - he is potentially one of the finest sources available for the period, given the peculiarities of his situation as a highly literate man writing from a position both within and without that culture, for a genteel audience. Nevertheless, it is my belief that a study of Clare's representations of popular culture which focuses on their function as indicators of the social and cultural manoeuvres of his work will not only tell us a great deal about Clare and his poetry, but will also provide the only sort of information about that popular culture which is really available to us. An account of that culture as it was apprehended and used in one individual's life and writings, with all the untidy particularities and biases entailed by his personal, cultural and social situations, will tell us a great deal more than any bland itemisation of cultural texts and practices could hope to do.

The general outline of my position, both with regard to the difficulties involved in any discussion of popular culture, and more specifically with regard to my approach to the relationship between Clare's work and popular culture, should thus be becoming clear. It is my contention in this thesis that this relationship was one of great complexity and variety, such that the sort of phrases used by Robinson and Powell and by Lucas, with which I began this introduction, are completely incapable of doing justice to it, and that an understanding of this relationship throws a great deal of light on the cultural politics of Clare's work, as well as on his status as a source of evidence about popular culture. To demonstrate the truth of this assertion briefly is impossible, as it requires much close reading of Clare's work, and it is this task to which much of my thesis is devoted.

My first two chapters deal with Clare's attempts to construct authorising narratives for his accession to poetry, in the autobiographical prose and in 'The Village Minstrel', and examine the ambiguities and contradictions which are exposed in his representations of popular culture in these narratives. In my third chapter I situate Clare's attempts to record the popular culture and customs of Helpston in a quasi-folkloric manner, and situate this within the contemporary traditions of antiquarian discourse, showing that notwithstanding his attempts to write in this style, his social status makes these traditions unavailable to him. In my fourth chapter, I look at the ballads, songs and tales collected by Clare from his family and neighbours, and argue that this activity is misrepresented if it is construed simply as an early attempt at folk-song collection, but should rather be seen as part of an artistic project to body-forth his locality in all its entirety. In my final chapter I examine *The Shepherd's Calendar* as forming a part of the same project, arguing that its representations of popular culture constitute a key feature in any diagnosis of the quality of the work, and that in it Clare achieves a precarious synthesis between the conflicting social forces I have been tracing.

CHAPTER 1

POPULAR CULTURE IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PROSE

1: INTRODUCTION

Despite the recent upsurge of interest in Clare, comparatively little has been written about his prose autobiographical writings. These consist of two main distinctive elements: a relatively brief piece finished in 1821, entitled *Sketches in the Life of John Clare* (hereafter referred to as *Sketches*); and a larger mass of fragments, mostly written during the mid-1820s, which were apparently never completed - certainly, no complete manuscript draft has ever been found. The lack of interest in this material is surprising, since the autobiographical prose contains much that is fascinating in its own right, quite apart from its value as a resource for students of the poetry.

In this chapter, I will be examining the representations of popular culture in the autobiographical prose. I will be partly concerned with establishing the nature of the evidence which they provide about the popular culture of Helpston, but, as I explained in my Introduction, my main concern will be with reading these representations *as* representations, rather than as transparent. In particular, I will be arguing that they betray, and are a catalyst for, a number of anxieties and instabilities surrounding the issues of Clare's social status and the legitimacy or otherwise of his ambitions to be a poet.

2: THE "PEASANT POET" REPLIES: SKETCHES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CLARE'S CHARACTER

In order to give a properly contextualised reading of Clare's representations of popular culture in *Sketches*, it is first necessary to establish a sense of the overall shaping concerns and narrative structure of the work as a whole. To this end, I want to begin by setting it against John Taylor's 'Introduction'[1] to *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (Clare's first book, published in January 1820). Apart from a dubiously sentimental piece by Octavius Gilchrist in the London Magazine[2], this was the only previous piece of publicly available writing to concern itself with Clare's life, and was certainly the reading public's primary source of information about the poet. As such, and particularly as it was written by the very man who was Clare's addressee in *Sketches*, it can be seen as in some sense the model for Clare's own writing about his life - a model to be followed, but also to be questioned and revised. An examination of the nature and extent of these revisions will therefore serve as a useful focus for establishing the distinctiveness of Clare's project in *Sketches*.

The major difference between the two texts, of course, is to be found in their respective audiences. The public reaction to Taylor's piece was crucial, both for himself and for Clare. He was introducing a new, untried poet to the world, and it was essential that he generated as much public interest in Clare as possible, whilst simultaneously avoiding alienating any sector of that public either by his account of the poet's character or by over-praise of the poems themselves. To put it bluntly, there was potentially a good deal of money at stake, both for Clare and for Taylor himself. Taylor's 'Introduction' was therefore an absolutely public text, almost an exercise in public relations, addressed to as wide an audience as possible. This is in sharp contradistinction to Clare in *Sketches*, who was avowedly writing for Taylor's eyes only. There is some slight suggestion in the text that Clare expects some other audience, possibly a hostile one (e.g. in the second paragraph Clare warns that 'those who (strangers to the writer) that it displeases need not be startled at the dissapointment'

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[1] Reprinted in *Critical Heritage*, pp. 43-54.

(*JCBH*, p.2)). However, in a letter to Taylor he makes it clear that even if *Sketches* were ever to be published, it must be entirely at Taylor's own instigation and subject to his editing, and indeed probably should be held back until after Clare's death -

> its only to furnish you with particulars - remember that - & not to stand as I have hobbled it over - you are the person if you survive me that must do me justice - to you I give a copy of these sketches & to no one else shall I copy a repetition of them tho I have often been urged to it[3]

Taylor's response to being sent *Sketches* further underscores this understanding of its purpose - 'The Life pleases me very much indeed ... but I trust many a year more will elapse my dear Friend before I find it useful as it will doubtless be when the Recollections of dep[arted] Genius are called for by an enquiring World.' (*Letters*, p. 172, n.2). The distinction between the two texts therefore stands - even if Clare did envisage some sort of further audience for *Sketches*, it was only in a shadowy and uncertain form, and not to be compared with the thoroughly public negotiation of Taylor in his 'Introduction'.

Taylor's purposes in the 'Introduction' were several: as well as providing a brief biography of Clare, he had to commend the poetry judiciously whilst defending it against potential attacks, and to present the poet's character in as sympathetic a manner as possible, with a view to attracting further patronage. Inevitably, given these considerations, and given the circumstances of the poet's life and background, the portrait of Clare that emerges is very much in accord with the sentimentalised notion of the 'peasant poet' that was so to dog his career and colour critical reactions to his work long after his death. The opening paragraph is exemplary in this respect with its suggestion that Clare's social circumstances were almost more interesting than the poems themselves, its stress on the genuineness of the poems, and its claim (almost a salesman's pitch) that Clare's background was even more deprived than any previous poet's:

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[2] Reprinted in *Critical Heritage*, pp. 35-42.
[3] Clare to Taylor, 3 April 1821, *Letters*, p. 173.

> The following Poems will probably attract some notice by their intrinsic merit; but they are also entitled to attention from the circumstances under which they were written. They are the genuine productions of a young Peasant, a day-labourer in husbandry, who has had no advantages of education beyond others of his class; ... he is, perhaps, the least favoured by circumstances, and the most destitute of friends, of any that ever existed (*Critical Heritage*, p.43)

This insistence that Clare's social class is his defining characteristic as a poet is followed by an account of his childhood that heavily emphasises his poverty, complete with a touching account of his father's rheumatism that has left him 'a helpless cripple, and a pauper, receiving an allowance of five shillings a week from the parish' (*Critical Heritage*, p. 44). Taylor then goes on to claim that, although pauperism is the likely destination of Clare's old age, he nevertheless has an honourable pride that would make such a fate 'the highest aggravation of affliction' to him. If such a portrayal of virtuous genius suffering under the afflictions of extreme poverty could be read as a covert plea for patronage, Taylor's conclusion is even more explicit. The final paragraph is a direct plea to the public, stressing Clare's virtue much more than it does his poetic talent, comparing his character favourably to those of wealthier poets who excuse their 'follies and vices' by appealing to their artistic temperament - 'let it be accounted no mean praise to such a man as CLARE, that, with all the excitements of their sensibility in his station, he has preserved a fair character, amid dangers which presumption did not create, and difficulties which discretion could not avoid' (*Critical Heritage*, p. 53). The 'Introduction' ends with an undisguised plea for patronage - 'To see a man of talent struggling under great adversity with such a spirit, must surely excite in every generous heart the wish to befriend him' (*Critical Heritage*, p. 54).

This, then, is very much the portrait of a 'peasant poet', a recognisable genre in which the constituent strands of extreme poverty, extreme virtue and proper deferentiality are woven together with claims about pure 'natural' genius to create a highly marketable commodity. It would be unfair to criticise Taylor too stringently for using these manoeuvres to present Clare to his public - given Clare's social status, and the (albeit fickle and fleeting) public taste for

'peasant poets', this was probably the only way to gain any sort of hearing for his poetry at all.

Nevertheless, it made inevitable the patronising treatment of Clare by his first reviewers, and, once the nine-days-wonder of his initial celebrity had worn off, it helped create the almost insurmountable obstacles that prevented Clare from getting a fair hearing as a poet, a situation that was to persist well into this century.

It is very instructive to compare this construction of Clare's character with his own self-representation in *Sketches*. There are certainly some passages which at first seem to correspond to the deferential figure portrayed in Taylor's 'Introduction'. For instance, there is the apology for skipping church to read on Sundays (*JCBH*, pp. 6-7); the defence of the moral character of the Billings brothers and 'Bachellors Hall' (*JCBH*, p. 24); and the comments on religion and politics which conclude the work (*JCBH*, p. 30). These passages all give the impression of having been written for eyes other than Taylor's alone, perhaps to reassure potential (and actual!) patrons that Clare was indeed the humble, virtuous, hard-working 'peasant' of Taylor's 'Introduction'. However, it is striking that in all of them the deferentiality is undercut or qualified in one way or another. In the first passage, for instance, after a textually and syntactically confused apology for digressing ('digressions may become tiresome and ill grounded opinions may be reckoned consciets ...' (*JCBH*, p. 7)), Clare immediately returns to his narrative with an unabashed admission that he 'often absentet [himself] the whole Sunday at this time nor coud the chiming bells draw me from my hiding place to go to church, tho at night I was sure to pay for my abscence from it by a strong snubbing' (*JCBH*, p. 7). Equally, there is little deference in the actual terms in which he defends the Billings brothers - 'such calumniators are liars of the vilest and most dangerous class, and ... I should always feel myself more safer in the company of my old neighbours then in those of that description' (*JCBH*, p. 25) - where Clare's patrons would doubtless have much preferred him to forswear any involvement with people to whom even a hint of scandal had been attached. Even the concluding discussion of religion and politics, which is firmly

pro-Establishment and makes a show of anti-revolutionary patriotism ('the words "revolution and reform" so much in fashion with sneering arch infidels thrills me with terror when ever I see them'), reads like a dutiful parroting of the 'correct' opinions for a man of Clare's station, and ends with a defence of the liberty of the individual conscience which, whilst superficially adhering to traditional notions about English liberty, might nevertheless in its robustness have caused the occasional stir of unease in any potential patrons - '... thats the creed of my consience - and I care for nobody else's - all have liberty to think as they please and he is a knave that cheats his heart with false appearences, be his opinions as they may' (*JCBH*, p. 30).

Overall then, though they could be taken to indicate an underlying desire on Clare's part to defend himself against potential accusations of vice and radicalism, these passages do not amount to anything like a wholehearted acquiescence in Taylor's construction of his character. Indeed, in the context of *Sketches* as a whole, they come to appear more as throw-away concessions, digressions almost (as Clare himself signals in his reference to digressions on page 6) in a work that is not really concerned with Clare's (moral) character at all, except in so far as it relates to his hard-won achievement of literary skill and success. In fact the contrary, sometimes devious figure, driven by a profound compulsion to write at all costs, that emerges from Clare's own account of his life has little in common with the pale cipher that is the subject of Taylor's text. As far as the construction of Clare's character is concerned, then, if *Sketches* is to be seen as in any way conditioned by Taylor's 'Introduction', it is largely as a reaction against it, an amplification and a reordering of it, and a rejection of Taylor's conventional pieties about the 'native worth of genius' in favour of a gritty engagement with the materiality of Clare's struggle to attain his literary ambition.

Having established that Clare in *Sketches* is not primarily concerned with presenting himself as the sanitised figure that is the subject of Taylor's 'Introduction', I now want to continue my comparison between the two texts by examining their construction of the principal events of Clare's life. This is essential in order fully to understand the context in

which the representations of popular culture which are my primary theme occur. It is also a useful exercise in that it brings out the extent to which Clare's prose, any more than his poetry, is not the simple, artless outpouring which it might at first sight appear to be, but is rather carefully wrought, the result of deliberate selection and artful meditation on its material[4].

With this in mind, I want to begin by looking at the passages in the two texts which deal with Clare's first experience of the power of polite literary culture in the form of an extract from Thomson's *Seasons*, leading to the writing of his first poem. This is a particularly interesting comparison in that both passages deal with approximately the same events, and give them a similar meaning, so that the differences between the two versions give us a very clear idea of the sort of narrative choices Clare was making in *Sketches*. Taylor's account is matter-of-fact and even in tone, laying out the course of events in a judicious and orderly manner:

> He was thirteen years of age when another boy shewed him Thomson's Seasons. They were out in the fields together, and during the day CLARE had a good opportunity of looking at the book. It called forth all the passion of his soul for poetry. He was determined to possess the work himself; and as soon as he had saved a shilling to buy it with, he set out for Stamford at so early an hour, that none of the shops were open when he got there. It was a fine Spring morning; and after he had made his purchase, he was returning through the beautiful scenery of Burghley Park, when he composed his first piece of poetry, which he called 'The Morning Walk' (*Critical Heritage*, p. 45)

Considered in itself, this might seem unexceptionable, yet if we set it against the equivalent passage in Sketches, the differences are quite remarkable:

> this summer I met with a fragment of Thompsons Seasons a young man, by trade a weaver, much older then myself, then in the village, show'd it me I knew nothing of blank verse nor of ryhme either otherwise than by the trash of

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[4] For an illuminating meditation on the artfulness and deliberate intertextuality of a Clare poem which it would be easy to read as a much less sophisticated piece of 'simple' nature poetry, see Hugh Haughton, 'Progress and Rhyme: "The Nightingale's Nest" and Romantic Poetry' in *John Clare in Context*, ed. Hugh Haughton, Adam Phillips, and Geoffrey Summerfield (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), pp. 51-86.

Ballad Singers, but I still remember my sensations in reading the opening of Spring I cant say the reason, but the following lines made my heart twitter with joy.

> Come gentle Spring, ethereal mildness come
> And from the bosom of yon dropping cloud,
> While music wakes around, veild in a shower
> Of shadowing roses, on our plains desend.

I greedily read over all I coud before I returnd it and resolvd to posses one my self, the price of it being only 1s/6d I expressd my supprise at seeing such a fine poem so carlessly handld, most part of Winter being gone, but the owner only laughd at me and said "twas reckoned nothing of by himself or friends" ... On the next Sunday I started to stamford to buy Thompson, for I teazd my father out of the 1s/6d and woud not let him have any peace till he consented to give it to me, but when I got there I was told by a young shop boy in the street who had a book in his hand which I found to be "Collins Odes and poems" that the booksellers woud not open the shop on a Sunday this was a dissapointment most strongly felt and I returned home in very low spirits, but haveing to tend horses the next week in company with other boys I plannd a scheme in secret to obtain my wishes by stelth, giving one of the boys a penny to keep my horses in my absence, with an additional penny to keep the Secret I started off and as we was generally soon with getteing out our horses that they might fill themselves before the flyes was out I got to Stamford I dare say before a door had been opend and I loitered about the town for hours ere I coud obtain my wishes I at length got it with an agreeable dissapointment in return for my first, buying it for 6d less then I had propos'd and never was I more pleasd with a bargain then I was with this shilling purchase On my return the Sun got up and it was a beautiful morning I coud not wait till I got back without reading it and as I did not like to let any body see me reading on the road of a working day I clumb over the wall into Burghly Park and nestled in a lawn at the wall side the Scenery around me was uncommonly beautiful at that time of the year and what with reading the book and beholding the beautys of artful nature in the park I got into a strain of descriptive ryhming on my journey home this was "the morning walk" the first thing I commited to paper (*JCBH*, pp. 10-11)

To start with, as might be expected, Clare's account is much more detailed, but it is the nature of these details, rather than the mere fact of them, that is remarkable. In every respect, Clare's account contradicts the bland respectability of Taylor's version. For instance, where Taylor has him 'sav[ing] a shilling to buy [the book] with', Clare describes himself as having 'teazd my father out of the 1s/6d and woud not let him have any peace till he consented to give it to me'. There is a world of difference between the respectable labourer saving his hard-earned wages, and the importunate boy badgering his poverty-stricken father for money he could probably ill-afford to spare. Clare, as he is throughout *Sketches*, is concerned with his

overwhelming desire to read and write, and with tracing the precise contours of the social and financial obstacles which stood in the way of this. Hence the concern throughout this passage with the price of the book, and the unashamed delight with which he registers the 'agreeable dissapointment' of discovering that it was cheaper than he thought - 'never was I more pleasd with a bargain then I was with this shilling purchase'.

Clare's revision of this aspect of the event is of a piece with other aspects of his account that show the young poet as rather less than the respectable, law-abiding character Taylor was so anxious to present to the public. In Clare's version the whole episode is suffused with anxiety and a sense of transgression, as his first attempt to buy the book on a Sunday is met with disappointment, and his second attempt involves bribing his workmate to tend his horses for him, an uneasy period of 'loitering' around Stamford waiting for the shop to open, and a final compounding act of trespass[5] occasioned by a fear of being seen 'reading on the road of a working day'. It is this sense of problems surmounted and dangers averted that gives Clare's account its excitement and its sense of tension, of illicit pleasure stolen from an at best indifferent, at worst positively hostile world. Finally, Clare's account has a characteristic sense of the materiality involved in access to polite literary culture that is lacking from Taylor's version. He begins by being shocked at the state of the weaver's copy of Thomson and at his dismissive attitude towards it - 'I expressd my supprise at seeing such a fine poem so carlessly handld, ... but the owner only laughd at me and said 'twas reckoned nothing of by himself or friends' - and ends with a definitive statement of the precise moment of his entry into literary, print culture - 'this was "the morning walk" the first thing I commited to paper'. For Taylor, 'The Morning Walk' was Clare's 'first piece of poetry', whereas for Clare himself its significance lay in the fact that it was the first piece he had *'commited to paper'*.

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[5] See John Goodridge and Kelsey Thornton, 'John Clare: the trespasser', *John Clare in Context*, pp. 87-129, esp. 87-91, for an illuminating discussion of the modes of trespass embodied in this passage.

Clare's alterations and additions to Taylor's account, then, transform a straightforward, somewhat dull narrative into a truly exciting conversion story, instinct with desire, danger, fear and final fulfilment. It is important to note, though, the way in which this is done. Clare's version does not accrue its superior power in the way in which we might expect an autobiographical account to score over a third party's telling of the same story - i.e. by a more intense and precisely rendered exploration of the subjective emotions involved. He is, if anything, less confident about emotions than Taylor. For instance, where Taylor claims, in bland and conventional language, that the passage from 'Spring' 'called forth all the passion of [Clare's] soul for poetry', Clare is merely content with the, albeit luminously expressive, throwaway remark 'I cant say the reason, but the following lines made my heart twitter with joy ...', which suggests that enquiries into emotional interiority are largely irrelevant to his purposes. What *is* distinctive about his version, though, is the way in which he completely transforms the emphasis of the narrative, turning it into a subtle and suggestive exploration of the materiality of the obstacles facing a working-class man as he tries to cross 'the boundaries of culture'[6] and appropriate this new-found experience of poetry for himself.

This stress on the overwhelming importance of the objective physical act of writing, of the materials necessary to the task, and the significance of seeing one's words in print, is one that recurs throughout *Sketches* with almost talismanic effect. For instance, see the first paragraph - 'a double gratifycation is witness'd as we turn to a repetition of our early days by *writing them down on paper*' (*JCBH*, p. 1, my italics); how the young Clare's ambition was not so much to write good poetry so much as 'to let my parents see a printed copy of my poems' (*JCBH*, p. 5); and his embarrassment at the physical condition of his letter to Henson containing his address to the public - 'directed with a pencil, written on a sheet of paper that was crumpled and grizzld with lying in ones pocket so long and to add to its novelty sealed with shoemakers wax' (*JCBH*, p. 23) - an embarrassment that reads almost as though Clare is

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[6] Goodridge and Thornton, *John Clare in Context*, p. 89.

displacing onto the letter his own anxieties about the fitness of himself and his poems to appear in public. This hard-headed, unillusioned concern with the physical, material obstacles that stand between Clare and his attainment of his literary ambitions can also be seen, differently reflected, in the protracted and confusing account of his dealings with Henson and Drury that takes up such an apparently disproportionate amount of this brief work[7]. This can doubtless be attributed partly to a desire to give Taylor a firm factual basis on which to conduct his dealings with Drury[8], and to reassure him that Clare was committed to him as an editor and trusted his financial judgement. However, it is also appropriate as another instance of Clare's refusal in *Sketches* to idealise any aspect of the process of writing and publication.

Clare's primary concern throughout *Sketches*, then, is writing - his own progress from semi-illiterate beginnings through the travails and hardships of a fitful education, his gradually increasing confidence in his creative ability, to the final triumphant achievement of publication. Indeed it would be very difficult to extract a comprehensive chronological biography from the information contained in Sketches - it is highly selective and chronologically imprecise, information about Clare's employment and relationships only being included insofar as it illustrates this overarching narrative of literary upward-mobility.

3: POPULAR CULTURE IN SKETCHES

Having established a sense of the distinctive character of Sketches, and of the ways in which it attempts to re-negotiate some of the more constricting boundaries of Taylor's construction of Clare as 'peasant poet', I now want to turn my attention to Clare's

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[7] See *JCBH*, pp.21-28.

representations of popular culture in the work. Again, comparison with Taylor's 'Introduction' serves as a useful introductory focus. In the following passage he is describing the importance to Clare of learning to read and write:

> ... it is very probable, that, without the means of recording his productions on paper, Clare would not only have lost the advantage he may derive from the publication of his works, but that also in himself he would not have been the Poet that he is; that, without writing down his thoughts, he could not have evolved them from his mind; ... a few detached songs or short passages might be, perhaps, treasured in the memory of his companions for a short period, but they would soon perish, leaving his name and fame without a record
>
> (*Critical Heritage*, p. 46)

The calm, distanced, quasi-philosophical way in which this passage treats of the importance to Clare of learning to write is in sharp contrast to the secretive urgency and material specificity with which the subject is dealt with by Clare himself throughout Sketches. However, it is particularly revealing for the light which it throws upon Taylor's (and therefore, by implication, at least part of the educated and literary world's[9]) conception of the nature and resources of a popular, partly oral culture. Taylor seems to claim that the illiterate lack the power of sustained composition - almost, indeed, the power of sustained or organised creative thought - in his assertion that Clare would have been incapable of composing more than a few scattered and minor pieces if he had not had the ability to write. The passage therefore seems, if not to deny the possibility, then certainly to downgrade the status of that oral culture of ballad, song and story, encompassing traditional folktales, oral versions of widely-circulated chapbook tales, local history and local custom, which we know from

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[8] See letter to Taylor 7 March 1821, *Letters*, pp. 44-45, - 'I shall be very minute in Hensons and Drurys affairs that your judgement may decide' (p. 45).

[9] For a significant and influential corollary to this passage, see Dr Johnson's remarks -'One generation of ignorance effaces the whole series of unwritten history. Written learning is a fixed luminary, which after the cloud that has hidden it has past away, is again brought in its proper station. Tradition is but a meteor, which, if once it falls, cannot be rekindled', Peter Levi ed., *Samuel Johnson: A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland and James Boswell: The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 113.

Clare's own works (including *Sketches* itself) existed alongside a semi-literate print culture in Helpston.

In this respect, it is worth setting this passage alongside Taylor's portrayal of Clare's father, Parker Clare. After the initial references to his poverty and illness, and the generosity of Lord Milton in sending him to Scarborough for the cure, he figures only as the mediator of literary culture to his son, when he reads him one of Pomfret's poems (*Critical Heritage*, p. 45). This is quite unlike his portrait in *Sketches*, where the primary image of him is decisively as a figure immersed in popular and oral culture - '[he] was very fond of the supersti[ti]ous tales that are hawked about a sheet for a penny, ... he was likewise fond of Ballads and ... he coud sing or recite above a hundred' (*JCBH*, p. 2). This conflict in the portrayal of Parker Clare as between the two texts is suggestive, although its precise significance is hard to pin down. Certainly, it illustrates the conflict between their overall shaping interests and narrative trajectories. Taylor's account characteristically plays up the pathetic in its stress on Parker Clare's disability, as well as emphasising Lord Milton's generosity and Parker's misguided but virtuous frugality in trying to save money by walking home from Scarborough[10]. The important aspect of Taylor's account, though, and the one which most clearly brings out the difference in emphasis between the two narratives, is his description of Parker Clare's influence on his son. Whereas in Clare's version his father features as a sort of symbol of the riches and variety of popular and oral culture, in Taylor's he is primarily an object of sympathy and secondarily a mediator of literary culture (in however meagre a degree) to his son. This difference between the two accounts can perhaps ultimately be traced to the different purposes for which they were written, and consequently the different constructions of Clare's character they work with. For Taylor in his account, Clare is a deferential character, humbly grateful to and dependent on the liberality of his patrons for all his literary achievements, whereas in *Sketches* he is stubborn and self-willed, and it his his own

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[10] *Critical Heritage*, pp. 43-44.

obsessive determination, rather than the beneficence of his patrons, which is the primary motor-force of his ascent into polite literary culture. Taylor therefore needs to stress the complete poverty, both material and cultural, into which Clare was born, and has no room for the haphazard array of cultural material, 'low' and 'high', oral and printed, which Clare depicts himself as being surrounded and inspired by.

There is thus in *Sketches*, despite the relentless upward-mobility of the narrative, and the strength of the desire for literary acceptance it evinces, no such erasure of popular culture from the story as we find in Taylor's 'Introduction'. At first sight, however, the overall tone of the work when dealing with popular culture would appear to be cool, somewhat patronising, and at times positively hostile[11]. While there is certainly some truth in this, it is not the whole story, and in any case such hostility needs to be read both in its immediate context and in the context of the structure and purposes of the work as a whole. In order to do this I will first examine those passages which deal with the subject in the order in which they appear in the narrative, and then attempt to draw the strands together to provide an overall assessment of the text's engagement with popular culture.

The first reference to popular culture in *Sketches* comes in Clare's introductory description of his parents -

> Both my parents was illiterate to the last degree my mother knew not a single letter and superstition went so far with her that she beleved the higher parts of learing was the blackest arts of witchcraft and that no other means coud attain them my father coud read a little in a bible or testament and was very fond of the supersti[ti]ous tales that are hawked about a sheet for a penny, such as old Nixons Prophesies, Mother Bunches Fairey Tales, and Mother Shiptons Legacy etc etc he was likewise fond of Ballads and I have heard him make a boast of it over his horn of ale with his merry companions at the Blue bell public house which was next door that he coud sing or recite above a hundred he had a tollerable good voice and was often calld upon to sing at those convivials of bacchanalian merry makings (*JCBH*, p. 2)

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[11] e.g. the references to 'the trash of Ballad singers', and to the 'wretched composition[s] of those halfpenny ballads', *JCBH*, pp. 10 & 13.

Coming where it does, at the beginning of *Sketches*, and being the first reference to any form of cultural activity, this passage carries a good deal of weight, in that it is Clare's attempt to outline the starting point, as it were, of the saga of his progress towards poetry. In this respect it is interesting to note the ambivalently poised tone he adopts towards the culture of his parents. The passage is neither an outright celebration of the resources of that culture[12] nor a wholesale denigration of it - as might have been expected from the way in which some later passages play off the 'trash' and 'wretched compositions' of popular materials against the superior powers of polite literature. Although the passage begins by stressing the poverty of the young Clare's cultural background through the illiteracy of his parents and their ignorance of 'the higher arts of lear[n]ing', it shifts into a much warmer act of remembrancing when it comes to describing his father's repertoire of ballads and their social context - 'those convivials of bacchanalian merry makings'. Presumably a repertoire of over 100 ballads would be significantly large (an impression confirmed by the fact that Clare portrays his father as boasting about it - it must have been deemed worthy of boasting about!), and it is possible that in including this information Clare is signalling the comparative richness of his cultural background. However, the warmth of this account is offset somewhat by the use of the adjective 'bacchanalian' to describe the gatherings in the Blue Bell. This could be read either as an attempt at ennoblement by giving the events a classical dignity and licence, or as an ironic and somewhat patronising exercise in mock-heroic burlesque, and the passage gives little clue as to which of these readings is more appropriate. Either way, though, the use of the word interposes a cultural distance into the account - the boy whose father was drinking and laughing in the pub next door would never have used such a word to describe him, any more than his father would have understood it - and thus heightens the ambivalence of the passage as a whole.

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[12] N.B. insofar as Clare is to be treated as a source of information about the rural popular culture of his time, it is noteworthy that oral and literate materials here coexist and are

The next reference to popular culture occurs when Clare is describing his childhood work in the fields, tending animals and scaring birds from the crops -'which was a delightfull employment, as the old womens memorys never faild of tales to smoothen our labour, for as every day came new Jiants, Hobgobblins, and faireys was ready to pass it away' (*JCBH*, p. 4). The tone of this is wholly positive towards the old women and their tales, and it is interesting for several reasons. It is more or less the only passage in *Sketches* where physical labour and imaginative activity are shown as going hand in hand and complementing each other - the prevailing impression throughout the rest of the work is of the young Clare sloping off from his workmates to read or compose poetry in solitude. It is also a celebration of the copiousness and inexhaustibility of an oral culture[13] - 'the old womens memorys never faild ...' - and of the pleasures of a simple identification with it in its context, without any apparent desire for anything different or 'higher', and in this respect it is highly unusual in *Sketches*. It is also worth comparing it with the penultimate line of the manuscript version of 'To my Oaten Reed' - 'I take thee up - to smoothen many a sigh'[14] - where Clare uses the same trope to refer to the psychological effects of writing poetry as he does here to describe the rewards of participation in a communal, oral performance.

This passage, though, is the only unequivocally positive reference to popular culture in *Sketches*, and the next one is again ambiguous -

> About now all my stock of learning was gleaned from the Sixpenny Romances of "Cinderella", "Little Red Riding hood", "Jack and the bean Stalk", "Zig Zag", "Prince Cherry", etc etc etc and great was the pleasure, pain, or supprise increased by allowing them authenticity, for I firmly believed every page I read and considerd I possesd in these the chief learning and literature of the country (*JCBH*, p. 6)

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accepted as two complementary strands of one culture, despite his initial claim that both his parents were 'illiterate to the last degree'.

[13] See the similar, though much-extended passage in 'The Village Minstrel', stanzas 54-58, and my discussion of it in Chapter 2.

[14] *Early Poems I*, p. 478. The sonnet appeared as the final poem in *Poems Descriptive*, although with this line (and much else) altered.

Clare is certainly remembering a pleasurable experience of these tales, but the pleasure is not the focus of this passage in its context. He has just been lamenting the lack of 'usefull books' in his early schooling, so these 'Sixpenny Romances' (note again the emphasis on the price of the books) here stand as indicators of the paucity of his intellectual nourishment. When he claims to have 'firmly believed every page [he] read', the effect is humorous and slightly sardonic - the man is looking back, from a position of cultural superiority, at the child's naive credulity.

The intellectual poverty of his surroundings is further emphasised by the fact that even to read these books Clare had to be wary of his neighbours' accusations of laziness and 'hide in woods and dingles of thorns in the fields on Sundays' (*JCBH*, p. 6). That Clare was capable of giving a much more positive value to such popular literature we know from the great celebration of chapbooks and folktales that occupies much the same position in the later autobiographical fragments (as far as can be discerned from their haphazard and disorganised state) as this passage does in *Sketches*, and which I will be discussing later in this chapter[15].

The cooler tone of the *Sketches* passage must be at least in part attributed to the work's narrative structure. Clare is representing his life as a teleological progress - from ignorance to knowledge; from obscurity to fame; and, not least, from a background in popular culture to an achievement of polite literary culture. The exigencies of his narrative therefore more or less demand that he stress the disadvantages of the earlier terms in the sequence, in order to emphasise more strongly the distance he had travelled. This is not to say that he was dissembling, either in this passage or in the later one in the fragments - his feelings about and judgements of the popular culture which was his birthright were naturally highly ambiguous and complex. It is precisely this ambivalence, this oscillatory sensibility, which makes a reading of his representations of popular culture so revealing, as their shifting and unstable

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[15] See *JCBH*, pp. 57-59.

character marks the traces in his work of all sorts of otherwise invisible social and cultural constraints.

The next passage I want to discuss is interesting in that Clare is describing his first attempts at imaginative activity -

> the traditional Registers of the Village was uncommonly superstitious (Gossips and Granneys) and I had two or three haunted Spots to pass for it was impossible to go half a mile any were about the Lordship were there had nothing been said to be seen by these old women or some one else in their younger days. therefore I must in such extremitys seize the best remedy to keep such things out of my head as well as I coud, so on these journeys I mutterd over tales of my own fancy and contriving them into ryhmes as well as my abilities was able (*JCBH*, p. 9)

There appears to be an almost dialectical relationship here between the local 'gossip tales' and Clare's own creativity: the old women's superstitious stories so filled his imagination that he was forced to make up his own stories to drive them out. He almost represents his 'fancy' as a sort of defence mechanism against the suffocating web of narratives which map out the area and would otherwise swamp his spirit.

The sense that we have in this passage of Clare's poetry being born out of a contest between his own imagination and the determining narratives and cultural patterns of his surroundings is further amplified by the crucial passage on pp. 13-14 which deals with the young Clare's attempts to get his parents' unbiased opinion of his early written work –

> my father woud sometimes be huming over a song, a wretched composition of those halfpenny ball[a]ds, and my boast was that I thought I coud beat it in a few days afterwards I used to read my composition for his judgment to decide, but their frequent critisisms and laughable remarks drove me to use a process of cunning in the business some time after, for they damp'd me a long time from proceeding. My method on resuming the matter again was to say I had written it out of a borrowd book and that it was not my own the love of rhyming which I was loath to quit, growing fonder of it every day, drove me to the nessesity of a lie to try the value of their critisisms and by this way I got their remarks unadulterated with prejudice ... their remarks was very useful to me at somethings they woud laugh here I distinguishd Affectation and consiet from nature some verses they woud desire me to repeat again as they said they coud not understand them here I discoverd obscurity from common sense and always benefited by making it as much like the latter as I coud, for I thought if

> they coud not understand me my taste shoud be wrong founded and not agreeable to nature (*JCBH*, pp. 13-14)

This is important for several reasons, not least for the way in which it picks up on the theme established by the previous passage I quoted. The imagery here is even more that of a competition between Clare and one of the accepted elements in his cultural world, and this time it carries some Oedipal overtones in that the contest is to be between Clare and his father - here almost figuring as emblematic of the whole world of popular ballads, chapbooks etc. which Clare is trying to distinguish himself from. Paradoxically, because popular literature is so familiar to Clare, because it is so redolent of the comforting and yet potentially stifling atmosphere of home and family, he is able to represent himself as struggling against it, as fighting to stake out his own imaginative identity against an all-too-familiar background. He even resorts to the subterfuge of pretending that his own poetry is a part of that culture in order to overcome his parents' hostility to his imaginative autonomy. However, it is here that the real complexities and subtleties of the passage come into play. The Oedipal traces earlier in the passage are complicated and almost counter-balanced by the deference to his parents' judgement evinced in the latter part of it. Clare disguises his own work by pretending it is itself a part of the popular literature valued by his parents. In doing so he betrays both his respect for that culture and his unavoidable indebtedness towards it, by the terms in which he describes the process of seeking his parents' approval. By identifying their taste with 'common sense' and 'nature' as opposed to 'obscurity' and 'Affectation' he in effect naturalises popular culture, representing it as the original ground of his cultural formation, as solid and as 'objective' as the natural world that was such an important feature of his poetry. In doing so, of course he recuperates in his image of his parents some of the features of his own public image as 'peasant poet' - a peasant poet was supposed to have a direct link to the inspiration of nature, untrammelled by education or culture, and it is some such quality that he praises in his parents' judgements - but it is the extent to which the passage identifies popular culture with nature as a given element in Clare's background that is significant.

This passage, then, gives us a sense of the enormous significance and complexity of the issues surrounding popular culture for Clare, at least at this stage of his career. Its unstable and rapidly-shifting tone, veering between the 'wretched composition[s] of those halfpenny ballads' and the disguised but still potent and deep-rooted respect evinced by the latter part of the passage, betrays the extent to which Clare's attitude to popular culture is a catalyst for, and an index of, his anxieties and uncertainties about his social and cultural status and the legitimacy of his poetic enterprise. It is interesting in this respect to compare the competitive way in which Clare here represents his poetry as growing out of an oppositional stance towards popular culture, with the passage about the acquisition of *The Seasons* and the composition of 'The Morning Walk' which I discussed earlier in this chapter. Despite the elements of transgression and anxiety which surround the episode, which I discussed earlier, there is in fact much less overt conflict in Clare's account of the way in which his own poetry is actually born out of this experience, than there is in the two passages I have been discussing in which he represents himself as struggling for self-expression against the forces of popular culture. In the earlier passage 'The Morning Walk' seems to emerge from the combination of Thomson and 'the beautys of artful nature in [Burghley] park' through an apparently effortless process of fusion and transfusion, and it is given a validating and triumphant vindication when the poem is 'commited to paper'.

In this light we can begin to make sense of *Sketches'* overall ambivalence towards popular culture, and its contrastingly positive attitude to polite literary culture. It was written at an early stage of Clare's published career (it was completed in March 1821, two months after the fourth edition of *Poems Descriptive* was published), and so far his experience of publication was largely one of success. *Poems Descriptive* had sold well enough to go into a fourth edition, and if many of the reviews were not wholly favourable, nonetheless the book had

caused a considerable stir[16], and there was no apparent reason why its successors should not achieve something of the same success. Clare's achievement of his ambition of a career as a published poet must then have appeared at the time to be more or less an unmixed blessing. Hence, perhaps some of the respect for literature and literary culture that we have seen to be a feature of *Sketches*. We have also seen that *Sketches* is structured around the difficult journey from Clare's origins to his current status as published poet, and it is not surprising in such a work that the positive features of those origins should be underplayed - if nothing else, the structure of the work demanded it.

In addition to this, Clare's hopes for the future rested on further acceptance by the literary world, and he already had some experience of that world's reactions to pieces which drew too clearly on popular materials. I have particularly in mind the reactions to two poems which appeared in the first two editions of Poems Descriptive – 'Dolly's Mistake' and 'My Mary'. Clare himself was proud of these poems - in a letter to Hessey in July 1820, he stated that they were 'by the multitude reckoned the best in the book' (*Letters*, p. 84). 'Dolly's Mistake' is a vigorous cautionary tale about a young woman who gets pregnant at a fair, and 'My Mary' is a parody of Cowper's poem 'To Mary', unashamedly vulgar and earthy in its language -

> Who when the baby's all besh-t
> To please its mamma kisses it?
> ...
> But when her Mistress is'n't nigh
> Who swears and wishes it would die
> & pinches it to make it cry
> My Mary
> (*Early Poems I*, p. 80)

Both poems, then, were almost bound to incur charges of vulgarity, and this was indeed the case. They were both singled out by the *Eclectic Review* as poems it 'should be extremely

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[16] Storey in *Critical Heritage* reprints eleven reviews from different journals (pp. 54-119), sign enough that the book had attracted considerable public attention.

glad to see displaced by subsequent productions' (*Critical Heritage*, p. 91), and Eliza Emmerson claimed that she and her friends in Bristol 'consider[ed them] as *spots,* to what could otherwise *be pure' (Critical Heritage*, p. 109). Both poems were duly omitted from the third edition of *Poems Descriptive*, and Clare was extremely angry about the fact, which prompted him to a passionate outburst against 'false delicasy' in the letter to Hessey referred to above (*Letters*, p. 83). However, although the disapproval was ostensibly directed against the poems' sexual immodesty, it is also possible to see it as being occasioned by the fact that in both poems Clare is presenting aspects of 'rural life and scenery' which were unacceptable to his 'refined' readership, and in a style that was unacceptable – 'Dolly's Mistake' reads so much like a broadside ballad that Deacon sees fit to include it in his work on Clare's song-collecting[17], and the language and sentiments of 'My Mary' are, as we have seen, blunt in the extreme. Given this, and given Clare's significant claim that the two poems are most admired by *'the multitude'*, the episode can be seen as a warning to Clare not just of the consequences of offending against 'false delicasy', but also of the public's distaste for 'vulgarity' in his work. In particular, it would have warned him that vulgarity could be discovered, not just in indecorous language and subject-matter (i.e. the frank treatment of Dolly's pregnancy), but also in the use of a popular genre and style for its telling.

It is not surprising, then, that *Sketches*, a work explicitly addressed to Clare's publisher, on whom most of his hopes for future success rested, should adopt such an ambivalent stance towards popular culture. As I have already suggested, this does not necessarily mean that Clare was deliberately misrepresenting his attitude towards it - rather that the structure and audience of the work combined to emphasise one side of his complicated and ambiguous relationship to that culture. Indeed it is a measure, both of the importance of the subject to Clare, and of that inescapable ambiguity towards it, that even in a work of this sort the evidence is as complete as it is - there is no sense that Clare is capable of following Taylor

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[17] *John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, pp. 201-205.

and completely erasing popular culture from his account. The very vehemence of some of his attacks on the 'trash of ballad singers' and 'the wretched compositions' of the balladeers would be enough in themselves to establish the subject as of great importance to Clare's development as a poet, even if we did not know from elsewhere that he was capable of framing very different judgements. In the next section of this chapter, I will be looking at the later *Autobiographical Fragments*, which articulate a different, though equally complex picture of Clare's relationship to popular culture.

4: THE *AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FRAGMENTS*: THE STATE OF THE TEXT

> ... I am anxious to give an undisguisd narative of facts good and bad in the last sketch which I wrote for Taylor I had little vanitys about me to gloss over failing which I shall now take care to lay bare and readers if they ever are publishd to comment upon as they please in my last 4 years I shall give my likes and dis likes of friends and acquaintance as free as I do of my self (*JCBH*, p.186)

This passage from Clare's Journal (16 October 1824) refers to the projected autobiography which he appears to have begun writing on his return from London in August 1824[18]. It is especially illuminating for the explicit comparison it offers between the work currently in progress and 'the last sketch which [Clare] wrote for Taylor'. Despite the rather confused syntax, the point appears to be that Clare considers *Sketches* to have been somewhat marred by the extent to which it 'glossed over' some of his 'little vanitys', and that in the autobiography on which he is now engaged he hopes 'to lay [these vanities] bare' and 'give an undisguisd narative of facts good & bad'. This suggests that the reading I have given of *Sketches* - as a text strongly influenced and shaped by the audience for which it was written (i.e. Taylor) - is one that might have been shared by Clare himself. It certainly seems from

this journal entry that Clare sees one of the major differences between the two works as consisting in the audiences to which they are addressed. *Sketches* is identified as the work 'which I wrote *for Taylor'*, and the openness that Clare hopes to achieve in the new autobiography is signified by the fact that 'readers' (i.e., it would appear, the general reading public) will be able to 'comment upon [it] as they please'. As we have already seen, *Sketches* made surprisingly few concessions to the image of a humble, virtuous 'peasant poet' created by Taylor's 'Introduction', but what is significant here is Clare's feeling that in writing it he had been operating under constraints which prevented him from practising the openness and honesty which he now wishes to make the defining feature of his second attempt at autobiography.

The overall impressions given by this journal entry are that the new autobiography will be as honest as possible, directed towards the general reader, and expansive in its treatment of Clare's relationships and opinions. These impressions are confirmed if we turn to the letters for further evidence of Clare's intentions in making this second attempt at autobiography. In a letter to Cary he claims that although illness has prevented him from making much progress with his 'life' he feels 'anxious to finish it & I feel also anxious that you should see it & I shall be greatly obliged for your opinion of it as I mean if I live to publish it'[19]. In a later letter he writes to Rippingille that 'I have nearly finished my life having brought it down as far as our last visit to London & as soon as its done I think of offering it for sale'[20]. This leaves little doubt that Clare fully intended this autobiography for publication, unlike *Sketches*, which as we have already seen was 'only to furnish [Taylor] with particulars'. However, it was never published, and it is impossible to tell whether it was even completed[21]. Certainly no fair copy

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[18] See letter to H. F. Cary, 18 September 1824, *Letters*, pp.303-304.

[19] Clare to Cary, 30 December 1824, *Letters*, p. 311.

[20] Clare to Rippingille, 14 May 1826, *Letters*, p. 380.

[21] See *JCBH*, pp.xvii-xix, and J.W. and Anne Tibble eds., *The Prose of John Clare* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1951), pp. 1-2, for inconclusive discussions of this question.

has ever been found, and the work exists today only as a number of manuscript fragments, which have been collected and published (in very different forms) by J. W. and Anne Tibble (*The Prose of John Clare*, pp. 11-100) and Eric Robinson and David Powell (*JCBH*, pp. 34-165).

There are several possible reasons why the work was never satisfactorily completed. Firstly, there are hints in the letters and the journal that Clare was finding his enterprise of 'undisguisd' honesty harder to achieve than to formulate -

> ... I feel it rather awkard to mention names as there are some that I cannot speak well of that is were I feel an objection I cannot flatter over it & I woud not willingly offend anyone I have made free with myself & exposd my faults & failings without a wish to hide them neither do I care what is said about me but if you shoud see anything that might be against me in speaking of others I shall be thankful of your advice & also your remarks on the thing all together for it is written in a confusd stile & there will doubtless be found a deal of trifling in it[22]

Although some of the self-deprecation here may be attributable to the fact that Clare's addressee was Cary, whose own biographical writings Clare admired, he admits to similar difficulties in the journal entry from which I quoted above - 'Wrote 2 more pages of my life find it not so easy as I at first imagind as I am anxious to give an undisguisd narative ...'. (*JCBH*, p. 186). These two examples certainly suggest that Clare found the actual writing of the autobiography difficult in itself.

Secondly, the letters and journal entries from this period show that Clare was frequently unwell, and indeed often convinced that his end was near[23]. Thirdly, there is the sheer quantity of writing that Clare was doing at this time, combined with the dispiriting effects of the long-drawn-out wrangles with his publishers over the text and publication of *The Shepherd's Calendar*. If we consider the cumulative effects of these factors, it becomes easy to understand why Clare, who was never very punctilious about completing or revising his

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[22] Clare to Cary, 30 December 1824, *Letters*, pp. 311-312.
[23] See e.g. journal entries for 22-24 September 1824, *JCBH*, pp. 176-177; and letters to Inskip, 10 August 1824, and Cary , 18 September 1824, *Letters*, pp. 299-301 and 303-304.

manuscripts, should have left his autobiography in its scattered and untidy state of apparent near-completion.

Whether Clare did finish the work, and the final version has since been lost or destroyed, or whether, through a combination of the above factors, he did not, we are left with the confused and tangled state of the manuscripts as they remain today, and we must deal with the problems this presents us with as we try to read and make sense of them. The two published editions[24] of the fragments do at least make them accessible to the general reader, but I do not think either can be said unreservedly to have solved the editorial questions which are raised by the fragmentary nature of the text. The principal problem is that of ordering the fragments, since although some of Clare's chapter numbers survive, these were probably provisional, and do not in any case go very far towards establishing anything like an indisputable order. A hint of the sheer extent of the problems can be gleaned from the fact that the Tibbles' edition prefaces chapter 1 with a paragraph ('many people will think me a vain fellow ... the humble pages I have written' (*The Prose of John Clare*, p.11) which Robinson and Powell place eight pages from the end of their edition (*JCBH*, pp. 159-160). This is only one of countless examples in which these two presentations of the text differ radically.

It is undoubtedly a very difficult text to edit, as should be evident from the fact that two editorial teams, each with a profound understanding of Clare's life and work, have devised such different orders for the fragments. This can be explained partly by the fact that Robinson and Powell were working to a different agenda to the Tibbles. The latter appear to have set themselves the task of shaping the fragments into what they imagine a final version of the autobiography would have looked like, had Clare ever finished it. In order to do this, they have erased the appearance of fragmentariness from the text, freely combining passages from

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[24] I.e. the Tibbles' edition and Robinson and Powell's. The version edited by Robinson and Powell and printed in *JCBH* supersedes that previously published under the sole editorship of

different manuscripts, and from different parts of the same manuscript, to produce what would appear to the uninformed reader to be a relatively conventionally-structured autobiography.

This is certainly a questionable editorial strategy (although it does have the merit of making their text preferable to Robinson and Powell's for a casual reader who is not concerned with absolute textual reliability), and one that makes their text unsuitable for any detailed scholarly scrutiny. It is a strategy that Robinson, in his introduction to his 1986 version of the text, represented as a 'temptation' - 'I have resisted the temptation ... to create a continuous narrative as J. W. and Anne Tibble did ... except for an occasional paragraph where I have indicated clearly what I have done' (*John Clare's Autobiographical Writings*, p. viii), and although this remark is omitted from the introduction to *JCBH*, there is little evidence that the editorial strategy has much changed. Robinson and Powell, in their introduction to *JCBH*, claim, in words almost identical to Robinson's 'Note on the Text' (*John Clare's Autobiographical Writings*, p. xix), that '... we have grouped the "autobiographical fragments" in what appears to us to be the most logical order. To print the fragments in the order in which they appear in the manuscripts, as catalogued by David Powell and Margaret Grainger, would have been confusing' (*JCBH*, p. xx). It is by no means clear what difference there is between 'creating a continuous narrative' and presenting the fragments in 'the most logical order'. In the case of an autobiography, and in the absence of any evidence of authorial intention to the contrary, surely 'the most logical order' *is* one which approximates as nearly as possible to a 'continuous narrative' - if not, it is hard to see what criterion of 'logicality' is being invoked. The text as constructed by Robinson and Powell does indeed follow this criterion. To take just one example, on pp. 74-76 they interrupt a section from manuscript A 34, R12-11 in order to include material designed, as they explicitly affirm, 'to preserve some continuity in the narrative' (*JCBH*, p. 299, n. 76). In

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Eric Robinson in *John Clare's Autobiographical Writings*, (Oxford and New York: OUP,

fact the order in which Robinson and Powell present the fragments as a whole does follow a broadly chronological narrative, from Clare's childhood to the visits to London, with which both they and the Tibbles conclude their editions.

If I have seemed to dwell too long on these editorial matters, it is only in order to make clear the extreme textual difficulties surrounding the published texts of the *Autobiographical Fragments*, and to indicate why extreme care is needed when reading and interpreting them. Even though the very obviously fragmentary appearance of Robinson and Powell's edition might suggest that it is a mere reproduction of the manuscripts, it has nevertheless been subject to editorial interventions nearly as dramatic as those of the Tibbles' edition, and this must always be remembered when reading it. In this discussion I will be using Robinson and Powell's edition, as these caveats notwithstanding, it is by far the more suitable (and complete) text for scholarly scrutiny.

5: POPULAR LITERATURE IN THE *AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FRAGMENTS*

I want first to look at the ways in which Clare's representations of popular literature in the *Fragments* both amplify and alter those given in *Sketches*. We have already gained some sense of how highly-charged an issue this was for Clare, and the *Fragments* provide a fuller but differently-weighted picture to that in the earlier work. For instance, *Sketches'* account of the way in which Clare's poetry is born out of a process of struggle and competition with his parents' taste in chapbooks and broadsides (*JCBH*, pp. 13-14) is repeated in similar fashion in the *Fragments* (*JCBH*, pp. 98-99). However, it is noticeable that the later version has been softened considerably. *Sketches'* disparaging description of Clare's father's song - 'a wretched

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1986), pp. 29-152.

composition of those halfpenny ballads' - has been omitted, and where the earlier account represents the process very much as a competition, the later one presents it in the much blander terms of imitation - 'my first r[ude attempts took the form of] imitations of my fathers Songs' (*JCBH*, p. 98). This softening is typical of the tendency in the *Fragments*, in which Clare does not seem to feel such a need to disparage popular literature by contrasting it with 'book[s] of ... merit' (JCBH, p. 15) as he did in *Sketches*.

Considered simply as a source of evidence for the range of reading material available to an agricultural worker like Clare, the *Fragments* are extraordinarily comprehensive -

> ... I read Thompsons Seasons and Miltons Paradise Lost thro when I was a boy ... in novels my taste is very limited Tom Jones Robinson Crusoe and the Vicar of Wakefield are all that I am acquainted with ... tho I have often been offerd the perusal of the Waverley Novels I declind it ... (*JCBH*, p. 56)
>
> ...
>
> The first books I got hold of beside the bible and prayer book was an old book of Essays with no title and then a large one on Farming Robin Hoods Garland and the Scotch Rogue (*JCBH*, p. 57)
>
> ...
>
> there was the yong mans best companion Dilworths Wingates Hodders Vyses and Cockers Arithmetic the last was a favourite with me and I kept it Bonnycastles and Horners Mensuration and Wards Mathematics Leybourns and Morgans Dialling Female Shipwright Robinson Crusoe Pilgrims Progress Martindales Land surveying and Cockers Land surveying Hills Herbal Balls Astrology Culpeppers Herbal Rays History of the Rebellion Hudibras some Numbers of Josephus Parnells Poems Miltons Paradise Lost Thompsons Seasons Sam Westleys Poems Hemmings Algebra Sturms Reflections Harveys Meditations Wallers Poems Westleys Philosophy Thompsons Travels Lestranges Fables of Esop A book on Commets Life of Barnfield more Carew The Art of Gauging Duty of Man Wats Hymns Lees Botany Waltons Angler Kings Tricks of London laid open The Fathers Legacy or seven stages of Life Bloomfields Poems ... (*JCBH*, p. 61)

This is fascinating evidence, as it shows how surprisingly catholic the print culture of a village like Helpston could be, with mathematical textbooks rubbing shoulders with astrological works, and chapbooks and broadsides being read alongside established classics such as *Paradise Lost*. Lists such as these serve as a useful corrective against any easy assumptions of an absolute dichotomy between 'popular' and 'literary' print cultures. As E. P.

Thompson has said, '... one must be cautious as to generalisations as to "popular culture" ... a culture is also a pool of diverse resources, in which traffic passes between the literate and the oral, the superordinate and the subordinate, the village and the metropolis'[25]. This is especially apposite in the case of Clare, since he is in a sense one of the bridges across which such 'traffic' between 'high' and 'low' culture passes.

However, it is one of the major differences between *Sketches* and the *Fragments*, and a strong indication of the broader focus of the latter work, that in it we are shown that Clare was not as unique in his reading habits as he appears to be in *Sketches*. Indeed one of the more striking features of the *Fragments* is that the several pen-portraits of Clare's friends and contemporaries dwell so heavily on the sorts of books associated with them. To take one example,

> John Billings was an inofensive man he believes every thing that he sees in print as true and has a cupboard full of penny books the king and the cobler Seven Sleepers acounts of People being buried so many days and then dug up alive Of bells in churches ringing in the middle of the night Of spirits warning men when they was to dye etc each of the relations attested by the overseers churchwardens etc of the parish were the strange relations happend always a century back were none lives to contradict it such things as these have had personal existances with his memory on as firm footings as the bible history it self (*JCBH*, p. 53)

Clare here uses a description of Billings' habitual reading matter and the simplistic literalism of his approach to it as a sort of index of his character, as a signifier of his 'inoffensiveness'. It is simultaneously condescending and affectionate in tone - Clare's wry acknowledgement that 'none now lives to contradict' such superstitious tales is balanced by his sensitivity to the importance such material has for Billings - as important as 'the bible history itself'. This is, of course, very similar to the passage in *Sketches* where Clare describes his own early experience of chapbooks - 'great was the pleasure, pain, or supprise increased by allowing them authenticity, for I firmly believed every page I read and considerd I possesd in these the

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[25] E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London and New York: Penguin, 1993), p. 6.

chief learning and literature of the country' (*JCBH*, p.6). However, it is symptomatic of the differences between *Sketches* and the *Fragments* that Billings' literalism and naivete are seen almost as endearing features, as against the more sarcastic tone of Clare's description of his young self.

What is most interesting here, though, is the wider sense this passage gives of the way in which popular literature was actually used, and of the part it played in the lives of its readers. We know from *Sketches* that for Clare himself reading was an activity of overwhelming importance, but the emphasis in that work on his solitariness and exceptional status would, in the absence of other evidence, have led us to believe that he was more or less unique in this respect. Nor is this the only passage in the *Fragments* which contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the patterns of reading in Helpston. Clare's account of John Turnill tells how their

> ... acquaintance began with learning me on the winter nights to write and sum he was of a studious musing turn of mind and fond of books always carr[y]ing one of some sort or other in his pocket to read between toils at leisure hours they were somtimes sixpenny books of storys and at other times the books which he usd at school for he had been [at] boarding school and read in books there that are unknown in a village school I remember being often delighted with one which he repeated by heart in ryhme a story of a young lady being killd in battle by a shield ball while seeking her lover and another tale in prose of the old man and his ass which was a favour[i]te (*JCBH*, pp. 49-50)

This, by linking Turnill with chapbooks, and by giving him credit not only for educating the young Clare, but also for 'delighting' him with his recitations, provides an interesting reversal of the downplaying of popular literature in *Sketches* - the unambiguity here of Clare's 'delight' in a 'sixpenny book of storys'[26] is quite unlike anything in the earlier work. It also provides a sense of the reciprocity and communality in the transmission of literacy in a rural working-class community - of a samizdat-like process whereby one individual with a taste for reading

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[26] Again note the emphasis on the price of the book as its distinguishing characteristic, a mode of classification which, while no doubt commonplace, helps to maintain a subliminal awareness of the materiality of access to polite literature in a way that classification of books by subject-matter or by author would not.

inducts another into its almost illicit pleasures - which is quite unlike the secrecy and solitariness which are the keynotes of Clare's access to literacy in *Sketches*.

These passages from the *Fragments*, then, show Clare much more relaxed and open about the place of popular literature in his upbringing than previously. They give a sense of it as the grounding context and root of his continuing involvement with poetry, mediated to him by a number of individuals, in whose portraits we are shown it functioning as an integral part of their lives. However, there is one passage that outshines even these in the clarity of its positive declaration of the value of popular literature, and it is notable that it occurs in the context both of Clare's ambitions as a writer (at this stage, simply to master the physical act of writing) and of his debt to John Turnill -

> my ambition then was to be a good writer and I took great pains in winter nights to learn my Friend John Turnill setting me copies who by the bye was far from a good writer himself I was fond of books before I began to write poetry these were such that chance came at - 6py Pamphlets that are in the possession of every door calling hawker and found on every book stall at fairs and markets whose titles are as familiar with every one as his own name shall I repeat some of them "Little red riding hood" "Valentine and Orson" "Jack and the Jiant" "Tom Long the carrier" "The king and the cobler" "Sawney Bean" "The seven Sleepers" "Tom Hickathrift" "Johnny Armstrong" "Idle Laurence" who carried that power spell about him that laid every body to sleep - "old mother Bunch" "Robin Hoods garland" "old mother Shipton and old Nixons Prophecys" "History of Gotham" and many others shall I go on no these have memorys as common as Prayer books and Psalters with the peasentry such were the books that delighted me and I savd all the pence I got to buy them for they were the whole world of literature to me and I knew of no other I carried them in my pocket and read them at my leisure and they was the never weary food of winter evenings ere milton Shakspear and thompson had an existe[nce] in my memory and I even feel a love for them still nay I cannot help fancying now that cock robin babes in the wood mother hubbard and her cat etc etc are real poetry in all its native simplicity and as it shoud be I know I am foolish enough to have fancys different from others and childhood is a strong spell over my feelings but I think so on and cannot help it (*JCBH*, pp. 68-69)

This is obviously of great importance for my investigation, and I want to pick out some of its more striking features.

Firstly, there is the way in which Clare establishes that the class of literature to which he is referring is characterised principally by its popularity and ubiquity - '6py Pamphlets ... whose

titles are as familiar with every one as his own name'. After giving a list of some chapbook titles, he goes on to claim that they 'have memorys as common as Prayer books and Psalters with the peasantry'; an explicit affirmation both of the social status of the audience of such work (it is in every sense a 'class' of literature), and of its deep-rooted place in their lives. By comparing popular literature to the institutional texts of organised religion Clare evokes connotations of respect and reverence, whilst simultaneously suggesting that such respect may run no deeper than most Anglican religious sentiment. The situation of the chapbooks in the *'memorys'* of the 'peasantry' is telling, with its implication that they function less as a fully-present force in the lives of their readers than as a kind of background noise, an atmosphere and a context beneath the level of everyday consciousness.

However, after this rather muffled and almost apologetic opening (note the diffidence - 'shall I go on' - with which Clare interrupts his catalogue of chapbooks), the register of the passage suddenly becomes much more emphatic and personal - 'such were the books that delighted me ... they were the whole world of literature to me and I knew no other'. What follows is even more dramatic. After introducing the names of some icons of polite literature 'milton Shakspear and thompson' - as a gauge against which to measure the strength of his feeling for popular literature, Clare finds his way to the remarkably whole-hearted sentence that crowns this fragment -'nay I cannot help fancying now that cock robin babes in the wood mother hubbard and her cat etc etc are real poetry in all its native simplicity and as it shoud be'. The declarative finality of the concluding cadence here has a muscular table-thumping force, and it is not entirely surprising that Clare follows it with an attempt to soften the force of what he has, apparently almost inadvertently, found himself saying. However, despite the attempt to disperse the force of his statement represented by 'I know I am foolish enough to have fancys different from others and childhood is a strong spell over my feelings', he finally casts aside deference with a resounding, take-it-or-leave-it conclusion which reaffirms the value and inescapability of his own judgement - 'but I think so on and cannot help it'.

What, then, are we to make of this passage? In its whole-hearted, unambiguous statement of approval for popular literature it marks a complete reversal both of the general tone and the particular judgements of *Sketches*, and it is also unparalleled in the rest of the *Fragments*. It would be too simplistic to see it as a once-for-all repudiation of his earlier attitudes - as I have said, it is untypical of the rest of the *Fragments* in its forthrightness. Indeed, there are few parallels to be found in the rest of Clare's prose. Perhaps the closest, in the terms in which the judgement is framed, occurs in the journal entry for 5 November 1824 - 'Read in Bishop Percys Poems the "Relic of ancient poetry" take them up as often as I may I am always delighted there is so much of the essence and simplicity of true poetry that makes me regret I did not see them sooner as they woud have formed my taste and laid the foundation of my judgment in writing and thinking poeticaly as it is I feel indebted to them for many feelings' (*JCBH*, pp. 192-193). Clare here praises the ballads and romances in Percy for possessing the 'simplicity of true poetry', much as he praised the chapbooks for being 'real poetry in all its native simplicity', and it seems clear that the two judgements express a common admiration for forms of literature that can reasonably be called 'popular'. It is true that Percy's *Reliques* was a work decisively prepared from within polite literary culture, and Percy defended himself from possible accusations of vulgarity and time-wasting in concerning himself with such 'low' material by pointing to the encouragement he had been given by 'many men of learned character ... and others eminent for their genius and taste'[27], presumably in the hope that his readership would be comprised of such men. It is also true that Percy's *Reliques* contained many poems in addition to ballads, and that many of these had been subject to editing and additions that leave their authenticity as popular literary

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[27] Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1864), Vol I, "The Preface", p. xxxi.

productions severely in doubt[28]. There is, however, strong evidence that Clare himself found the collection interesting at least partly, if not primarily, for the ways in which it reflected the popular culture that he knew himself - 'D[rury] has sent me 3 vols calld "Percys Relics" there is some sweet Poetry in them & I think it the most pleasing book I ever happend on the tales are familiar from childhood all the stories of my grandmother & her gossiping neighbours I find versified in these vols'[29].

We are therefore, I think, entitled to see the journal entry as confirming the passage from the *Fragments* in articulating one possible form of Clare's response to popular literature, a response that dwells in gratitude on its place in the formation of his own poetic identity, and that is willing to make great claims for it as a form of poetry worthy of comparison to such canonical heavyweights as 'milton Shakspear and thompson'. The way in which the claims are made is interesting, in that Clare's stress is on 'simplicity' in both cases, in a way that recalls to mind numerous other commentators on popular literature - for instance Addison praising 'the essential and inherent perfection of simplicity of thought' in his essay on 'Chevy Chase'[30], and not least Percy himself in his 'Preface' to the Reliques, who is no doubt thinking of Addison amongst others when he writes that

> In a polished age, like the present, I am sensible that many of these reliques of antiquity will require great allowances to be made for them. Yet have they, for the most part, a pleasing simplicity, and many artless graces, which in the opinion of no mean critics have been thought to compensate for the want of higher beauties, and, if they do not dazzle the imagination, are frequently found to interest the heart (*Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, p. xxvii)

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[28] See Albert B. Friedman, *The Ballad Revival: Studies in the Influence of Popular on Sophisticated Poetry* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1961) Ch. 7, pp. 185-232.

[29] Clare to Hessey, 4 July 1820, *Letters*, p. 82

[30] Joseph Addison, 'Chevy Chase' *The Spectator*, No. 70, as reprinted in Edmund D. Jones ed., *English Critical Essays (Sixteenth, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries)* (London: OUP, 1965), p. 228.

However, it is noticeable that Percy's praise is far more ambiguous than Clare's, and its terms - 'pleasing simplicity, and many artless graces, which ... compensate for the want of higher beauties' - are uncomfortably similar to those associated with the 'Peasant Poet', whose closeness to nature and 'artless' simplicity are supposed to compensate for his lack of learning and humble station in life.

A survey of the contemporary reviews of Clare's work will yield many instances of his own work being appraised in just such terms. These are too numerous to quote in full, but two, both taken from largely favourable reviews, will suffice to suggest the extent to which Clare's work was both appraised - '[The works of Theocritus and Virgil] are to him, as they were to the Ayrshire Peasant "*a fountain shut up, and a book sealed*;" but Clare is acquainted with a language less understood than Greek or Latin - the language of the human heart, and he reads in a book which requires no commentary - the book of nature'[31] - and explicitly theorised in such terms - ' ... the productions of men who have passed their days in the midst of rural scenery, and whose education has not been such as to pre-occupy the mind with other ideas, consist of a succession of rural images, mingled with representations of simple and natural feeling; and the compositions of such men are valuable, because they are artless and unsophisticated ...'[32]. This gives some sense of the potential danger inherent in the terms in which Clare appraises popular literature in this fragment. We have what appears to be a serious attempt to establish an alternative, positive value for popular literature in the formation of Clare's poetic self, yet in a classic instance of the double-bind in which Clare so often found himself in talking about popular culture, the language in which he does so comes very close to the limiting and class-ridden language in which he himself was described in his capacity as 'peasant poet'.

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[31] *New Monthly Magazine* March 1820, xiii, pp. 326-330, reprinted in *Critical Heritage*, p. 70.

[32] *Monthly Review* March 1820, xci, pp. 296-300, reprinted in *Critical Heritage*, pp. 73-74.

Thus, although it is tempting to see this passage as representing a dramatic shift in Clare's attitude towards popular culture between the writing of *Sketches* and the period of composition of the *Fragments* - from a jealously possessive attitude towards literacy and polite literature and a concomitant *arriviste*-like contempt for the culture of his upbringing, to a more mature, unillusioned assessment of the worth of the polite culture whose acceptance of him and his work had been so equivocal, and hence an increased respect for his 'first culture' - such a view is untenable for several reasons. Firstly, that would imply a more consistent chronological progression in Clare's attitude to popular literature than is warranted by the evidence - for instance, the letter to Hessey, with its evidently warm approbation of Percy, was written in July 1820 - nearly a year before *Sketches* was completed. Secondly, such a view would discount the difference between the intended audiences for both works, which as I have been arguing plays a large part in conditioning their different representations of popular culture. Thirdly, as I have shown, there is the ambiguity of the actual terms in which Clare frames this paean to popular literature. The similarity of these to the terms in which Clare's own work was received graphically illustrates the difficulty for Clare of finding ways of figuring cultural judgements without betraying the social contradictions in which his status as both 'peasant' and 'poet' placed him.

This chapter has been concerned primarily with exploring some of the ways in which these contradictions are manifested in Clare's autobiographical prose, in the belief that the prose constitutes an excellent but often ignored resource for students of Clare, and I hope to have shown how they surface inevitably when he is trying to give an account of the role of popular culture in his poetic and personal formation. My next chapter will further explore this theme through an in-depth reading of 'The Village Minstrel' - the vocational title-poem of Clare's second book and his most concerted and sustained attempt at engaging in his poetry with this issue of his poetic self-formation.

CHAPTER 2

'A RIGHT TO SONG': POPULAR CULTURE AND VOCATION IN 'THE VILLAGE MINSTREL'

PAGE

NUMBERING

AS ORIGINAL

1: INTRODUCTION: TITLE AND ENTITLEMENT

'The Village Minstrel'[1], the longest poem in Clare's second book (published in two volumes in September 1821), is a curiously elusive work. Even its title, which is given a certain apparent solidity and centrality by virtue of the fact that it is shared with that of the book as a whole, turns out to have been chosen only after the poem had already been completed. I want to begin my discussion of the poem with a consideration of this question of its title, because, as we will see, it raises and crystallises a number of issues which are crucial to any reading of the poem itself.

Clare's original title for the poem was 'The Peasant Boy', but when Taylor first read it, he immediately wrote to Clare suggesting that its title should be changed - '... it is an excellent Poem; and this Discovery makes me alter my Mind about the Title: we must put this Poem first and call it I think The Village Minstrel; & the Title will then run The Village Minstrel, & other Poems, by JC, &c.'[2]. The 'Title' to which Taylor refers first in this extract is not the title of the poem, but rather that of the book itself, which he had previously proposed[3] to call 'The Ways of a Village, with Songs, Sonnets, & other Poems'. It is, however, suggestive that as soon as he had seen Clare's long poem he felt that its title should be changed, and should become the title of the book as a whole. Why this should be so will emerge from a consideration of the correspondence that ensued from this change of mind.

Clare himself seems to have had no objection to the change - he wrote to Taylor on 16 January 1821 referring to the poem simply as the 'Village Minstrel' without commenting on the proposed name change. It is in Taylor's letter to Clare of 23 January 1821 that the scope and the nature of the problems surrounding the issue of the work's title are first raised:

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[1] Although it is a major work, I will use inverted commas to refer to the poem, rather than italics, in order to distinguish it from the book of the same title.

[2] Taylor to Clare, 29 December 1820, *Letters*, p. 135.

[3] In a letter to Clare of 29 December 1820, *Letters*, p. 126.

I want to draw out a number of strands from this correspondence, but it is worth dwelling briefly first on the picture that emerges from it of the working relationship between Clare and Taylor at this time. With the publication of Clare's poetry in its manuscript form in the Oxford English Texts Edition, and the evidence which this supplies of frequently radical differences between poems as Clare wrote them and as they were actually published in his lifetime, it is often tempting to assume that this relationship was little more than one of censorship and misrepresentation on Taylor's side and mute acquiescence on Clare's. However, as the above letters show, Taylor was often extremely solicitous for Clare's opinion and approval in his alterations. Equally they show that Clare for his part was capable of strongly-worded dissent from Taylor's suggestions - '"Minstrel Villager" & "Village Muse" [both Taylor's suggestions] are very poor & very bad' - quite as much as he was capable of agreeing with them if he thought them good - 'your "Village Minstrel" still sticks in my memory as best of all'. This sort of evidence, and there is much more of it in the letters at this period, should at least make us think twice when we claim to prefer the unpunctuated immediacies of Clare's manuscript versions to their tidied-up and respectable cousins in the published volumes. We may still stick to our preference, and in many cases there are good reasons to, but we should be aware that Clare himself would probably not have shared our preference - he had given Taylor a general mandate to emend and punctuate his poems, and in many cases he gave his approval to specific instances[6].

However, the most important feature of this correspondence is the light it throws on the question, not just of what 'The Village Minstrel' was to be called, but also of what was at stake for Clare in this choice of a title. When Taylor first raised serious doubts about the title of the work, in his letter of 23 January, the manner of their expression was very telling - 'the *Village Minstrel* is too much like Beattie's *Minstrel*, & will remind some persons of that work ... The Peasant Boy is a tame Title, too like the Farmer's Boy'. Clare in his

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[6] For an illuminating discussion of the general issue of Clare's relationship, at times almost amounting to creative partnership, with Taylor; and one which provides a salutary corrective to the prevalent view of Taylor's editorship as unwarrantably intrusive, see Zachary Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), Ch. 5, 'John Taylor and the Poems of Clare', pp.206-261.

> Now what are we to do about the Title. - Some of our Friends think the *Village Minstrel* is too much like Beattie's *Minstrel*, & will remind some persons of that Work which has a Design like yours though in my opinion far inferior for Truth & Vigour in the Conception and Execution - The Peasant Boy is a tame Title, too like the Farmer's Boy - Do you think of any other? -
>
> (*Letters*, p. 145)

Clare's response to this came in a letter of 8 February 1821 - 'D[rury] likes "Village Minstrel" for the Long poem uncommon well but has the same opinion of it as you fear still he says if the general title be adopted "Village Minstrelsy" the fear of plagerism will be reduced to a trifle as "Village Minstrel" will only stand at the head of the long poem ...' (*Letters*, p. 147). However, this option did not recommend itself to Taylor any more than the others -

> "Village Minstrelsy is not free from the same Charge which comes against the other Titles. It is too like "English Minstrelsy" - a Compilation of Walter Scotts which *did not sell*, & that is another bad sign. I have preferred your old Title The Peasant Boy after duly Considering all Circumstances. - For some time I thought favorably of "The Minstrel Village" - & also of "The Village Muse" - but unless you recommend either of them I cannot trust to adopting either[4]

Clare's reply to this was a characteristic mixture of forthright opinion and deferred judgement:

> I have had my dose of "Village Minstrelsy" after your information no worse a [?singn] & no better phisic to sicken a repetition coud be given *woud not sell* is plenty to abandon anything of that nature so I am content but "Minstrel Villager" & "Village Muse" are very poor & very bad - the "Peasant Boy" is but middling while your "Village Minstrel" still sticks in my memory as best of all - & out of these 2 you chuse for yourself - as for my part I shoud chuse the last[5]

Taylor appears to have taken Clare's advice to stick with 'The Village Minstrel', and the question of the poem's title is not referred to again in the letters.

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[4] Taylor to Clare, 10 February 1821, *Letters*, p. 148 (Taylor's italics).

[5] Clare to Taylor, 13 February 1821, *Letters*, p. 151.

response to this seems to have thought that what was worrying Taylor was the possibility of accusations of plagiarism, but I think this is a misunderstanding of Taylor's real concern. This I think would be better expressed in terms of the way in which a title can set up expectations in the reading public, the way it sets up a context, a particular genealogy of previous texts within which to read a work. In this case, Taylor is concerned that the two proposed titles for the poem would each be liable to align the work with two well-known and much-loved literary precedents - Beattie's *Minstrel* and Bloomfield's *The Farmer's Boy* - to the detriment of Clare's own work.

There was no doubt an element of canny marketing in this - in an already overcrowded poetic marketplace it was necessary to try and create a distinctive identity for Clare, lest he should be swamped by the mass of competing productions. The economic motive becomes explicit when 'Village Minstrelsy' is rejected as being too close to Scott's 'English Minstrelsy' 'which did not sell'. This question of the placing of Clare as a poetic 'product' was particularly important in that, as we have seen, Taylor's marketing strategy for the first book had been to present Clare to the public as conforming to the highly idealised generic concept of the 'peasant poet'. However, a 'peasant poet's' appeal to the market resided largely in the conjunction of novelty-value with the opportunity he afforded for pity, neither of which attractions promise to provide secure foundations for a long or remunerative poetic career. In fact, the nature of the literary marketplace made it almost impossible for a poet from the rural lower classes to avoid stereotyping as a 'peasant poet', and Taylor had little choice but to continue marketing Clare in this way - the 'Introduction' to *The Village Minstrel* reiterates a number of the same themes as that of *Poems Descriptive*. However, it ends on an uneasy note, with Taylor hinting at the problems of a 'peasant poet' in a literary 'free' market, and concluding with a quixotic plea for a return to past models of literary production, as though he could foresee the results of entrusting Clare to the fickleness of public taste -

> Poets of all ages have been cherished and rewarded, and this, not as of mere favour, but from a feeling that they have a claim to be so considered. If of late years a less generous treatment has been experienced by any, it is not chargeable on the nature of man in general, but on an illiberal spirit of criticism, which, catching its character from the bad temper of the age, has "let

slip the dogs of war" in the flowery fields of poesy. We may hope that kinder feelings are returning, that "olives of endless age" will grace the future Belles Lettres of our country, and that especially the old and natural relation of poet and patron may be again acknowledged, as it has been in the present instance:-

> The kindly dew drops from the higher tree,
> And wets the little plants that lowly dwell

(*Critical Heritage*, p. 140)

Taylor's concern about the possible effects of the proposed titles for 'The Village Minstrel' can thus be seen as a rather uneasy acknowledgement of the problems inherent in Clare's situation as a competitor in the literary market-place, but I do not think such a reading exhausts the implications of his comments. The issue of Clare's distinctiveness in the market-place was certainly very much alive both for Taylor and for Clare (witness his amused but hard-headed reaction to Taylor's comment on 'Village Minstrelsy' - 'no better phisic to sicken a repetition coud be given *woud not sell* is plenty to abandon anything of that nature'), but Taylor's comments also adumbrate the question of Clare's distinctiveness as a poet, and the way in which the choice of a title for 'The Village Minstrel' could help or hinder this. For instance, when he refers to the danger of reminding readers of Beattie's *Minstrel*, it is not its power as an economic competitor that concerns him, but rather the effect an implicit comparison of the two works will have on the reading of Clare's poem - '[it] will remind some persons of that work which has a Design like yours though in my opinion far inferior for Truth & Vigour in the Conception and Execution'. He also criticises 'The Peasant Boy' for being 'a tame title', as well as pointing out its too-close similarity to Bloomfield's *Farmer's Boy*. While it is not entirely clear what Taylor means by 'tameness' in this context, it is likely that the problem lies in the word 'peasant', perhaps indicating an uneasy sense of all the uncomfortable and limiting connotations that attach to the word (as against the 'higher' associations with antiquity and originary poetic genius, untainted by social connotations, that surround the word 'minstrel' and were possibly what attracted Clare to it as a title), despite the necessity of using it in order to bring Clare to public attention, and perhaps a sense that for the word to appear in the title of Clare's longest work to date would be to offer too substantial a hostage to fortune.

For Taylor, then, the importance of choosing a good title for the poem lies in its effect on the reading public - partly on whether it will tempt them to buy the work in the first place; but also, and in the long term more importantly, on how it will contribute to their sense of what it is about Clare that is both important and distinctive, on how it will encourage them to construct his relationship with his poetic precursors - with individuals such as Beattie and Bloomfield, and ultimately with the whole literary tradition of English verse.

If I have dwelt so long on the apparently trivial matter of the work's title, it is because of a sense that these questions are also central to the work itself, and that the pains which Taylor and Clare took over the issue suggests that they had some apprehension of the fact. I want to suggest that Clare's vexed and ambivalent status as poet and labourer, his relationship to the literary tradition as a whole, and the possibility of creating a distinctive space for himself in a terrain hedged about and scarred by numerous social and cultural boundaries, are the issues around which 'The Village Minstrel' circles again and again in its elusive and tentative way, just as they are the issues which lie behind the choice of its title. It is indeed very much in keeping with the manner of the poem that, although it is centrally concerned with Lubin's 'entitlement' to his role as a poet, he is never actually referred to in such terms in the text (the poem is full of 'titles' for Lubin, but they are all of an extremely limiting nature - 'a humble rustic', 'a luckless clown', an 'uncoothly lout', 'a ninney' etc. - 'tame titles' indeed!), and it is only in the title of the piece that he is able to assume that 'title' of 'Minstrel' which the poem throughout works both to confer on and withhold from him.

2: 'THE VILLAGE MINSTREL' AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

In recent critical writing on 'The Village Minstrel', there is general agreement that the issues which I have outlined above as being raised by the controversy over the poem's title are also central to any reading of the

poem itself. For instance, William D. Brewer sees it 'as a work in which Clare struggles to come to terms with his precursors, as a highly ambivalent poem in which Clare tries to defer to the pastoral tradition of the eighteenth century and to present social and economic realities'[7]. Johanne Clare, in her excellent chapter on the poem, quotes Beattie and compares Clare's project to his - 'Beattie wrote, [that] the intention of his poem was to "trace the progress of a poetical genius ... from the first dawnings of fancy and reason." This subtitle and statement of intention might also serve to explain the themes with which Clare's poem is centrally concerned'[8]. Bridget Keegan reads the poem as a response to patronising criticisms of Poems Descriptive, as an attempt to produce a narrative which will authorise Clare's right to the 'title' of poet through the means of an alternative 'intertextual genealogy'[9]. Her argument, particularly in its reading of the status and function of popular culture in 'The Village Minstrel', is one to which I will return later in this chapter.

However, given the general agreement about the issue that are at stake in the poem, there is some disagreement about the precise manner in which it addresses them, i.e. about what sort of poem it actually is, about what genre it can usefully be assigned to, and particularly, in the case of William Brewer, about the extent to which it should be read as autobiographical. It is true, as Johanne Clare points out, that some of Clare's comments on the poem do not necessarily suggest that he saw its prime worth as being in any way connected with its autobiographical value - 'I have been looking over that hasty scribbld thing the "Peasant Boy" & find some of the best rural descriptions I have yet written such as the feast & the statute & some touches on Love & Scenery'[10]. However, the similarities between Clare's situation and that which the poem ascribes to Lubin constantly invite the reader to make connections between the poet and his hero, and to read

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[7] William D. Brewer, 'Clare's Struggle for Poetic Identity in The Village Minstrel', *John Clare Society Journal*, 13 (1994), p. 74.

[8] *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance*, p. 87.

[9] Bridget Keegan, 'Broadsides, Ballads and Books: the Landscape of Cultural Literacy in "The Village Minstrel"', *John Clare Society Journal*, 15 (1996), pp. 11-18, quotation from p. 13.

[10] Clare to Taylor, 7 January 1821, *Letters*, p. 136.

the work as being at least obliquely autobiographical. In fact, Brewer's argument against reading the poem autobiographically is far from convincing:

> ... Clare separates the narrator and Lubin not to create two visions of himself but in partial deference to the pastoral tradition in which he was working ... Clare's impulse to write autobiographically is more than tempered by his adherence to his model. But even here, his ambivalence toward the pastoral tradition leads to inconsistencies, as when he interjects into the narrative his childhood experiences of being taken from school to help support his family and reading *Robinson Crusoe* ... The distinction between the narrator and Lubin is an artificial device which is clearly at odds with Clare's impulse to present peasant life in an honest and direct way (*John Clare Society Journal* 13, pp. 77-78)

This argument is vitiated by the assumptions it makes, both about the nature of pastoral, and about the nature of autobiography. Firstly, it seems to be implied that since, in Brewer's view, 'The Village Minstrel' is a pastoral, it therefore cannot be also an autobiography, and hence that any interjections of autobiographical matter are evidence of Clare's 'ambivalence' towards the form. It is true that in writing a pastoral a poet must present his material in a manner that accords with the traditions and prescriptions of the form, and that certain sorts of material are inappropriate to the form. However, this is by no means to say that it is impossible to write an autobiography through the medium of a pastoral, but rather that the selection, both of material and of the manner of its presentation, which is as central to autobiography as to any other form of writing, will in this case be made according to the criteria imposed by the pastoral form.

Secondly, Brewer's use of the word 'artificial' seems to suggest that there is some sort of contrast between the 'artificialities' imposed by the pastoral form, and what we must take to be the transparent, 'honest and direct' nature of autobiography. Such a privileging of the supposedly artifice-free nature of autobiography over against the 'artificial' character of other literary forms is highly misleading - we saw in my previous chapter how artful and selective Clare's own autobiographical prose was in its construction of a very particular and deliberately-chosen narrative of Clare's early life. Johanne Clare's comments on this subject provide as good a refutation of Brewer's position as any:

> All forms of autobiography and confession are artful in the sense that they conceal as well as reveal certain truths about their authors ... Both works [i.e. "The Village Minstrel" and the

> autobiographical prose] may be ransacked for their autobiographical information and eloquent misinformation, and the most important difference between them is not to be found in terms of their autobiographical content - they are both literary texts in which certain aspects of Clare's experience are structured and restructured, evaded and revealed - but rather in terms of their formal motive (*John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance*, p. 88)

I propose, then, to follow both Johanne Clare and Bridget Keegan in reading 'The Village Minstrel' as being, in however veiled and evasive a manner, autobiographical in its general project. I will argue firstly that, like *Sketches*, it is an attempt by Clare to write about his own formation and vocation as a writer - to construct a narrative that will not only describe the process whereby he became a poet, but also legitimate and authorise his right to that status - and secondly, that the poem's representations of popular culture are crucial to this project.

However, before I go on to consider the place of popular culture in 'The Village Minstrel', I must first substantiate my claim that it shares a common autobiographical purpose with *Sketches*, since at first sight the two works could hardly appear to have less in common. *Sketches*, as we have already seen, is a work rich in circumstantial detail about Clare's life, foregrounding the material and cultural obstacles which stood between him and his ambition to be a poet, and its main thematic concern is with the physical act of writing, which serves to focus these issues in a particularly stark way. In contrast to this, 'The Village Minstrel' has for its central character the shadowy figure of Lubin, whose material situation is gestured at only in vague and general terms - 'Far in the swail where poverty retires'[11] - and whose apparent passivity[12] is in sharp contrast to the obstinately determined Clare of *Sketches*, whose consuming desire to write is the motor force of that work's narrative. The difference appears even more starkly when one considers that nowhere in 'The Village Minstrel' is Lubin shown as actually writing. His poetic activity is almost always figured in terms of song - 'A humble rustic hums his lowly dreams' (l. 3); 'His native scenes & childhoods early spring / So sweet to view so temptingly to sing' (ll. 22-23); 'As nature seemly sung his mutterings usd repeat' (l. 171)

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[11] *Early Poems II*, p. 123, l. 4. All references to the text of the poem are to this edition unless otherwise specified, and for simplicity's sake I will henceforth give line references only.

etc. - quite a contrast to the almost materialist concentration on writing as a talismanic activity which is such a feature of *Sketches*. Finally, there is the much-remarked fact that only one 'literary' text is referred to in the poem (and that in an oblique and fleeting manner - Lubin is described as 'blunder[ing] oft wi joy round crusoes lonly isle' (l. 384)), and there is thus nothing to compare with *Sketches*' description of the young Clare's foundational encounter with Thomson's *Seasons* (*JCBH,* pp. 10-11 – see my discussion in chapter 1).

Given all these differences, then, it is clear that if there is any sense in which *Sketches* and 'The Village Minstrel' share a common aim, they realise it in very different ways. This should not be surprising in the light of my earlier comments on Brewer's over-simplification of the relationship between autobiography and genre - we should certainly expect an autobiography written in the form of a prose letter to a friend and publisher (with the expectation, if not the certainty, that he would be the only person ever to read the work) to differ greatly from one written expressly for publication, particularly if it is written in verse, with all the formal and generic constraints that brings. I will now therefore turn to a discussion of the way in which the autobiographical nature of 'The Village Minstrel' is shaped by its genre.

As I have already remarked, 'The Village Minstrel' is an elusive poem, and it is difficult to discern an overall shape to the work as a whole. It is true that there are suggestions of a seasonal structure - the poem moves from Lubin's experience of winter (stanzas 9-16), through spring (stanzas 17-43) and summer (stanzas 44-52), to autumn (stanza 53 onwards). However, it could hardly be said that this is a structure that forces itself on the reader's attention - it is not given any particular emphasis in the text, and it seems to peter out before the poem is two-thirds over - and the poem as a whole seems to be given over to a more or less random alteration between rhapsodic descriptions of Lubin in solitary communion with nature, and accounts of village customs and holidays. Bearing this in mind, I want to begin my reading of the poem by setting it against Beattie's *The Minstrel*, since a clearer sense of the structure of Clare's poem will emerge from an examination of the ways in which he departs from and remodels a work that appears to have been a model for his own.

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[12] See *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance*, pp. 89-92 for a discussion of Lubin's apparent

My discussion of the correspondence about the title of 'The Village Minstrel' has already suggested how inevitable it was that it would be compared with Beattie's work, and a cursory examination of the two works reveals some very striking similarities. Both poems are written in Spenserian stanzas (a form which is relatively rare in Clare's work), and both concern themselves with the fate of a poet born in poverty, who draws his chief inspiration from solitary communing with nature. It is true that Clare claims not to have seen Beattie's work until after the completion of his own - he wrote as follows to Chauncy Hare Townsend after receiving a copy of *The Minstrel* as a gift: 'the "Minstrel" is a sweet Poem & far as I have read a many thoughts occur which are in my "Peasant Boy" I doubt the world will think them plagarisms therefore I must alter them or cut them out altogether but nature is the same here at helpstone as it is elswhere'[13]. However, as Mark Storey indicates in his note to this passage, it is probable that Clare was being economical with the truth here, and that he had in fact seen Beattie's poem some five years earlier 'in a collection of verse called *The Wreath*, which he had owned since 1815'[14]. We have already seen how sensitive to accusations of plagiarism Clare could be, and no doubt he did not wish to provide any unnecessary ammunition for them by admitting to a previous acquaintance with *The Minstrel*. Certainly, the similarities between the two works are too striking to be accidental, and they did indeed appear to some contemporary readers to smack of plagiarism. For instance, an anonymous reviewer in the *Monthly Magazine* complained as follows in November 1821: 'not only in the structure of the verse, but in many imitative passages, we seem to perceive an attempt to present us in Lubin, with a species of travestie of our old acquaintance Edwin [the principal character of *The Minstrel*], and we cannot approve of the experiment' (*Critical Heritage*, p. 153). To a modern reader, though, 'The Village Minstrel' seems much less like a pale imitation of *The Minstrel* than a creative appropriation of its general structure towards ends that are quite unlike Beattie's. It is in these terms that I propose to read the relation between the two works, and by

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'incapab[ility] of personal agency'.

[13] Clare to Townsend, May 6 1820, *Letters*, p. 63.
[14] *Letters*, p. 63, note 3.

exploring the ways in which Clare departs from and reinterprets his model I hope to arrive at a clearer sense of what is distinctive about 'The Village Minstrel'.

Beattie's own preface to his poem is very illuminating as to his purposes and it is worth quoting at some length:

> The design was, to trace the progress of a Poetical Genius, born in a rude age, from the first dawning of fancy and reason, till that period at which he may be supposed capable of appearing in the world as a MINSTREL, that is, as an itinerant poet and musician:- a character which, according to the notions of our forefathers, was not only respectable, but sacred.
>
> I have endeavoured to imitate Spenser in the measure of his verse, and in the harmony, simplicity and variety of his composition ...
>
> To those who may be disposed to ask what could induce me to write in so difficult a measure, I can only answer, that it pleases my ear, and seems, from its Gothic structure and original, to bear some relation to the subject and spirit of the poem. It admits both simplicity and magnificence of sound and of language, beyond any other stanza I am acquainted with. It allows the sententiousness of the couplet, as well as the more complex modulation of blank verse. What some critics have remarked, of its uniformity growing at last tiresome to the ear, will be found to hold true only when the poetry is faulty in other respects[15]

This is interesting on a number of levels, firstly for what it tells us about the connotations of the Spenserian stanza, which both Beattie and Clare use as the medium for their poems. For Beattie, it is evidently its somewhat archaic and 'Gothic' flavour that is its prime attraction, and if his poem does not in fact live up to his ambitious claims to match Spenser 'in the harmony, simplicity and variety of his composition', he has at least been honest about his aims and has given a good description of the virtues of the stanza when well-handled. It is, though, less clear why Clare should have been attracted to the metre - the 'subject' and 'spirit' of his poem have little of the Gothic about them, and he was not given to providing this sort of abstract rationalisation of his poetic method. It is possible that the example of Beattie's poem alone is sufficient to explain Clare's choice of the same stanza, and the sheer technical pleasure of testing himself against such a demanding from should not be downplayed - a glance through any collection of his poetry provides

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[15] Rev George Gilfillan ed., *The Poetical Works of Beattie, Blair and Falconer, With Lives, Critical Dissertations, and Explanatory Notes* (Edinburgh and London: James Nichol, 1854).

abundant evidence of his willingness to experiment with different verse-forms[16]. I will be returning later to the question of what might be implied in Clare's choice of this stanza, but for now it is sufficient to note that his reasons for doing so can hardly have been the same as Beattie's, if indeed they were consciously worked out at all.

Secondly, and more importantly, Beattie's preface provides us with explicit and valuable evidence of his purposes in the poem. When taken in conjunction with the poem's subtitle (the full title is *The Minstrel; Or, The Progress of Genius*), it makes it very clear that the poem was conceived as a fictionalisation of the sort of theories about natural genius and minstrelsy which were so prominent at the time (*The Minstrel* was first published in 1770). The first paragraph of the preface, with its carefully precise, even pedantic outline of 'the progress of a Poetical Genius, born in a rude age, from the first dawnings of fancy and reason, till that period at which he may be supposed capable of appearing in the world as a MINSTREL, that is, as an itinerant poet and musician ...' reads almost like the prospectus for an anthropological experiment, and indeed Albert Friedman has claimed that the poem 'is little more than a dramatization of Percy's account of minstrel life' (*The Ballad Revival*, p. 215). This important conjunction between *The Minstrel* and Percy's theories about the minstrels, who were held to have been the authors of most of the ballads collected in his *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*, is one to which I will return later in this chapter when discussing the representations of popular culture in 'The Village Minstrel'.

However, I am at the moment concerned with the light that the preface throws on Beattie's design for his poem, and with the difference between this and Clare's design for 'The Village Minstrel'. Clare wrote no preface for his work, and there is little external evidence as to his purposes in the poem. What little there is, though, does make it clear that his purposes were quite unlike Beattie's. There is the passage in the letter to Taylor which I quoted from above, in which Clare describes himself as having 'been looking over that hasty scribbld thing the 'Peasant Boy' & find some of the best rural descriptions I have yet written such as the

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[16] Taylor's remark in his 'Introduction' to *Poems Descriptive* - 'CLARE has a great delight in trying to run races with other men' (*Critical Heritage*, p. 52) - is certainly true of this aspect of Clare's work, and his

feast & the statute & some touches on Love & Scenery' (*Letters*, p. 136). While this tells us nothing explicitly about Clare's overall design for the poem, it at least emphasises that he saw its value as inhering in the quality of its descriptions rather than in any overweening philosophical argument. Clare's estimations of the worth of his own poems could vary wildly, however, and in fact the main external evidence concerning his purposes in "The Village Minstrel" occurs in the much-quoted passage from the autobiographical fragments in which he is describing the reasons for his dissatisfaction with it -

> I began the Village Minstrel ... attempting to describe my own feelings and love for rural objects ... it was little time but I was still unsatisfied with it and am now and often feel sorry that I did not withold it a little longer for revision the reason why I dislike it is that it does not describe the feelings of a ryhming peasant strongly or localy enough
>
> (*JCBH*, pp. 113-114)

This passage has been the occasion of much discussion, most of it centreing on the question of what Clare means by writing 'localy', but this is not what concerns us here[17]. Bearing in mind that Clare's value-judgements on his own work are not to be trusted - he always tended to claim that his most recent productions were his best - we nevertheless have here an important, if retrospective, piece of evidence as to his intentions in writing 'The Village Minstrel'. He claims that it was begun as an attempt 'to describe my own feelings and love of rural objects', and the reason he gives for disliking it now 'is that it does not describe the feelings of a ryhming peasant strongly or localy enough'. This provides some reason for reading an autobiographical motive into 'The Village Minstrel' - describing one's own feelings is certainly a part, if not by any means the whole, of what is meant by autobiography. In addition to this, it suggests that we would be correct to read the work, not just as being autobiographical in character, but also as being primarily concerned with Clare's status as poet - it is criticised for failing sufficiently to describe the

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delight in imitation and craftsmanly experiment with different forms is one of the most constant themes throughout his vast output.

[17] See my discussion of this issue in my chapter 4.

feelings, not just of a peasant, but of a *rhyming* peasant (who, in the context, must be firmly identified with Clare himself), i.e. a poet.

Although this passage should not be leant on too heavily - it was, after all, written several years after the event and cannot be taken as fully representative of Clare's intentions at the time of writing - it nevertheless suggests a clear demarcation between the purposes of Beattie and Clare in their representations of their respective minstrels. We have on the one hand a philosophico-historical poem about the growth of 'Poetical Genius' in 'a rude age', which, if it fails, will fail by being insufficiently elevated and 'Gothic'; and on the other hand a poem about 'the feelings of a ryhming peasant' (almost certainly to be identified with its author), which is indicted by its own author for being insufficiently 'local'. Bearing in mind this distinction, I now want to turn my attention to the texts themselves, in order to draw out the ways in which Clare both imitates and departs from his model. A comparison of the ways in which both poets situate their central characters both physically and socially is highly instructive. Here is Beattie introducing Edwin's father and describing the way of life into which his hero is to be born:

11 There lived in Gothic days, as legends tell,
A shepherd-swain, a man of low degree;
Whose sires, perchance, in Fairyland might dwell,
Sicilian groves, or vales of Arcady;
But he, I ween, was of the north countrie;
A nation famed for song and beauty's charms;
Zealous, yet modest; innocent, though free;
Patient of toil; serene amidst alarms;
Inflexible in faith; invincible in arms.

12 The shepherd swain of whom I mention made,
On Scotia's mountains fed his little flock;
The sickle, scythe, or plough he never sway'd:
An honest heart was almost all his stock;
His drink the living water from the rock:
The milky dams supplied his board, and lent
Their kindly fleece to baffle winter's shock;
And he, though oft with dust and sweat besprent,
Did guide and guard their wanderings, wheresoe'er they went.[18]

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[18] *The Poetical Works of Beattie etc.*, p. 5.

In contrast to this self-sufficient figure from a pre-historic Caledonian golden age, swathed in a penumbra of mythic associations, here is how Clare introduces us to Lubin and to the world in which he is to grow up:

While learned genius rush to bold extreemes
& sun beams snatch to light the muses fires
A humble rustic hums his lowly dreams
Far in the swail where poverty retires
& sings what nature & what truth inspires
The charms that rise from rural scenery
Which he in pastures & in woods admires
The sports the feelings of his infancy
& such like artless things how mean so ere they be
(ll. 1-9)

...

Young lubin was a peasant from his birth
His sire a hind born to the frail & plough
To thump the corn out & to till the earth
The coarsest chance which natures laws alow
To earn his living by a sweating brow
Thus lubins early days did rugged roll
& mixt in timley toil - but een as now
Ambitions prospects fird his little soul
& fancy soard & sung bove povertys controul
(ll. 28-36)

Even making allowances for the fact that the Clare stanzas are made to look radically different by virtue of their status as unpunctuated, uncorrected manuscript transcripts, the differences between these two passages are surely dramatic. Although neither is given a precise location - Edwin's father is said to hail from 'the north countrie'[19] while Lubin is simply located in 'the swail where poverty retires' - they are placed within very different connotative contexts. Beattie allows himself to speculate that Edwin's 'sires ... in Fairyland might dwell, / Sicilian groves or vales of Arcady' - in other words he is explicitly situated somewhere

[19] N.B. even this apparently trivial detail turns out to be firmly rooted in scholarship. See Percy's 'Essay on the Ancient Minstrels', section VII, 'There is scarce an old historical song or Ballad, ... wherein a Minstrel or

between the two lineages of Spenserian romance and classical pastoral, thereby ruling out any pretence at realism. In contrast to this, Clare comes over almost as a severe realist. His social placement of Lubin is blunt and precise, and he allows no mythological suggestions to cloud his ancestry - 'His sire a hind born to the frail & plough / To thump the corn out & to till the earth / The coarsest chance which natures laws alow'. This is not to deny the deferential construction of poverty and class which Johanne Clare finds in this and other passages in 'The Village Minstrel'[20], but to suggest that Clare is working within very different conventions to Beattie, despite their overt similarities, and to emphasise the realism that is present within 'The Village Minstrel', even if it is not the overall impression that we carry away from the poem as a whole. The contrast also holds good between the occupations of the two heroes, and between the poetic voices in which each is presented. Edwin, in true pastoral style, is the son of a shepherd - 'The sickle, scythe, or plough he never sway'd' - and any 'shock' that winter or poverty could deal him (or his readers) is adequately 'baffled' by Beattie's deliberately archaising vocabulary. Lubin, on the other hand, is born 'To thump the corn out & to till the earth ... to earn his living by a sweating brow' - the predominantly monosyllabic vocabulary serving to emphasise the monotony of his condition, and the allusion to the curse of Adam universalising and depersonalising his condition, aligning him with the common humanity from which Edwin's mythological associations mark him out.

This comparison should in itself be enough to dispel any charges of plagiarism. It is quite clear that the two poets are working to vastly different agendas - Beattie's scene is set in a distant, semi-mythological past ('in Gothic days, as legends tell') and swathed in archaic language and pastoral convention. Clare, on the other hand, introduces us to a hero who is explicitly described as a 'peasant', i.e. a manual agricultural labourer, set in an admittedly indeterminate but apparently recent past and figured in language which is not afraid of colloquial bluntness - 'To thump the corn out ...' etc.. Beattie's idyllic and arcadian pastoral mise-en-scene is replaced by an account which, while still recognisably pastoral in nature, tends much more

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Harper appears, but he characterized by way of eminence to have been "of the North Countreye" ...', *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* I, p.lv.

[20] See *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance*, pp. 90-91.

towards the traditions of georgic with its acknowledgement of some of the harsher aspects of rural life, and its willingness to consider both the existence and the nature of the labour which gives that life its character. If Clare can be accused of anything, then, it is only of borrowing from Beattie a template in the overall shape and situation of his poem, but both the use to which he puts that form, and the detail and texture of his handling of it, are so much his own that any accusations of plagiarism can be confidently dismissed as the consequences of superficial readings of both works.

So far, my discussion of Clare's introductory stanzas has centred on the way in which they demythologise the equivalent passage in *The Minstrel*, but they are also crucial in themselves to any reading of 'The Village Minstrel', as they set up the terms in which the whole poem must be read if it is to be properly understood. I have already pointed out the emphasis they place on Lubin's social standing, and the much greater realism with which they render this, compared to Beattie's placing of Edwin. However, this aspect of these lines, while it is crucial to any reading of the relationship between the two works, is not in itself their most significant feature. This lies in the way that Lubin is constructed from the very first not just as a 'peasant', but as a 'peasant-poet', and these opening stanzas make it very clear that it is this peculiar status, this compound of social class and poetic aspiration, that is the defining feature of Lubin's identity. The very first lines of the poem establish this double identity for Lubin - he is first mentioned as 'A humble rustic hum[ming] his lowly dreams' i.e. as a peasant whose aspirations to poetry are already called into question by the 'lowliness' of his dreams and by the contrast between himself and the 'learned genius' with which the poem begins (a contrast which is made even clearer by the substitution of 'poets' for 'genius' in the version published in *The Village Minstrel*[21]). Thus Lubin is immediately situated within an uncomfortably limiting social and cultural context, poised between humility and ambition and trying to occupy a precarious cultural space, some of the pressures of which are further brought out in the second stanza -

> Tho far from what the learneds toils requite
> He unambitious looks at no renown

---

[21] The opening line of the poem as published read 'While Learned poets rush to bold extremes', see *Early Poems II*, p. 123, textual note to line 1.

But little hopes break his oblivions night
To cheer the bosom of a luckless clown
Where black neglect spreads one continual frown
& threats her constant winter cold & chill
Where toil & slavery bears each fancy down
That feign woud soar & sing "albeit ill"
& forces him submit to fates controuling will
(ll. 10-18)

While acknowledging all that Johanne Clare[22] says about the highly deferential nature of this construction of Lubin, I would claim that it firmly focuses the reader's attention on the conflict between Lubin's social status and his ambitions to be a poet, and that even if the passivity of the language does not allow him to 'own' his own struggle, it nonetheless suggests that this struggle is going to be, in one way or another, a prime thematic concern of the poem as a whole. It is in this respect that I think it makes sense to say that 'The Village Minstrel' shares a common purpose with *Sketches*, in that they are both concerned in their different ways to explore, and in some sense to legitimate, Clare's status as 'peasant poet'. We have already seen that *Sketches* engages with this question by providing Taylor with a narrative of Clare's life that details his almost obsessive determination and ambition to become a poet, and which foregrounds the material and cultural obstacles over which he triumphed in order to attain this goal. I would argue that these opening stanzas suggest that 'The Village Minstrel', while in many ways more conventional and less radical in form and style than *Sketches*, should be read as a more publicly ambitious attempt to work through the same themes and problems, and that Beattie's poem provided him with a template upon which he could overlay a semi-fictionalised account of his own upbringing and poetic formation, always circling around the question which, occuring nearly a third of the way through the poem, is nevertheless central to its theme and its structure:

Folks much may wonder how the thing may be
That lubins taste shoud seek refined joys
& court the 'chanting smiles of poesy
Bred in a village full of strife & noise

---

[22] See *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance*, pp. 89-92.

Old sensless gossips & blackguarding boys
(ll. 385-389)

In the next section of this chapter I will attempt to show how the poem's representations and mediations of popular culture constitute a vital part of its attempts to wrestle with this question.

III: POPULAR CULTURE IN 'THE VILLAGE MINSTREL'

The manner in which Clare's introductory passage deviates from and refashions the corresponding passage in *The Minstrel* is characteristic of the relation between the two works as a whole, and numerous further instances could be adduced to confirm this. However, I now want to explore just one of these instances in more depth and at greater length: namely the way in which 'The Village Minstrel' both borrows from and completely reworks the presentation and valuation of oral storytelling in a particular passage in *The Minstrel*. The comparison is important for two reasons. Firstly, as another example of the sophisticated intertextual relationship between these two works (one which, as we have already seen, is misrepresented by the simplistic and pejorative overtones of 'plagiarism'), but secondly, and crucially, because it lays bare the artfulness and self-consciousness of the Clare passage in a way that would be easy to miss if it was not thus placed within its genealogical context, showing just how carefully and selectively it mediates and constructs its representation of this aspect of popular culture.

The passages I have in mind occur in the first book of *The Minstrel*, from stanzas 43-52 (pp. 14-17), and in stanzas 54-58 (pp.145-147) of 'The Village Minstrel', and it is worth quoting both more and less in full, as I will be commenting on them in some detail. The Beattie passage describes Edwin's experience of and reaction to the tales of the village 'beldam', and it runs as follows (I include the preceding stanza, as the

context which it establishes is crucial to any reading of the passage, and omit one of Beattie's all-too-frequent lapses into religiousness sententiousness) -

42 But hail, ye mighty masters of the lay,
Nature's true sons, the friends of man and truth!
Whose song, sublimely sweet, serenely gay,
Amused my childhood, and inform'd my youth,
O let your spirit still my bosom soothe,
Inspire my dreams, and my wild wanderings guide;
Your voice each rugged path of life can smooth,
For well I know, wherever ye reside,
There harmony, and peace, and innocence abide.

43 Ah me! neglected on the lonesome plain,
As yet poor Edwin never knew your lore,
Save when against the winter's drenching rain,
And driving snow, the cottage shut the door.
Then, as instructed by tradition hoar,
Her legend when the beldam 'gan impart,
Or chant the old heroic ditty o'er,
Wonder and joy ran thrilling to his heart;
Much he the tale admired, but more the tuneful art.

44 Various and strange was the long-winded tale;
And halls, and knights, and feats of arms display'd;
Or merry swains, who quaff the nut-brown ale,
And sing enamour'd of the nut-brown maid;
The moonlight revel of the fairy glade;
Or hags, that suckle an infernal brood,
And ply in caves the unutterable trade,
'Midst fiends and spectres quench the Moon in blood,
Yell in the midnight storm, or ride the infuriate flood.

45 But when to horror his amazement rose,
A gentler strain the beldam would rehearse,
A tale of rural life, a tale of woes,
The orphan babes, and guardian uncle fierce.
O cruel! will no pang of pity pierce
That heart, by lust of lucre sear'd to stone?
For sure, if aught of virtue last, or verse,
To latest times shall tender souls bemoan
Those hopeless orphan babes by thy fell arts undone.

46 Behold, with berries smear'd, with brambles torn,
The babes, now famish'd, lay them down to die:
Amidst the howl of darksome woods forlorn,
Folded in one another's arms they lie;
Nor friend, nor stranger, hears their dying cry:

"For from the town the man returns no more."
But thou, who Heaven's just vengeance dar'st defy,
This deed with fruitless tears shalt soon deplore,
When death lays waste thy house, and flames consume
thy store.

...

52 Nor was this ancient dame a foe to mirth.
Her ballad, jest, and riddle's quaint device
Oft cheer'd the shepherds round their social hearth;
Whom levity or spleen could ne'er entice
To purchase chat or laughter, at the price
Of decency. Nor let it faith exceed,
That Nature forms a rustic taste so nice.
Ah! had they been of court or city breed,
Such delicacy were right marvellous indeed.[23]

Before moving on to the corresponding passage in 'The Village Minstrel' it is worth picking out some of the salient features of this. Firstly, it is important to note that stanza 42, which introduces the account of the old woman's tales, firmly establishes their importance as located in the fact that they are Edwin's only contact with literary art. He has no access to the 'mighty masters of the lay', and the old woman's story-telling is presented as a substitute (inferior but nonetheless cognate) for true poetry. The closing couplet of stanza 43 makes it clear that it is in its artful character that the old woman's performance inspires Edwin - 'Wonder and joy ran thrilling to his heart; / Much he the tale admires, but more the tuneful art.'. It is possible that the 'tuneful art' refers to the singing of the old woman, but it also suggests poetry, and the implication is surely that even as a youngster Edwin's poetic vocation makes him particularly sensitive to the music of words. Secondly, there is the nature of the woman's tales themselves. In stanza 43 she is described as being 'instructed by tradition hoar' to 'chant the old heroic ditty o'er', phrases which suggest that her tales will be of a suitable antiquity and 'Gothic' character for the proper instruction of a 'Minstrel', and this is confirmed by the following stanza. Her tales are described in terms which are redolent of chivalry and cod mediaevalism - 'halls, and knights, and feats of arms display'd' - and there is a strongly literary feel to the descriptions of witches and fairies that is further emphasised in the edition to which I am referring by an editorial footnote

which pedantically traces a somewhat laboured allusion to *Macbeth*. Thirdly, there is the heavy-handed moralism (a persistent feature of *The Minstrel*), which leads Beattie into a long digression on Edwin's religious perplexities arising out of the tragic ending of 'The Babes in the Wood', and which combines with pastoral sentimentality to bring the passage to a conclusion - 'Nor let it faith exceed, / That Nature forms a rustic taste so nice. / Ah! had they been of court or city breed, / Such delicacy were right marvellous indeed.'.

The Clare passage is apparently modelled on Beattie's, given that it too tells of his protagonist's experience of listening to old women's storytelling, but its radical departures from its model should soon become apparent:

54
& when old women overpowrd by heat
Tuckt up their tails & sicknd at the toil
Seeking beneath the thorn the mole hill seat
To tell their tales & catch their breath awhile
Their gabbling talk did lubins cares beguile
& some woud tell their tales & some woud sing
& many a dame to make the children smile
Woud tell of many a funny laughing thing
While merrily the snuff box charm went pinching round the ring

55
Here lubin listn'd wi a struck supprise
When hickerthrifts great strength has met his ear
How he killd jiants as they were but flies
& lifted trees as one woud lift a spear
& not much bigger then his fellows where
He knew no troubles waggoners have known
Of getting stalld & such dissasters drear
Up hed chuck sacks as one woud hurl a stone
& draw whole loads of grain unaided & alone

56
& goodys sympathy woud fetch the tear
From each young listner seated by her side
When cruel barbary allen they did hear
The haughty stubbornness of female pride
To that fond youth who broke his heart & dyd
& jack the jiant killers tales shed say

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[23] *The Poetical Works of Beattie, etc.*, pp. 14-17.

Which still the same enchanting power supplyd
The stagnant tear amazment wipd away
& jacks exploits were felt for many an after day

57

These were such tales as lubin did delight
But shoud the muse narrate in goodys strain
& tell of all she told from morn till night
Fays ghosts & jiants woud her songs detain
& be at days return resumd again
Wi cinderella she has charmd awhile
Then Thumbs dissasters gev a moments pain
Thus true thought legends woud each soul beguile
As superstition willd to raise the tear or smile

58

& as the load joggd hom ward down the lane
When welcome night shut out the toiling day
His followings markt the simple hearted swain
Joying to listen on his homward way
As rests warm rapture rousd the rustics lay
The thread bare ballad from each quavering tongue
As "peggy bond" or the "sweet month of may"
As how he joyd to hear each "good old song"
That on nights pausing ear did echo loud & strong

(ll. 519-563)

The differences between this and Beattie's account are manifold. Firstly, Edwin listens to the old women's tales outside working hours while sheltering from 'the winter's drenching rain, / And driving snow', presumably as a member of a relatively small audience (there is no mention of anyone being present save himself and the old woman), and the mention of the cottage's closed door, along with the elevated and portentous archaic language in which the woman's 'chanting' is described, all conspire to lend the occasion a certain glamorous exclusivity. Lubin's experience, however, is represented as a snatched relief from hard work in the fields, both for the tellers and the listeners, and the language is vibrant with a sense both of this relief and of the busy communality of a field at harvest time - 'some woud tell their tales & some woud sing / & many a dame to make the children smile / Woud tell of many a funny laughing thing / While merrily the snuff box charm went pinching round the ring'. Secondly, the tales told by Clare's old women are quite unlike those to which Edwin listens. Beattie strives to conjure up a generalised atmosphere of chivalric

heroism and gothic supernaturalism for his stories, and 'Babes in the Wood' is the only specific tale which is recognisable, being told in as grotesquely pathetic a manner as possible, and used as the occasion for a lengthy digression on the trials of Edwin's youthful conscience. Clare, however, provides what almost amounts to an inventory of the resources of an oral culture, naming seven specific tales or songs in the space of four stanzas, and suggesting an almost inexhaustible wealth of further material - 'But shoud the muse narate in goodys strain / & tell of all she told from morn till night / Fays ghosts & jiants woud her songs detain / & be at days return resumd again'. Thirdly, the moralism of Beattie's passage is virtually absent from Clare's account. Where Beattie draws a lengthy moral from his recounting of 'Babes in the Wood' and feels the need to reassure his audience that his old woman's tales contained nothing indecent, Clare's emphasis is almost entirely on the reactions - surprise, tears, amazement and delight - occasioned by the tales, and only briefly dwells on the moral implications to be drawn from 'Barbara Allen' ('The haughty stubbornness of female pride'), and even then seems to do so only in order to contrast it with the different response evoked by 'Jack the Giant Killler', 'Which still the same enchanting power supplyd / The stagnant tear amazment wiped away ...'. Fourthly, the differences between the dictions and rhythms of the two poets in these stanzas are even more marked than usual, especially in the two stanzas in which the poets set their respective scenes (stanza 43 in Beattie and stanza 54 in Clare). Johanne Clare rightly claims that in these stanzas 'Clare "sounds" better than he does anywhere else in the poem' (*The Bounds of Circumstance*, pp. 104-105). While her suggestion that this is owing to his greater confidence in writing about the oral tradition seems somewhat simplistic and raises rather more questions than it answers, it is nonetheless true that the vernacular fluidity and sensual immediacy of Clare's stanza 54 are a class apart from the metrical rigidity and sub-Miltonic syntactic convolutions of Beattie's stanza 43.

However, while it would be possible to continue enumerating contrasts between these two passages at great length, I now want to turn my attention to the ultimately more important question of whether they can be read as in fact sharing a common purpose. As I noted earlier, Beattie's stanzas 42 and 43 explicitly claim that Edwin's response to the old woman's storytelling functions as a surrogate for an experience of the

'mighty masters of the lay' which as yet he is unable to attain. To frame this in terms which clarify its relevance to my overall argument, we can say that his experience of popular oral culture serves as an introduction to and a preparation for his entry into the role of 'Minstrel'. The question, then, is whether the passage from 'The Village Minstrel' can be read as setting up a similar relation between Lubin's experience of popular folktales and his aspirations towards poetry.

There is, admittedly, little in the passage itself that makes such a connection obvious. We have, therefore, to situate the passage within the context of the work as a whole to see whether such a reading seems appropriate. There are a number of factors which suggest that it is, although none of them are individually sufficient to make it certain. On the broadest level, there is the fact that, as I have already noted, the poem's introductory stanzas set the poem up as being concerned with Lubin's dual identity as both peasant and poet; which, if taken in conjunction with the phrase from the *Autobiographical Fragments* about describing the feelings of a 'rhyming peasant', could lead us to conclude that anything and everything in the poem is therefore to be read as pertaining to Lubin's formation as a poet.

However, while there is some truth in this, it does not do much more than create a general presumption in favour of such a reading, and more specific reasons are required to show that such a presumption is justified. One such reason lies in the fact that this is one of very few passages in which Lubin is shown as being unreservedly happy in the presence of his fellow villagers. Normally Clare takes pains to emphasise the separation both in sentiment and vocation between Lubin and his fellows - 'Small joy to him was childhoods tempting tricks' (l. 37); 'Far far remote from boys & their unpleasing play' (l. 154); 'Oer brook banks stretching on the pasture ground / He gazd far distant from the jocund crew' (ll. 191-192) etc. - but here he is represented as joining with 'delight' in a communal activity, and stanza 56 even goes so far as to subsume Lubin entirely into the company of his fellows, in that it makes no distinction between the reactions of Lubin and those of all the other 'young listner[s]'. In itself, this might not seem to be particularly relevant, but if we take into account the fact that the 'delight', 'supprise' and 'joy' with which Lubin is represented as listening to the old women are in the bulk of the poem associated with his solitary experience of nature, it becomes more

suggestive. These delighted emotions, and the experiences of nature which evoke them, are strongly associated with Lubin's poetic activity, as can be seen particularly clearly in stanzas 18 and 19 -

> Sequesterd nature was his hearts delight
> Him woud she lead thro wood & lonly plain
> ...
> & while the thrush sung her long silencd strain
> He thought it sweet & mockt it oer again
> & while he pluckt the primrose in its pride
> He ponderd oer its bloom tween joy & pain
> & a rude sonnet in its praise he tryd
> Where natures simple way the aid of art supplyd
>
> ...
> Enthusiasm made his soul to glow
> His heart wi wild sensations usd to beat
> As nature seemly sung his mutterings usd repeat
> (ll. 155-172)

Thus the account of the storytelling is not only unusual in that it portrays Lubin at ease among his fellows, but it also, in describing his reactions to the storytelling, draws on a vocabulary which elsewhere in the poem is closely associated with the poetic inspiration which he finds in nature.

It thus looks more and more reasonable to read stanzas 54-58 as being in some way concerned with establishing a connection between Lubin's poetry and the cultural forms there described, and the reading comes to seem almost irresistible if we note the parallel between this passage and one which occurs a few pages earlier. I have already quoted some of stanza 40, and suggested that the question which it asks is of central importance to any interpretation of the poem as a whole, but here I want to quote it in conjunction with stanza 41, in order to show how crucially it must feed into a reading of stanzas 54-58:

> Folks much may wonder how the thing may be
> That Lubins taste shoud seek refined joys
> & court the 'chanting smiles of poesy
> Bred in a village full of strife & noise
> Old sensless gossips & blackguarding boys
> Ploughmen & threshers whose discourses led
> To nothing more then labours rude employs
> 'Bout work being slack & rise & fall of bread
> & who were like to dye ere while & who were like to wed

Houswives discoursing bout their hens & cocks
Spin[n]ing long stories wearing half the day
Sad deeds bewailing of the prowling fox
How in the roost the thief had knawd his way
& made their market profits all a prey
& other losses too the dames recite
Of chick & duck & gosling gone astray
All falling prizes to the swopping kite
& so the story runs its round both morning noon & night
(ll. 385-402)

Thus the question of how we are to understand Lubin's poetic vocation as being fostered by such an unprepossessing environment is framed in such a way that the actual speech of the villagers becomes crucial to it. In these two stanzas, the villagers' 'discourse', and in particular that of the village women, is pitted against Lubin's poetic aspirations in such a way as to suggest that it is one of the most extraordinary features of his emergence as a poet that this was the linguistic environment from which he emerged. The village women's speech is represented as trivial and inexhaustible - 'the story runs its round both morning noon & night' - and the suggestion seems to be that we would expect this apparently endless tide of speech, this 'strife & noise', to swamp and suffocate any poetic ambition on Lubin's part. It is thus surely very suggestive that just over ten stanzas later, Lubin is delightedly absorbing another form of speech, presumably by these same women, which also is represented as inexhaustible in its copiousness (the muse would have to continue for more than a day and a night to repeat all the old women's tales), and that the terms of his delight are those which have been used earlier in the poem to describe the very process of his poetic inspiration. Given this apparent contradiction, it seems more than reasonable to enquire what stanzas 54-58 can tell us about the poem's construction of the relationship between popular culture and Lubin's poetic vocation, and that is what I now propose to do.

Having established that such a reading is not only possible but necessary if we are to make sense of the apparent contradictions between this passage and the earlier stanzas, I want to begin by considering the fact that the culture of tale and song which the passage describes is represented as being entirely oral. This is a feature which it shares with the corresponding passage in *The Minstrel* but there is one crucial difference

between the two. For Edwin, unlike either Clare or Lubin, this orality is to be a constant feature of his poetic career. Edwin is to become, not simply a poet, but a 'Minstrel', and Percy, in the 'Essay on the Ancient Minstrels' which forms an introduction to volume I of the *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* and on which Beattie drew so strongly for his inspiration, is adamant 'that so long as the Minstrels subsisted, they seem never to have designed their rhymes for literary publication, and probably never commited them to writing themselves: what copies are preserved of them were doubtless taken down from their mouths'[24]. This is borne out by Part II of *The Minstrel*, in which we find Edwin undergoing a poetic apprenticeship at the feet of a sage, whose appearance with a harp[25] makes it clear that he is to be understood not just as a philosophic hermit, but as a fully-fledged minstrel[26]. Thus in listening to the songs of the 'beldam' Edwin is not just being inducted into a generalised love of poetry which will go on to inform his own work in later life, but also into the particular form in which that work will be both produced and consumed, i.e. oral recitation. Beattie's procedure here can be seen to be thoroughly logical - he was attempting to give an account of the formation of a minstrel; current theory claimed that a minstrel was an oral poet; thus his minstrel is shown discovering poetry as an oral and performative art. However, this does not hold for the passage from 'The Village Minstrel'. Clare was emphatically *not* an oral poet, yet this passage shows Lubin (whom we cannot help but identify, at least partially, with Clare himself) delightedly awakening to the experience of poetry in what is represented as being an exclusively oral context. Why should this be so, and what is at stake in such a representation?

One of the most important points to emphasise is that it *is* a representation, one involving deliberate selection, emphasis and exclusion, rather than a transparent and complete reflection of what we may take the life of Lubin's village to have been. Johanne Clare's discussion of this passage, while making some

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[24] *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* I, pp. lvi-lvii.

[25] *Poetical Works of Beattie, etc.*, p. 27, stanza 25.

[26] See Percy's note H 'Minstrels and Harpers', *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* I, p. lxiv, in which he sets out to prove 'That the Harp (Cithara) was the common musical instrument of the Anglo-Saxons' and thus strongly to be associated with the minstrels.

important and interesting points, seems to assume its transparency too readily - 'It is not a textual culture which first leads [Lubin] toward literary habits of mind but rather the oral culture of the collective village, and this culture is described by Clare in some considerable detail'[27]. While this is true as far as it goes, it nonetheless fails to do justice to the complexity and importance of what is going on in this passage, and its failure to this is in large part due to a failure to allow for the 'eloquent misinformation'[28] and evasiveness which Johanne Clare had earlier quite rightly claimed to be such a pervasive feature of autobiographical writing. Firstly, there is the way in which it simplistically juxtaposes 'textual' and 'oral' cultures, as though there were neither any conceivable middle term nor possibility of confusion and overlap between the two; and secondly there is the way it seems to assume that it is sufficiently clear that we would expect the culture of a village such as Lubin's to be uncomplicatedly 'oral' and that hence the text's mediation of this information can be adequately and unproblematically rendered as 'description'. A much more complex and nuanced account is therefore needed if we are to make sense of everything that is at stake for Clare in this passage.

We have already seen, in discussing the autobiographical prose, how misleading it is to make rigid distinctions between the 'oral ' and the 'textual' in considering the popular culture of Helpston, noting both the quantity and the variety of literary texts that were available to Clare, and also the way in which particular tales and songs could pass fluidly between oral and textual forms of transmission. It could be objected that to make use of this in discussing the passage in 'The Village Minstrel' would be unfair, in that it does not on the surface make any claim to faithful and accurate representation either of rural culture in general or of Helpston in particular, and that Johanne Clare is therefore entitled to take as unproblematic its representation of the oral culture of Lubin's village. While I would not grant such an objection, given the strong grounds already established for an autobiographical reading of 'The Village Minstrel' (a reading which Johanne Clare is also herself committed to), a careful reading of the text itself suggests that, even on strictly

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[27] *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance*, p. 104.

[28] *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance*, p. 88.

'internal' evidence, any discussion of the 'oral culture' of the village needs to be qualified - that the culture cannot be taken to be wholly oral in nature.

While it is true to say that, as compared with the autobiographical prose, the poem's lack of reference to reading, writing and literacy in general is very striking, this is not to say that there is no such reference at all. In stanza 39, Clare is describing Lubin's childhood - 'oft wi books spare hours he woud beguile / & blunderd oft wi joy round crusoes lonly isle' (ll. 383-384) - a description which, while it undoubtedly functions to differentiate Lubin from his fellow villagers, nonetheless shows that books were not altogether unavailable to him. Stanza 74 is perhaps more telling, in that it forms part of a general account of a village statute which is merely observed by Lubin, and therefore lacks the suggestions of atypicality which are carried by stanza 39:

> & there the ballad singers rave & rant
> & hodge whose pockets wornt stand treats more high
> Hears which his simpering lass may please to want
> & brushing thro' the crowd most manfully
> Outs wi his pence the pleasing song to buy
> & crams it in her hand wi many a smile
> The trifling present makes the maid comply
> To promise him her company the while
> & strutting by her side at night he hands her oer the stile
> (ll. 699-707)

There is a good deal to say about this passage: as Bridget Keegan remarks, it raises 'complicated issues of commodification and gender relation'[29], notably in the way that 'hodge' is said to be unable to afford 'treats more high', an unstable phrase which seems simultaneously to encompass and conflate several different conceptions of height - as financial cost, as social distinction and as aesthetic quality - and which suggests how difficult it was for Clare to find anything like a neutral vocabulary with which to describe the products of popular culture.

However, for my purposes here it is sufficient to stress that this passage provides further internal evidence for the claim that it is insufficient simply to construe the culture of Lubin's village as 'oral' and leave it at

that. There were texts in the village (both 'high' - *Robinson Crusoe* - and 'low' - Hodge's ballad), however fleetingly they are referred to and however little importance the narrative seems to attach to them. Indeed, it is crucial to my position that the poem does give such little emphasis to the presence of texts in the village's life, since it is precisely the fact that Clare represents the significant aesthetic effect of the village's cultural life on Lubin solely in oral terms that is interesting. This would not be the case if we were to conceive the village's culture as wholly illiterate and oral in nature.

I have possibly been slightly unfair to Johanne Clare in thus drawing out and criticising the implications of her remarks on stanzas 54-58, as the focus of her argument is not the same as mine, and her positive description of the function and status of the oral tales in the poem seems to me excellent -

> These stories break "[Lubin's] infant rest" in more ways than one. They are remembered and relived, they haunt his sleep, but they also lead him out of infancy because they teach him that the imagination may be exercised not only within the lonely stretches of the individual mind but also within the community ... The old and young guard their traditions well, perhaps because it is the only form of knowledge they possess which cannot be bought or sold in an economic system: it means nothing to the men who buy their labour and skills, and so means everything to them (*John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance*, p. 106)

Nevertheless, I think the point is crucial, because to recognise the deliberately selective nature of the representation of the village's oral culture enables one to acknowledge the force of such remarks, and of the passages in the poem which give rise to them, with a proper degree of sophistication, and reduces the risk (which I do not think Johanne Clare herself wholly avoids) of assuming that these are inherently the 'natural' properties of an oral culture, and of a fledgling poet's response to it, which can simply be read off the poem and used to refer back to Clare's own life in an unproblematic manner.

Having established the importance of recognising the partial and selective nature of this passage as an account of the culture of Lubin's village, it remains to consider what this fact tells us about its significance for a reading of the poem as a whole. In particular, what does it tell us about the way in which the poem constructs Lubin's poetic vocation? Bridget Keegan's article in the 1996 *John Clare Society Journal* -

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[29] *John Clare Society Journal* 15, (1996), p. 16.

'Broadsides, Ballads and Books: The Landscape of Cultural Literacy in "The Village Minstrel"' - to which I have already referred briefly, is explicitly concerned with this issue. Her arguments respecting the place of the poem's representations of popular culture in this matter are interesting, although, as I hope to show, they ultimately fail to do justice to the real complexities of the poem, as well as being vitiated by certain inaccuracies of detail.

Keegan describes 'The Village Minstrel' as a 'partially fictionalised vocational poem' (*John Clare Society Journal* , 15 (1996), p.12) - in other words as the sort of refracted and generically constrained essay in autobiography that I have been reading it as - and she begins her discussion of it by comparing it to the autobiographical prose. She adverts to the story in *Sketches* of the foundational encounter with Thomson's *Seasons*, and goes on to note both the absence of any such story in 'The Village Minstrel', and the difference of tone between the two works: '... the poem makes a significant substitution in its account of the poet's coming to writing. In "The Village Minstrel" it is enclosure and not Thomson, that compels the poem's protagonist (and Clare's alter ego) Lubin to take up the pen' (*John Clare Society Journal*, 15 (1996), p. 12).

This is a neat and superficially plausible statement of one of the differences between 'The Village Minstrel' and *Sketches*. There are two problems with it, however. Firstly, by claiming that the poem 'substitutes' its account for that in the prose work, it seems, falsely, to assume that the prose predates the poem. While this assumption is not explicitly stated, and it would be just possible to claim that this passage does not strictly imply it, Keegan's language throughout the piece when discussing the relationship between the poem and the autobiographical prose makes it almost impossible to sustain such a defence. She speaks of Clare 'reconfigur[ing] the story of his aesthetic education', and goes on to state that '... it is not surprising that in *rewriting* the history of his learning to write poetry about nature in 'The Village Minstrel', Clare *alters* the intertextual genealogy presented by the autobiographical prose, and incorporates an inventory of other literal and figurative texts'; and she claims that 'Reading the poem as a tentative effort at reconciliation with the popular culture that Clare had initially wished to repudiate is further warranted by the fact that it was around the time of the composition of "The Village Minstrel", *in the early 1820s*, that Clare became actively

engaged in collecting the folklore and folksongs of his region' (*John Clare Society Journal*, 15 (1996), pp. 13-14, my italics). Taking all this together, it becomes clear that Keegan believes *Sketches* antedates 'The Village Minstrel' (the composition of which she places in 'the early 1820s') by a sufficient period for Clare's attitude to popular culture to have undergone a near-reversal. However, almost the opposite is true. Robinson and Powell, following the dates written on the manuscript, date 'The Village Minstrel' between 20 October 1819 and 21 January 1820[30], whereas *Sketches* was written a full year later, probably between January and March 1821[31]. Keegan's argument - that the valuation of popular culture (and the corresponding absence of any reference to 'canonical precursor poets') in 'The Village Minstrel' represents a change in attitude from the autobiographical prose which can simply be accounted for by the passage of time and a desire to displace the critical condescension which had met *Poems Descriptive* - is therefore premised on an entirely false assumption. Some alternative explanation must be found for what certainly is a striking difference.

The second problem with Keegan's position lies in her assertion that 'it is enclosure, and not Thomson, that compels ... Lubin to take up the pen'. This is a point to which she returns later, and it forms the culmination of her argument. After describing the profound effect which enclosure has on the landscape of the poem, silencing both the villagers and the voice of nature itself, and pointing to the suggestive way in which the anti-trespassing signs which it brings with it constitute an incursion of writing into the landscape whereby 'writing becomes a form of tyranny, a manner of claiming possession by usurping voice', she goes on to describe its effect on Lubin -

> ... Lubin transcends his previously significant discursive differences from the villagers and attempts to speak for the losses of both nature and village culture.

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[30] See their headnote to the poem, *Early Poems II*, p. 123.

[31] The first passage in Clare's letters which could be read as referring to *Sketches* occurs in a letter to Hessey of 29 June 1820 - 'I mean to leave Taylor the trouble of writing my Life .. & for that purpose shall collect a great many facts ...' (*Letters*, pp.78-79) - but there is no evidence that Clare actually put this plan into practice until a letter to Taylor of 7 January 1821 - 'I will fill your last ruled Quarto with as much of my little life as I can ..' (*Letters*, p.138).

> Moreover, he does so in writing - which he had not done at any point prior in the poem. Each time Lubin had been depicted as producing poetry, it was figured as an oral activity: humming, singing or muttering. It would seem that because enclosure has given new symbolic status to writing, it is in writing that Lubin must respond ...
>
> (*John Clare Society Journal*, 15 (1996), p. 17)

This is an intriguing argument, but unfortunately there is no evidence in the text for claiming that Lubin does break into writing at this point. The stanza from which Keegan goes on to quote as evidence that it is Lubin's writing that is being 'explicitly condemned' runs as follows:

> He has his friends compard to foes tho few
> & like a cornflower in a field of grain
> Mong many a foe his wild weeds ope to view
> & malice mocks him wi a rude disdain
> Proving pretensions to the muse as vain
> They deem her talents far beyond his skill
> & hiss his efforts as some forged strain
> But as hopes smile their tongues shall all be still
> Een envy turns a friend when shes no power to kill
>
> (ll. 1292-1299)

This does not seem to me to imply anything about whether Lubin's 'efforts' are written or not - the point seems to be rather that they are *public*, like weeds in a field of cornflowers, and thus open to hostile criticism - and there is certainly nothing that could bear the weight which Keegan requires for her interpretation. Nor is there anything in the previous stanzas, which amount to an elegy for the changes wrought in the village by enclosure, to justify the claim that it is here that Lubin crosses the boundary between the oral and the written - in stanza 123 we hear him 'complain / & sigh & wish ...'; in the following stanza his lament takes the form of a 'sigh'; in stanza 128 we find him 'Sweet muttering oer his joys from clowns intrusions free'; and in stanza 129 his productions are again described as 'songs'. Thus Keegan's argument is again undercut by a failure to attend sufficiently closely to the data. As with her attempt to simplify the shifting and ambiguous history of Clare's representations of popular cultural forms into a simple narrative of chronological progression, so her account of the effect of enclosure on Lubin's poetic vocation fails to do justice to the inconclusive nature of the text, which does not provide the sort of neat resolution

which she claims for it. The incursion of enclosure is a crucial moment in the poem, and it is one to which I will return, but it should be clear that its effect on Lubin and on his vocation cannot be framed in the over-schematic terms employed by Keegan.

Despite these flaws, which render much of the detail of her arguments invalid, I nevertheless believe that Keegan's overall approach to 'The Village Minstrel' is correct. She identifies it as the sort of work which I believe it is - as a 'partially fictionalised vocational poem', in which 'Clare tests ... vocational possibilities for Lubin (and implicitly for himself)' (*John Clare Society Journal*, 15 (1996), pp. 12-13). She is thus able to ask the right sort of questions of it, even if the answers she gives are inadequate and over-simplified. By reading the poem in this way, and by seeing that it is crucial to situate it within the wider cultural scope of questions about the entitlement of a working-class man like Clare to write poetry at all (even if the quotation she gives from one adverse critic is framed in such a way as to suggest that the poem was some form of response to an article published more than a year after it was completed (*John Clare Society Journal*, 15 (1996), p. 13)), she is forced to consider the role which popular culture plays in the formation of Lubin's poetic vocation. This is a crucial question for any reading of the poem, but it is one which no previous critic has adequately addressed.

Keegan is thus, more than most, in a position to appreciate the significance of stanzas 54-58, and she does make some comment on them. However, it is not extensive, and her argument is that they provide evidence for the presence of print culture in Lubin's village -

> ... just as there are printed materials in Lubin's early life, so too is there print in the villagers' lives, and these artefacts are not without effect on their oral tradition. Although it is less easy to trace scripted models for the ghost and fairy stories which are essentially local in origin, many of the folk tales and ballads mentioned in the poem, particularly those which are given specific titles, have sources in broadsides and chapbook collections. While they are orally related ... the stories of "hickerthrift" and "cruel barbary allen" are tales that gained popularity in the printed broadsides sold throughout the countryside
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> (*John Clare Society Journal*, 15 (1996), p. 15)

She goes on from this to admit that 'the text does not claim that the women owned the broadsides or even knew of them ...' but the thrust of her argument seems to suggest that this is of comparatively little

importance, the main point being that these stories were available in print forms and hence that the passage can be taken as indicating their fluidity as between oral and print media. It is certainly true that such stories were readily available in print forms. To take just one example, the Eighteenth Century Short Title Catalogue database has fourteen entries for 'Tom Hickathrift' (consisting of seven different chapbook editions each published in two parts and printed in areas as diverse as London, Penrith, and Newcastle) for the period between 1750 and 1800, which suggests an extremely wide currency for the tale as an item of print culture. There is also ample evidence that Clare himself knew of such editions - in one of the autobiographical prose fragments he lists 'Tom Hickathrift' as one of the most common of the '6py Pamphlets that are in the possession of every door calling hawker and found on every book stall at fairs and markets whose titles are as familiar with every one as his own name' (*JCBH*, p. 68).

However, while it may be difficult for us to read stanzas 54-58 without importing such knowledge into them, it seems to me seriously to misrepresent them to claim that they actively illustrate such a fluidity, when in fact they exclude all suggestions of print sources and deliberately represent the tales under the sign of orality. Indeed, the knowledge that such tales were a common feature of chapbook print culture surely adds an extra significance to their representation as primarily oral. Keegan's comments on this passage thus underplay and obscure what is really most striking about it, which is odd in that her overall approach to the text seems to me to be potentially better suited than most to providing an adequate reading of such data. Such an approach should have the salutary effect of placing passages such as the one which I have been considering at the centre of any interpretation of the poem as a whole. However, while Keegan does see that passages such as this and the later account of Lubin's instruction by the shepherds which is interrupted by the incursion of enclosure (stanzas 99-102) must be important, her dependence on the idea that 'The Village Minstrel' was written after the autobiographical prose, as well as her misreading of the text, means that the way she conceptualises their importance is seriously flawed.

If we adopt Keegan's general approach, which would stress that the significance of Clare's representation of the orality of Lubin's village culture must inhere in the way it reflects on and shapes the vocational

construction of Lubin which the poem is engaged in producing, we need to examine in more depth the connotations and significance which that orality might have had both for Clare and for his prospective readers. It is tempting for modern readers, with our greater reverence for indigenous, "native" and/or marginalised cultures to view Clare's life and career partly as the triumphant product of such a culture and partly as an emblem of what happens when they are destroyed by a state which is intolerant of such diversity. For instance, Tom Paulin, in his splendidly partisan essay "John Clare in Babylon" claims that

> Listening to [Clare's] unique and delicate sound-patterns the reader is caught in the blow-back of an immense historical suffering, and glimpses what happens when an oral culture is destroyed by the institutions of law, order, printed texts[32]

However, as we have already seen, it is at best an over-simplification to describe the culture in which Clare was brought up as 'oral', and at worst (though not in Paulin's case) it can result in an approach to his life and work which is little more than a modern recuperation of the sentimentalised role of 'peasant poet' into which Clare's contemporary readers were so happy to force him. Passages such as the one from 'The Village Minstrel' which we have been discussing can be taken out of context and read as apparent endorsements of and paeans to a supposedly 'pure' oral culture with the result that Clare becomes a spokesman for a way of life which never actually existed (or at least which Clare never experienced). The battlefields on which Clare was fighting in 'The Village Minstrel' were much more complex, and involved personal, cultural and political issues in a way that makes them difficult to reduce to any simple formula. It is thus important to gain a clearer sense of what the representation of Lubin's background as exclusively oral might have meant to Clare and his readers, in order to understand how it might feed into the genealogical narrative of Lubin's vocation which the poem is attempting to construct.

One of the more obvious potential connotations is one that I have already touched on in my discussion of the poem's debts to Beattie, and one which would certainly have been suggested by the poem's title (although, as we have already seen, the poem's title throws a complex and ambiguous light on Clare's

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Tom Paulin, *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1992) p. 47.

intentions when actually writing the poem) and by its ostensible similarities with Beattie's poem. This is the notion of orality as a defining character of the mediaeval minstrels. The effects that this would have on a contemporary reader's attitude to the concept of an oral culture and its relationship to the nurture of a would-be poet, though, are ambiguous. On the other hand, most of the ancient ballads such as those collected by Percy, many of which were still in circulation (as Clare himself discovered when given a copy of *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* - 'all the stories of my grandmother & her gossiping neighbours I find versified in these vols'[33]), were believed to have been composed by the minstrels[34], which would seem to provide some connection between the actual materials of a contemporary oral culture and the practice of a high poetic art, and thus a potentially validating connotation. On the other hand the minstrels themselves were thought by Percy to have been noble court poets[35], who would have had next to nothing in common with the sordid contemporary reality of life amongst apparently illiterate agricultural labourers. Moreover, they were located firmly in the mediaeval past, as is strongly suggested by the archaising title of Percy's collection, and we have already seen how Beattie, in trying to provide a portrait of the formation of a minstrel, took great pains to set his story very far from any taint of contemporary reality, situating it in a distant arcadian past. This would suggest that any connotations of minstrelsy which might be aroused by Clare's title and his re-workings of Beattiesque topoi would be very faint and of little use towards the poem's vocational project. Any archaic glamour they might cast over the scene would be outweighed by the lack of a concrete association between the noble minstrels of the past and the bathetic mundanity of contemporary working-class life as represented by the rest of the poem, notwithstanding the fact that many of the songs and tales which featured in that life were believed to have originated with the minstrels.

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[33] Clare to Hessey, 4 July 1820, *Letters*, p. 82

[34] See Percy's 'An Essay on the Ancient Minstrels in England', *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* I, pp.xxxii-xciii.

[35] This was not a universally held view - Ritson in particular strongly disagreed with Percy's contention that the English minstrels were held in high esteem by the nobility (see Friedman, *The Ballad Revival*, pp. 216-218) - but Percy's views held the wider currency, and most readers would undoubtedly have though of the minstrels in his terms.

Despite this discrepancy between the era of minstrelsy and the setting of the poem, Clare's emphasis on oral performance as a formative part of Lubin's poetic apprenticeship could still be read as a somewhat daring attempt at revaluation of the minstrel tradition, by re-casting it within the arena of modern working-class life, stripped of its archaic trappings and nurtured by the very productions of the original minstrels as preserved through the centuries by unlettered labouring women. This reading, which a modern reader might find appealing for its suggestions of radical revaluation and cultural re-appropriation, would almost certainly have been unavailable to a contemporary reader, though. The tang of contemporary reality would have been too strong, and the notion that an unlettered working-class labourer could be compared to an ancient minstrel would have been somewhat absurd. This will become particularly clear through a further examination of the literature on minstrelsy and orality, particularly with regard to the question of the oral transmission of the minstrel ballads, as this is the crucial link in the chain for such a reading.

The great theoreticians of this subject, and the men most associated with the idea of 'minstrelsy', were Percy and Scott. It might be argued that the writings of such men are too specialised and theoretical to be useful as a means of gauging the response of the average educated reader to Clare's representation of orality in 'The Village Minstrel'. However, my purpose is to discover how possible it would have been for Clare to use such a representation to provide a positive poetic genealogy for Lubin, and since it is in such writings that we would expect to find the most sophisticated and considered assessments of orality it is reasonable to consult them for this purpose - if they do not value it highly, we can hardly expect the average reader to do so. In fact, it is very difficult to find anything in their writings which would support such a positive valuation of orality as would be required for Clare's purposes.

Percy himself seems to have had a fairly neutral attitude towards the oral tradition by which the works of the minstrels were supposed to have been preserved - while most of the *Reliques* were taken from his Folio manuscript or from broadsides, he did include some which came from oral sources[36]. In his theoretical writings on the subject, though, his interest was almost exclusively in the minstrels, and his essay on them

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[36] See Friedman, *The Ballad Revival*, p. 226.

concentrates entirely on the historical issues surrounding the existence of the minstrels and the authorship of the ballads, and makes no reference to any oral tradition whereby those ballads might be supposed to have been preserved. It is in Scott, however, that we find the most extended and considered comments on oral transmission, and they are not of a kind to encourage a favourable reading of 'The Village Minstrel''s account of its place in Lubin's life. In the 'Introductory Remarks on Popular Poetry' which he appended to the 1830 edition of Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border, Scott begins a discussion of this subject as follows -

> Another cause of the flatness and insipidity, which is the great imperfection of ballad poetry, is to be ascribed less to the compositions in their original state, when rehearsed by their authors, than to the ignorance and errors of the reciters or transcribers, by whom they have been transmitted to us ... a poem transmitted through a number of reciters ... incurs the risk of impertinent interpolations from the conceit of one rehearser, unintelligible blunders from the stupidity of another, and omissions equally to be regretted, from the want of memory in a third[37]

After giving some examples of this process, he finally provides a slightly more positive assessment of the oral tradition, but any compliment involved is decidedly backhanded -

> Taking into consideration the various indirect channels by which the popular poetry of our ancestors has been transmitted to their posterity, it is nothing surprising that it should reach us in a mutilated and degraded state, and that it should little correspond with the ideas we are apt to form of the first productions of national genius; nay, it is more to be wondered at that we possess so many ballads of considerable merit, than that the much greater number of them which must have existed should have perished before our time
>
> (*Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, p. 15)

It is true that this was written some ten years after 'The Village Minstrel', but given that it occurs in an essay which amounts to a summing-up of contemporary antiquarian debate about the ballads, judiciously assessing and mediating between the arguments of Percy and Ritson in particular, and from a figure of such authority as Scott, who was not at all averse to collecting ballads from oral recitation himself, it seems reasonable to suggest that it represents as favourable an assessment of the possibilities of an oral tradition as would have been possible to an educated audience of Clare's work.

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[37] Walter Scott, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* Vol I, pp. 9-10.

It is thus hard to see how a contemporary audience would have accepted Clare's account of Lubin's poetic formation in anything like the sort of terms in which I have suggested it should be read, and an examination of the poem's reception confirms this. Even a favourable review from the *Eclectic Review* for January 1822, possibly written by Josiah Conder, can do no better than praise the picturesque qualities of Clare's account of local culture -

> ... this simple and authentic description of Lubin's childhood ... far exceeds any picture. It is not Westall, but Wilkie, that could alone transfer the portrait to canvass ... "Autumn time - the cornfield - harvest-home - harvest supper - the statute - the poor sailor - the recruiting serjeant - the village feast - rural love - village sports" - these form a series of rural sketches equally graphical. (*Critical Heritage*, p. 170)

with no sense that to subsume all these aspects of the poem into the one category of the picturesque might be to do the poem a disservice and rob it of some of its power. Hostile reviewers could not even take this much pleasure in the poem, the reviewer for the November edition of the *Monthly Magazine* being particularly harsh -

> To us ... the writer's mention of himself appears, in general, too egotistical and querulous, and the local subjects and rural amusements, whatever opinion may be entertained of the colours in which he has pourtrayed them, have not, we think, been very judiciously selected for the purpose of inspiring general interest. There is, besides, something more than homeliness, approximating to vulgarity, in many of his themes, and it must be admitted that these are described in most suitable language (*Critical Heritage*, p. 152)

Thus, what a favourable reader found agreeably picturesque, an unfavourable one found to be merely vulgar and worthy only of lofty sarcasm, and in this respect it would appear that 'The Village Minstrel''s account of Lubin's growth as a poet falls into the same 'spiked trap' (Tom Paulin's vivid phrase) which was inherent in Clare's marketing as 'Peasant Poet'. If he was praised for his 'artlessness' and his untutored simplicity, it was all too easy for an unfavourable reader to invert the value of those terms and to describe the same qualities as simply that 'vulgarity' and ignorance which rendered him an 'incompetent intruder [...] into the

walks of literature'[38] - a phrase which very tellingly conflates the idea of a gentleman's ordered private estate with the 'realm' of literature as two spaces into which any trespassing by the lower orders is to be deprecated.

Again, then, as we saw in the previous chapter in my discussion of the prose fragment about chapbooks, Clare's attempt to give a positive value to popular culture as a formative aspect of his poetic development runs aground on his inability to represent that culture in a way which does not collude with the limiting class-based stereotypes through which he was read. Even to have introduced, as he was to do in that autobiographical prose, some account of the diversity and quantity of printed materials available to the working class in a village such as Helpston, would have been at least to trouble and unsettle the easy assumption that picturesque forms of oral tradition formed the sum total of art and knowledge that was available to a 'peasant', but this he did not do. So what might appear to a modern reader to be a brave, if flawed, attempt to re-value and celebrate the roots in popular culture of a working-class poet was read at the time either as an agreeable picture of rustic manners or as an irresponsible and unwelcome incursion of vulgarity into the 'walks of literature'.

It is somewhat ironic that a poem in Spenserian stanzas, one of the most difficult and 'literary' verse forms available to an English poet, should have been so widely seen by its readers as exemplifying 'artlessness' and simplicity (and the poem was both praised and censured for these qualities), but it is perhaps inevitable that this was so. Johanne Clare argues that the distance between the narrator's voice and the hero (a major part of which is enacted by the artfulness of the poem's use of this verse form) is deliberate: '... Clare wanted his narrator and his hero to remain formally separate because they represented entirely different ways of projecting himself: in Lubin he offered an image of the way he assumed he was seen by his critics; through the narrator's commentary, and image of the way he saw himself' (*John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance*, p. 89). This seems plausible enough, but it is clear that it was a dangerous strategy, given the way it identified Clare's voice as narrator with the codes and manners of the dominant

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[38] From the *Monthly Magazine* review, *Critical Heritage*, p. 151

literary culture, and the way in which it seemed to confirm the superiority of that culture to that represented in the poem. It ran the risk that, to the poem's contemporary readers, the narrator's voice would appear to be merely a transparent medium through which the events and characters of the poem were observed, rather than a socially inflected and deliberately chosen stance which reflected not the natural order of things but a particular and partial point of view. Thus it also ran the risk that its representation of Lubin's background as one that lacked books, and in which the predominant culture was unlettered and oral, would be read not as Clare-as-narrator giving a surprising and potentially radical evaluation of the possibilities of working-class culture as a source and inspiration of a poet's vocation, but rather at best as a representative voice from literary culture rehearsing commonly-held ideas about the illiteracy of peasant life in an agreeably picturesque manner.

Given this combination of factors - the low regard for oral tradition amongst learned readers; the picturesque conventions through which contemporary critics filtered the poem's account of village life; and the distance between the narrative voice and the persona of Lubin - it becomes clear that the attempt to provide Lubin with a poetic genealogy that omitted any mention of canonical literary figures was liable to fail. Rather than challenging the idea that a literary education was essential to genuine and worthwhile poetic production, it can be seen to collude with the stereotype of the peasant poet which dogged Clare's career, in which the peasant's lack of education is seen both as the defining feature of his genius - his 'artlessness' and 'simplicity', and as the limiting factor which debars his work from being read in the same terms and judged by the same standards as educated poets. The emphasis throughout the work on Lubin's experience of nature as the other main wellspring of his poetry also helps to reinforce this stereotype, which was founded so strongly on the notion of the peasant having a privileged access to the pure and culturally unsullied inspiration of nature.

There is only one section of the poem which seems to come close to escaping this double bind whereby the narrative voice and the conventional expectations of the poem's readers rob its representations of popular culture of their force, and that occurs in the passage which leads up to the poem's emotional climax as

enclosure strikes the village. This passage is interesting for several reasons - it is the only part of the poem which steps outside the bounds of contemporary reality, with Lubin enraptured by the shepherds' tales about the Civil War and its traces in the landscape around the village; it includes one of the songs ('Woodcroft Castle The Netherds Tale', ll. 951-998) in a rolling ballad metre with which Clare interspersed his narrative, and which were omitted by Taylor in the published version of the poem; and in stanza 100 it makes an interesting link between the 'antique scenes' of Civil War remains and the 'ancient songs' of Robin Hood which the shepherds sang. However the particular part of this passage that I want to emphasise occurs in stanza 102, just following the conclusion of 'Woodcroft Castle'. Clare is describing Lubin's reaction to the song as he

> ... marveld much that cruel wars should breed
> So nigh his natal home the horrid deed
> & soon the tale his wild research supplyd
> Like artless maidens who romances read
> Each ruind heap was castles now discryd
> Were other hudsons bore comand & fought as brave & dyd
> (ll. 1042-1047)

It is line 1045 ('Like artless maidens who romances read') which is particularly interesting with its apparently conventionally sexist representation of women's reading - they are 'artless' and they read 'romances', which are implicitly condemned as trivial and unworthy objects of attention. However, occuring as and when it does, this line is extremely suggestive, for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is one of the very infrequent references to reading anywhere in the poem. Secondly, it identifies Lubin with the 'maidens', explicitly feminising him in a way that can be seen as having been prepared for by the way in which the rest of the poem has constantly represented him as passive and therefore implicitly feminine (the very word 'artless' in this line would in itself be enough to ally the 'maidens' with Lubin, given the way in which he is represented throughout the poem as the epitome of artlessness). Thirdly, it is no written text but the landscape itself that Lubin is 'reading', and unusually for the poem he is reading it not in order to discern the

variegated and picturesque beauties of nature, but rather to trace and imagine its history - a history of conflict, rebellion and civil war.

This one line therefore has a number of fascinating consequences and implications. In terms of its immediate context, it prepares us to 'read', with Lubin another and more immediate history of conflict and 'rebellion' in the landscape -

> But who can tell the anguish of his mind
> When reformations formidable foes
> Wi civil wars on natures peace combind
> & desolation struck her deadly blows
> As curst improvement gan his fields inclose
> (ll. 1048-1052)

- in which the incursion of enclosure is represented in terms which explicitly pick up on the discussion of the Civil War which has preceded it. However, in the context of the poem as a whole, it is the way in which the line sets up the possibility of an alternative and implicitly politicised way of conceiving the poet's role that is most interesting. With its feminisation of Lubin, and particularly in the ambiguity of the way it establishes a link between his 'reading' of the landscape and the 'maidens' who read romances - a much condemned practice, and one that carries connotations of an overheated, lubricious imagination - it suggests a freedom for Lubin both as 'reader' (of the landscape) and as writer which is lacking elsewhere in the poem. He begins to discern the landscape as fraught with history, rather than as a simple repository for the beauties of nature - 'Each ruind heap was castles now discryd'. In the context of the passage as a whole, with the connections it establishes between the shepherds' oral histories of the Civil War, their songs of the outlaw Robin Hood, and the contemporary trauma of enclosure, it could certainly be argued that this section of the poem goes some way towards setting up a dynamic, politically inflected conception of the possible resources of a poet grounded in popular culture and educated outside the dominant literary culture.

However, none of this could have been apparent to a contemporary reader, as stanza 102, along with the whole of 'Woodcroft Castle' and stanza 101 which preceded the song, were omitted by Taylor from the poem as published in *The Village Minstrel*. This would have had the effect of robbing the poem's account of

enclosure of much of the power which it has in the manuscript version printed by Robinson and Powell. Its references to 'reformations' and 'civil wars' (stanza 103) would become merely metaphorical and even whimsical, whereas in their context they strike with genuine power and situate enclosure within a real history of conflict and war (albeit one which is very ideologically inflected in its distaste for 'rebel outlaw[s]' who opposed 'our unfortunate king' (ll. 967-968)[39]). I am not suggesting that Taylor omitted this section with the deliberate aim of removing the poem's political sting - his objection was more to the language of 'Woodcroft Castle'[40], and he was not averse to including the outspoken objections to enclosure - but I would argue that this was its effect. It also removes the striking feminisation of Lubin which I have been commenting on, and the context whereby the account of Lubin's relationship with the shepherds and their tales and songs is lifted out of the merely picturesque and rendered politically charged.

Thus even here, ultimately, the poem as available to contemporary readers did not escape from the limiting circle of picturesque convention which prevented its representations of popular culture from achieving the sort of weight Clare seems to have been seeking for them, in his attempts to construct a poetic genealogy for Lubin rooted in popular rather than polite culture. One final example of a contemporary response to the poem will suffice to illustrate the difficulties which even a favourable reader had in breaking out of this circle -

> [Clare] takes you to the fields and woods, and points out all their beauties, in a way that enables you to see them with the same eyes that he does. In doing this, he is the poet, the painter, and the gentleman. He introduces you to the neighbouring rustics, whom you attend in their every-day pursuits, and in the clebration of their galas, till you almost become one of them. You learn, from him, their language, and their habits of thought; you see how they behave at home, abroad, and at church; you penetrate into their social and private feelings;- and return wiser and better than you went (*Critical Heritage*, p. 180)

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[39] N.B. my suggestion that this section of the poem is significant for the way in which it enables Lubin to read the landscape in political terms is not meant to imply any sort of specific radical agenda - Clare's politics are almost always impossible to pin down to any stable position. It is simply the fact that a political reading is opened up as a possibility that is important.

[40] See the letter from Taylor to Clare 23 January 1821, *Letters*, pp. 144-145

This, which is taken from a series of public letters written by the Reverend W. Allen to Clare's patron Lord Radstock in 1823, is emblematic of the problems of a refined audience's response to Clare's writing about working-class culture, and about the general conditions of his life as a working-class man. In order to appreciate this aspect of Clare's writing, Allen is forced to the extraordinary metaphorical conceit of imagining Clare's presentation of village life as that of a 'gentleman' showing off his private property, but even this blurring of social barriers does not enable Allen completely to ignore the respective places both of himself and his addressee, and of the writer - 'you *almost* become one of them'. However much you may appreciate and enjoy the picturesque delights which Clare sets before you, you can never forget the social gulf which yawns between you and the world therein depicted, which is enacted in the very grammar of the piece, with its distinction between 'you' and 'they', and with which the writer is inextricably bound up.

Thus Clare's attempt in 'The Village Minstrel' to forge a poetic identity for Lubin rooted in the popular culture of his village was ultimately vitiated by the impossibility of bridging such gaps, partly because of the construction of the poem itself, and partly because of the prevalent conventions which made it impossible for his readers to take such an attempt on its own terms. There is, however, a hint later in the same letter by Allen of an alternative and possibly more fruitful way of conceptualising Clare's writing of popular culture. In summing up his comments on 'The Village Minstrel', he claims as one of its virtues that it 'records habits, customs, and sentiments, which might not otherwise have been recorded but by tradition. As a faithful and distinct portraiture of rural life in England, it is unequalled ...' (*Critical Heritage*, p. 181). This is, effectively, to praise Clare not as a poet but as a folklorist, and in my next chapter I will be taking up this hint, by examining the ways in which his activities as a recorder of and commentator on popular culture can be situated within the field of contemporary antiquarian endeavour, and whether such a context proves any less fraught with difficulty than that which I have been discussing in this chapter.

CHAPTER 3

EVERY-DAY BOOKS: CLARE AND ANTIQUARIAN DISCOURSE

1: INTRODUCTION

In April 1825, Clare wrote a letter to William Hone[1], consisting of an extended essay on the popular customs of Helpston, with the intention that Hone should publish it in his *Every-Day Book.* This letter constitutes an absolutely crucial piece of evidence for any reading of the relationship between Clare and popular culture. Not only does it constitute the single most extended prose treatment of popular culture in Clare's work, but in the fact that it was addressed to William Hone with the explicit request that he publish it[2] we have solid evidence of the kind of audience the piece was written for, something which, as I showed in Chapter 1, is much harder to reconstruct for those passages in the autobiographical fragments which deal with popular culture.

Even on a cursory examination, it should be immediately apparent that the 'Letter to Hone' exemplifies a very different approach to the representation of popular culture than those with which my two previous chapters have been concerned. They were primarily concerned with the ways in which Clare's representations of popular culture - particularly of chapbook, broadside and oral song and story - are both crucial to, and severely disruptive of, his attempts to create for himself an account of his poetic vocation capable of accounting both for his lowly social origins and the loftiness of his poetic ambitions. To this end they concentrated in some detail on the autobiographical prose and on 'The Village Minstrel' as being two works in which this sort of vocational project bulked large.

However, in both discussions I noted an aspect of his approch to popular culture which could not be wholly accounted for in terms of this vocational focus, an aspect which primarily arises when Clare is concerned with the customs, rituals and superstitions of village life, and one which I have so far loosely characterised as 'folkloric' in that it appears to be concerned more with simply recording these features of the culture of Helpston than with establishing a relationship between that culture and Clare's poetic vocation. It

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[1] Author and editor of *The Every-Day Book.* This letter will hereafter be referred to as 'Letter to Hone'.
[2] In the first paragraph of the letter Clare tells Hone that it is 'at your service to do as you please with - I desire no acknowledgement of them in your numbers as [it is] are worth but <little>'.

should be clear that the sort of engagement with popular culture evinced in the 'Letter to Hone' is very much of this kind, with its seemingly haphazard list of customs and superstitions, and with its (apparently) impersonal, objective authorial standpoint.

Using the 'Letter to Hone' as a starting point and central focus of discussion, I now wish to elaborate on this element of Clare's engagements with popular culture, and to explore it through a wider range of his writings than I have yet discussed. This will involve broadening the scope of my discussion to provide some sense of the wider contexts, both of antiquarian writing and of the poetic representation of rural and village life, within which Clare's work must be viewed if it is to be properly understood. I want to begin this discussion by seeing what light is shed on Clare's letter by the fact that it was written to William Hone, a major figure in the history of popular antiquarian writing, and that it was evidently intended to serve as material for Hone's *Every-Day Book.*

William Hone is an interesting figure in his own right. He had been tried (and acquitted) three times in 1817 for blasphemous libel[3], and had continued to make a name for himself as a radical writer and pamphleteer with publications such as *The Political House that Jack Built*[4]. This was an illustrated pamphlet first published in 1819 in the aftermath of the Peterloo massacre, calling for reform, condemning attempts to curb the freedom of the press, and lacerating the corruption of English society. What is particularly interesting from the point of view of my thesis is Hone's use of clashing cultural registers: the popular literary form of the nursery rhyme which Hone adapts for the main body of the text is set in juxtaposition with a series of mottoes from Cowper's 'Task', and with the illustrations by George Cruickshank, so that a phrase such as 'the main body of the text' becomes inaccurate - the dialogical interaction of these three components creates a field of force in which the overall impact of the pamphlet is magnified far beyond what would have been possible simply in terms of the adaptation of the nursery rhyme. The power which

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[3] See E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working-Class*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), pp.792-794.

[4] Reprinted in Jerome J. McGann, *The New Oxford Book of Romantic Period Verse*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

accrues from such a juxtaposition of popular and polite culture obviously has a considerable bearing on some of Clare's own practices, but there is no evidence that he was aware of Hone's pamphlets or his radical background[5], and what is perhaps of more importance is the way in which Hone's willingness to incorporate disparate voices and registers within his work becomes a feature of the *Every-Day Book.*

Hone began the publication of the *Every-Day Book* in 1825, following periods of imprisonment and bankruptcy. It is this work which Clare hoped his letter would form a contribution to, and it is in his character as its author, editor and publisher that William Hone primarily concerns us here. It is an extraordinary text, and some idea of its character may be gleaned from the lengthy title-page to one of its many editions, which describes the work as follows:

> The Every-Day Book and Table Book; or, Everlasting Calendar of Popular Amusements, Sports, Pastimes, Ceremonies, Manners, Customs, and Events, Incident to Each of the Three Hundred and Sixty-Five Days, In Past and Present Times; Forming a Complete History of the Year, Months and Seasons, and a Perpetual Key to the Almanac; Including Accounts of the Weather, Rules for Health and Conduct, Remarkable and Important Anecdotes, Facts and Notices, In Chronology, Antiquities, Topography, Biography, Natural History, Art, Science, and General Literature; Derived from the most Authentic Sources, and Valuable Original Communications, with Poetical Elucidations, For Daily Use and Diversion[6]

If this title were not sufficiently informative in itself, Hone also provided a further guide to his intentions in the 'Explanatory Address to the Readers of the Every-Day Book' which follows the 'Preface' to Volume I -

> Our ancestors were persons of leisure. They appropriated each day in the year to the memory of remarkable persons or events. The EVERY-DAY book will relate the origins of these three hundred and sixty-five celebrations, with interesting accounts of the individuals and circumstances commemorated.
>
> It will especially describe the National and Domestic Festivities at the Remarkable Seasons, and on the great Holidays that are still kept ... [there follows a list of all the major Christian

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[5] Although there is a suggestion that Clare had met Hone on one of his visits to London (see letter to Hone Thursday 15 May 1823, *Letters*, p. 270 - ' I felt anxious ... to send you a trifle of remembrance, for I thought you would set me down as one of the world which the old saying illustrates well - "no sooner out of sight then out of mind"'), there is no reference to Hone's history of radicalism in Clare's letters or journals, and no copies of the pamphlets in Clare's library as preserved in Northampton Public Library.

[6] William Hone, *The Every-Day Book and Table Book* Vol I, (London: Thomas Tegg and Son, 1837), title page.

> Festivals, some saints' days and one or two secular public holidays such as lammas and Guy Fawkes' Day]
> ... While recording such observances, it will entertain the reader with descriptions of numerous Popular Merriments and Usages, a few of which may be mentioned as instances: namely, Fairs - Wakes - Morris Dancings - Harvest Homes - Shearings - Mayings - Aleings - Wassailings - Mummings - Soulings - Waits - Eton Montem - Hogmany - Yule, &c
> (*Every-Day Book* Vol I, p. ix)

Hone follows this with a long list of further topics which the *Every-Day Book* is to deal with, a selection of which will give some idea of the bizarre eclecticism of the work - ' ... Newspapers - Christmas boxes - Bogles - Brownies - Spunkies - Kelpies - Wraiths - Dwarfs - Giants - Fascinations - Tobacco - Snuff - Sorcerors - Songs - Hair and Wigs ...'.

The contents of the book live up to the promise of diversity and haphazard miscellany which such an advertisement would seem to promise. There is an entry for every day of the year, and the material which these entries contain is highly varied, generally including under the heading of each day accounts of any saints associated with that day, as well as any other material of almost any nature which can be associated with that day, and which is deemed to be of sufficient curiosity value. The work was originally published serially[7] and Hone encouraged his readers to send in any material of their own which they thought might be interesting - 'To a large mass of materials already collected, *communications* respecting local usages or customs in any part of the United Kingdom, and Festival Ceremonials abroad, will be especially acceptable'[8]. As can be imagined, the result of such a principle of selection is a text of the most extreme heterogeneity. To take just one more or less random example, the entry for July 26, following entries for the four previous days which together take up less than a page, runs for 56 pages and includes, amongst other things, a lengthy history of lion-fighting; the story of St Anne; a contributor's account of a holiday in

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[7] I am using a two volume collected edition published in 1833 and 1837 (one of many which Thomas Tegg the publisher continued to reissue until 1874) (See Richard M. Dorson, *The British Folklorists: A History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 35).

[8] *Every-Day Book* Vol I, p. x. This is taken from the 'Explanatory Address to the Readers of the Every-Day Book' which is dated 31 December1824, and almost certainly forms the 'prospectus' which Clare refers to in his journal entry for 21 March 1825, *JCBH*, p.219.

London; a table designed to predict the weather; and Hone's own account of his visits to Claude Seurat, 'The Human Skeleton' (*Every-Day Book* Vol I, pp. 978-1034).

However, the most consistent feature of the *Every-Day Book*, and the reason why it is important to my argument, is suggested by the part of its subtitle which describes it as an '*Everlasting Calendar of Popular Amusements, Sports, Pastimes, Ceremonies, Manners, Customs* ...' and which is further amplified in the 'Explanatory Address' with its long lists of popular festivals and superstitions. In other words, it is what we would nowadays think of as a work of folklore - a study of popular culture in its traditionary, customary and superstitious aspects - and it is in this aspect that it seems to have interested Clare and inspired him to write this lengthy account of the customs and traditions of Helpston for Hone.

It is worth noting at this point some of the complex associations which Hone and the *Every-Day Book* seem to have had for Clare, as this prose account of customs was by no means the only piece of work Clare tried to get Hone to publish. Clare records his first encounter with a prospectus for the *Every-Day Book* in his journal entry for 21 March 1825 (less than a month before he wrote the 'Letter to Hone' which is the focus of this chapter) -

> ... if such a thing was well got up it woud make one of the most entertaining things ever published - and I think the prospectus bids fair to do something there is a fine quotation from Herrick for a Motto how delightful is the freshness of these old poets it is meeting with green spots in deserts (*JCBH*, p.219)

It is immediately apparent that as much of the appeal to Clare lay in the associations called up by the quotation from Herrick[9] as in the prospectus itself, and it is these associations which seem to have inspired Clare later that summer to submit two poems to the *Every-Day Book* under assumed names. In June, writing under the name of James Gilderoy, he submitted a poem which he claimed (in the surviving draft of his accompanying letter) to have discovered 'in a Vol of Miscellanys published by the Spalding Society of

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[9] The quotation from Herrick is 'The Argument of his Book' from *The Hesperides* - see L. C. Martin ed., *The Poetical Works of Robert Herrick*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1956, p. 5.

Literature & [which was] there ascribed to Andrew Marvel'[10]. This poem, 'Death', was duly published by Hone under Marvell's name[11]. Clare followed this with another attempt, on 2 August 1825, this time writing under the alias of Frederic Roberts, to submit a poem called 'Farewell & Defiance to Love'. In the two drafts of his accompanying letter which survive[12], Clare alternately ascribes the poem to Sir John Harrington and to Sir Henry Wooton, but we know from his journal entry for that date (*JCBH*, p. 239) that he eventually settled on Harrington as the poem's 'author'. This time Hone did not publish the poem, which, like 'Death', went on to form part of the *Midsummer Cushion* manuscript.

This correspondence is obviously highly suggestive, and I would like to draw out several features which are relevant to my reading of the 'Letter to Hone'. Firstly, there is Clare's use of aliases. It is obviously possible to see this as a result of his general dissatisfaction with his prospects of being published under his own name, or to suggest a connection between this desire to escape the limitations of his own identity with the 'impersonations' which he later adopted in the asylum.

However, as a considerable degree of caution is needed in ascribing those later adoptions of other identities simply to pathology (there would appear to be plenty of method behind the 'madness' which chose such apposite figures of identification[13]), so the particular aliases which Clare chose to adopt in his correspondence with Hone are of great interest, and suggest a complex of motives far more interesting than mere 'forgery'.

This is particularly the case with respect to the first attempt, and his use of the name 'James Gilderoy'. As Storey (*Letters*, p. 335, n.3) points out, the real James Gilderoy was a Scottish highwayman, who was featured in Percy's *Reliques*[14], and who was hanged in 1636. In choosing this name, then, Clare was venturing on an intriguing double-bluff: as a highwayman might mask himself to rob a polite traveller, so

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[10] Clare to Hone (deleted draft) Thursday, 23 June 1825, *Letters*, p. 335.

[11] *Every-Day Book* Vol I, pp. 883-886.

[12] *Letters*, pp. 340-341.

[13] See Roy Porter, '"All madness for writing": John Clare and the Asylum', in *John Clare in Context*, pp. 259-278, especially his discussion of Clare's 'impersonations' on pp. 271-2.

Clare adopts the mask of a highwayman in order to pass off his own work as that of an eminently 'polite' and canonical author. This strategy of multiple impersonation sets up an intriguing matrix of cultural resonances.

Firstly, there are the illicit, counter-cultural associations which accrue to the figure of the highwayman[15] in general, which can be read as a conscious displacement of the sense of transgression and guilt involved in such an attempt at 'forgery'. Secondly, there is the fact that this particular highwayman was featured in Percy's *Reliques*. Clare was an unconditional admirer of Percy - 'take them up as often as I may I am always delighted there is so much of the essence and simplicity of true poetry ... I feel indebted to them for many feelings'[16]. The *Reliques* were particularly important to him as providing print authority and a wider currency for many of the ballads and folk songs that he otherwise only knew as features of his local village culture - when he was first given the work he wrote to Hessey that 'the tales are familiar from childhood all the stories of my grandmother & her gossiping neighbours I find versified in these vols'[17]. The association of Gilderoy with Percy thus also establishes a further field of force in which the traditions of popular literary culture are held in tension with polite literature, partly absorbed into it and partly validated by it. This tension is further complicated by Clare's association (in the drafts of his letter to Hone under the name of Frederic Roberts) of the *Reliques*, not just with the literary validation of popular balladry, but with all 'ancient poetry', especially Elizabethan -

> ... I see by your insertion of a Poem of Andrew Marvels that you give room to such 'Reliques' - I myself am very fond of these old votarys of the muses & I may confess my taste to be laughd at by the moderns when I say that I prefer Shakspear to Byron Spencer to Sir Walter Scott Sir John Suckling to Moor & every other of the Elizabethian Bards to the rest of the Moderns[18]

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[14] The ballad itself is No. XII in Book III of Volume I of the *Reliques*, pp. 256-259.

[15] For a discussion of the ways in which highwaymen could be linked to the Robin Hood tradition and were often associated in popular literature with a liberty which was in explicit opposition to the liberty claimed by the polite, property-owning classes in the seventeenth-century, see Christopher Hill, *Liberty Against the Law: Some Seventeenth-Century Controversies*, (London and New York: Penguin, 1996), Ch. 10, pp.123-130.

[16] Journal entry for Friday 5 November, 1824, *JCBH*, p. 192.

[17] Clare to Hessey, 4 July 1820, *Letters*, p. 82.

[18] Clare to Hone (under name of Frederic Roberts), deleted draft from Peterborough MS B7, *Letters*, p. 341.

- and the complications reach a dizzying level when we recall that this is Clare writing under a different assumed name, and that the poem by Marvell which he refers to was in fact his own. Thirdly, hovering behind all this donning of masks and imitations of ancient poetry is surely the figure of Thomas Chatterton. Chatterton was always a figure of great importance to Clare, as a type of the *poète maudit*, as a symbol of the fickleness of 'common fame'[19] and simply as a much-admired writer. In particular, his 'imitations' of Rowley were well known to Clare, and he had been reading Chatterton and reflecting on his life in the Autumn preceding his dealings with Hone[20]. There is a sense, then, in which Clare's imitations themselves constitute what might be called a 'meta-imitation', of Chatterton as a complex precursor representing both the delights and the dangers of literary success[21].

The choice of 'Frederic Roberts' as the name of the correspondent in Clare's second submission to Hone of an 'imitation' carries less explicit cultural charge than the use of 'James Gilderoy', although the fact that there was a servant of that name at Milton Hall (See *Letters*, p. 339, n.1) suggests further subterranean concerns with issues of class and power - Clare's location of his voice as that of a working-class man writing from within a site of great social power and privilege can be read as an oblique comment on his predicament as a working-class poet. I do not want to lay too much stress on this, though and it is the actual tone of voice in the two (substantially similar) drafts of the 'Roberts' letter which is of most interest. In them, Clare appears to be adopting yet another mask, this time that of a fussy, pedantic yet naive amateur antiquarian -

> I am a yearly reader in Moors Almanack & up to July your every day book was a key to it which I eagerly searched to decipher those mystic Abridgements in red & black letters that fill up the narrow ... space of its monthly calender & to my great dissapointment I found that you had ommitted to explain the following mystery which to me is as dark & difficult of explanation as the Hierogliphics on the Sircophacus in the Museum (*Letters*, p. 340)

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[19] See e.g. *JCBH*, pp.57-58 and the 'Essay on Popularity', in *The Prose of John Clare*, pp. 206-210 and pp.255-260.

[20] See journal entries for 13th-15th September, *JCBH*, pp.173-174, and in particular the defence of Chatterton's forgeries - 'I hate the name of Walpole for his behaviour to this Genius and his sneering and cold blooded mention of him afterwards when his gossiping fribble had discovered them to be forgeries why did he not discover the genius of the author ...'.

[21] For a fuller discussion of the Chattertonian echoes in Clare's 'imitations', and for a sense of the disturbing yet iconic status of Chatterton for Clare, see John Goodridge, 'Identity, Authenticity, Class: John Clare and the Mask of Chatterton', *Angelaki* vol.1, no.2, winter 93/94, pp. 131-148.

The overblown pomposity of this surely suggests that Clare is using the freedom given him by his adoption of a pseudonym to indulge in a private joke at the expense of some of Hone's correspondents, or possibly even of the real Frederic Roberts. Notwithstanding this burlesque tone, both drafts of the letter are interesting for the way in which they link an interest in Elizabethan poetry with an interest in 'superstitious history' and a desire to 'see every one of her beleifs & customs imortalized' (*Letters*, p. 340). This suggests an extra dimension to Clare's interest in the 'folkloric', antiquarian aspects of the *Every-Day Book*, that in some sense the preservation of popular traditions was bound up with his admiration for Elizabethan poetry in a way that probably stems from his reading of Percy's *Reliques* and the associations that book makes between Elizabethan poetry and popular balladry.

To sum up, what I want to draw out of this correspondence with Hone is the way in which Clare's adoption of alternative voices goes far beyond the level of *jeux d'esprit*. It rather evinces an extremely sophisticated sense of conflicting cultural registers as played out in a carnivalesque sphere of masked identities and impersonations - the sense of transgression involved in passing off a poem of his own as one of Marvell's is quite deliberately focussed in the adoption of the pseudonym of a seventeenth-century highwayman, and the whole thing is played out beneath the shadow of Chatterton, another poet who was (at least perceived by Clare to be) broken by the intransigence and misunderstanding of the world of polite letters. When we bear in mind that this correspondence was carried out at almost exactly the same time as the 'Letter to Hone' was written, its relevance becomes clear. Although the 'Letter to Hone' might at first sight appear to be a relatively artless piece of prose, this correspondence brings out the extent to which it must be read as a deliberately chosen voice, another mask, even if in this case the mask appears to be that of Clare's own face. It draws attention to the fact that Clare's decision to write under his own name in what appears to be a relatively transparent, observational style was in fact a deliberate choice, made in order that the piece would fit in with the overall temper and style of the *Every-Day Book*. It also brings out the extent to which that style is in fact far from transparent, but an artificial construct in its own right, and I now want

to turn to a consideration of the historical antecedents of that style, and the way in which they can be seen as discursive models for Clare's own writings as a 'folklorist'. My interest in the *Every-Day Book* lies primarily in the way in which it can be seen to provide Clare with a discursive model for this 'folkloric' style.

However, the concept of 'folklore' is anachronistic in this context[22], and Hone's self-understanding of his project is better approached by means of his use of the word 'antiquities' in his subtitle. The *Every-Day Book* is by no means an isolated text, but rather stands in a long line of works on 'popular antiquities', and in order properly to understand the reasons why the study of popular culture should have been described by a term which suggests a concern with the ancient past, and in order to understand the concomitant ideological features which that study displayed (the better to appreciate the subtle discursive pressures which such writing may have exerted on Clare), we must situate the Every-Day Book within that history of antiquarian writing.

2: A 'Ground Emptied of Conflict'[23]: The Ideology of Antiquarian Discourse

Evidence that Hone consciously saw himself as part of a continuing tradition of popular antiquarian scholarship can be had from an edition of the Every-Day Book for June 24, 1826 -

> A large paper copy of Brand's "Popular Antiquities", with MS. notes upon it by a gentleman of great reputation as an antiquary, and who has publicly distinguished himself by erudite dissertations on certain usages of ancient times, was some time ago forwarded by that

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[22] The term was in fact coined some twenty years later - 'Writing ... to The Athenaeum, on August 22, 1846, the antiquary William Thoms (1803-1885) declared, "What we in England designate as Popular Antiquities ... would be most aptly described by a good Saxon compound, Folk-Lore ..."' - Dorson, *The British Folklorists*, p.1.

[23] David Vincent, 'The Decline of the Oral Tradition in Popular Culture' in Robert Storch ed., *Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth-Century England*, (London, Canberra and New York: Croom Helm, 1982), p. 35.

> gentleman to the editor of the Every-Day Book, with permission to use the valuable manuscript additions ... this and future sheets will be enriched from that source.[24]□

The volume by Brand to which Hone here refers is probably the single most seminal work in the history of popular antiquarianism, and it is therefore of great importance to my argument. However, it is a composite text, the result of the work of three different authors over a period of nearly a hundred years, and some account both of its complicated genesis, and of the traditions of antiquarian writing which it both drew on and helped to create, is necessary if its full significance is to be appreciated.

The OED entry for the word 'antiquary' gives as one of its senses 'A student (usually a *professed* student) or collector, of antiquities. Formerly, used, in a wide sense, of a student of early history; now tending to be restricted to one who investigates the relics and monuments of the more recent past', and its earliest citation for this sense dates from 1586. For the word 'antiquity' itself, it gives as sense 6 the following - '(Now usually *pl.*; formerly *sing.* or *collect.*) Matters, customs, precedents, or events of earlier times; ancient records.' This would appear to confirm Dorson's assertion that 'The concept of antiquities, even in its earliest formulation, was not restricted to written and material records of the past; it also covered oral traditions'[25]. He adduces the example of Camden's *Britannia* (1586) as evidence of this, noting that in a work the ostensible purpose of which was to provide 'an historical survey of British topography and antiquities' (*The British Folklorists*, p. 2), Camden did not simply confine himself to investigating the material evidence left by earlier civilisations, but was equally prepared to treat popular superstitions and traditions as evidence about the Roman occupation.

However, for my purposes here, it is a quotation from John Aubrey, writing after the Civil War, that is most illuminating about the early formation of antiquarian discourse -

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[24] Quoted by Dorson in *The British Folklorists*, pp. 35-36.

[25] *The British Folklorists*, p. 3. I am heavily indebted to Dorson for his account of the history of antiquarian writing, but my reflections on its discursive features are partly my own and partly suggested by David Vincent's essay 'The Decline of the Oral Tradition in Popular Culture', Dorson being primarily concerned with the ways in which popular antiquarianism prefigured later developments in the field of academic folklore.

> Before Printing, Old -wives Tales were ingeniose, and since Printing came in fashion, till a little before the Civill-warres, the ordinary sort of People were not taught to reade. Now-a-dayes Bookes are common, and most of the poor people understand letters; and the many good Bookes, and variety of Turnes of Affaires, have putt all the old Fables out of doors: and the divine art of Printing and Gunpowder have frighted away Robin-goodfellow and the Fayries[26]

I am not so much concerned with whether Aubrey was right or not in his assessment of the effects of printing and the Civil War on popular culture, as with what this passage can tell us about the construction of popular culture by the early antiquarians. Here in one of the earliest antiquarian writers we can already see what was to become a defining feature of all popular antiquarian (and a good deal of later folkloric) writing: the trope whereby the process of antiquarianism is constructed as an act of remembrancing and preserving ways, customs, manners and traditions which are seen to have flourished in the recent past but which are now and forever disappearing. Under this trope popular culture is seen as interesting only in terms of its own past, as a perennially corrupting and degenerate form of an earlier and purer essence. Thus, instead of being studied as a means of learning about the modern poor and the cultural practices through which they live, it is simply quarried for evidences of ancient practices and beliefs which are thought to survive as half-understood superstitions - "'Old Customs and old wives fables are grosse things, but yet ought not to be buried in Oblivion; there may be some trueth and usefulnesse be picked out of them, besides 'tis a pleasure to consider the Errours that enveloped former ages: as also the present"'[27].

This trope, and some of the other features of eighteenth century antiquarian discourse which interest me, can be found fully exemplified in the seminal text of popular antiquarianism: the work which I earlier quoted Hone referring to as 'Brand's "Popular Antiquities"'. Although Hone refers to it as if it has only one author, it is in fact a composite text, bearing the marks of three separate authors: Henry Bourne (1694-1733), the work's originator; John Brand (1744-1806); and Sir Henry Ellis (1777-1869).

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[26] Dorson, in *The British Folklorists*, pp. 5-6, quoting Oliver L. Dick, ed., *Aubrey's Brief Lives* (2nd ed.; London: Secker and Warburg, 1950), p. xxxiii, in his Introduction, 'The Life and Times of John Aubrey'; who was quoting from Aubrey's 'Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme', a work described by Dorson on p. 5 as a 'compendium of customs and notions surviving from classical and biblical times'.

Henry Bourne was a curate, living in Newcastle, when he published the first edition of this work in 1725 under the somewhat cumbersome title of *Antiquitates Vulgares; or, the Antiquities of the Common People. Giving an Account of several of their Opinions and Ceremonies. With proper Reflections upon each of them; shewing which may be retain'd, and which ought to be laid aside.* As this title suggests, Bourne was primarily concerned not so much with describing as with the extirpation of popular beliefs and practices which he believed to be contrary to true religion. However the true significance of his work for the historian of popular culture lies in the fact that he collected most of his information about the heathenish practices of the common people through his own observations:

> He wrote about the populace kindling fires on Midsummer's Eve, seeing spirits exorcized in haunted houses, carousing at wakes, worshipping at wells and fountains. He knew "Of country conversation in a Winter's Evening", centring on ghosts and spirits. He saw how the interwoven strands of folk tradition formed a separate culture from the rational, sober, and pious ways of learned men. These patterns of behaviour he called the "antiquities of the common people", regarding them as a base counterpart to the physical antiquities left by Roman generals and Saxon kings. Bourne's explanation for such "antiquitates vulgares" was made in simple theological terms; these were heathen errors renewed and enlarged by the medieval church. The light of reason and the truth of God would soon blow them away.
>
> (*The British Folklorists*, p. 12)

Thus, for Bourne, the belief that popular customs and superstitions had their origins in paganism and/or Roman Catholicism was primarily used as an argument against their continuation, rather than as justification for treating them as semi-veiled sources of information about those ancient origins. Nonetheless, such an approach still firmly locates the interest and significance of popular culture in the past, and renders irrelevant any attempt to consider what its actual practitioners conceived themselves to be doing.

When John Brand, another Newcastle clergyman, re-published Bourne's work in 1777 as *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (under his own name and with the addition of notes and commentaries which increased the work's size by a quarter), he maintained both Bourne's text and his understanding of the nature of popular superstition, but altered the emphasis: "'Popular Antiquities" designated the mental heirlooms of the

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[27] Dorson, in *The British Folklorists*, p. 7, quoting Dick (p.lxv), quoting Aubrey's 'Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme'.

past found in the superstitious fancies of the populace, but no longer a target of reform so much as a proper subject for antiquarian study' (*The British Folklorists*, p. 13). Brand was preparing a new edition of the work when he died, but it was left incomplete, and it was not until 1813 that the work was published in its final form, this time under the editorial stewardship of Sir Henry Ellis. This is the form of the text which was to be most influential in the nineteenth century (and almost certainly the edition to which Hone was referring). As well as additional notes by Ellis, it contained a new preface and a great many new notes by Brand, which he had been unable to reduce to publishable proportions before his death.

Thus the final responsibility for the bulk of the *Popular Antiquities* can probably be said to rest mainly with John Brand, and certainly his preface[28] is of great interest, in that it attempts to set out to justify and explain the practice of the rest of the text (which is of such a haphazard and heterogeneous nature that such an explanation is especially needful), and thus lays bare many of the presuppositions on which popular antiquarianism was founded. Some quotations from it will serve to demonstrate this -

> Tradition has in no instance so clearly evinced her faithfulness as in the transmittal of vulgar rites and popular opinions.
> Of these, when we are desirous of tracing them backwards to their origins, many may be said to lose themselves in the Mists of Antiquity.
> ...
> It must be confessed that many of these are mutilated, and, as in the Remains of antient Statuary, the parts of some have been aukwardly transposed: they preserve, however, the principal traits that distinguished them in their origin.
> Things that are composed of such flimsy materials as the fancies of a multitude do not seem calculated for a long duration; yet have these survived shocks by which even Empires have been overthrown, and preserved at least some form and colour of identity, during a repetition of changes both in the religious opinions and civil polity of States.
> But the strongest proof of their remote antiquity is, that they have outlived the general knowledge of the very causes that gave rise to them.[29]

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[28] Written by Brand in 1795 with the intention of being included in the new edition which he did not live to complete, but included by Ellis in the 1813 edition.

[29] John Brand M.A., Arranged and Revised, with Additions, By Henry Ellis, F.R.S. Sec.S.A, *Observations on Popular Antiquities: Chiefly Illustrating the Origin of our Vulgar Customs, Ceremonies, and Superstitions*, (London: 1813), pp. vii-viii. Hereafter referred to as *Popular Antiquities*.

This is Brand setting out his stall and giving a very clear indication of his understanding of popular culture: the true interest of popular superstitions and customs lies in their origins in the remote past, and these origins must indeed be remote, since 'they have outlived the general knowledge of the very causes that gave rise to them' amongst the people who actually believe or enact them. He goes on to make explicit what he perceives those origins to be: 'few who are desirous of investigating the popular Notions and vulgar Ceremonies of our own Nation, can fail of deducing them, in their first direction, from the times when Popery was our established Religion' (*Popular Antiquities*, p. x).

Brand's theory of the transmission and persistence of these customs is also of interest, as he argues that, since the Reformation

> ... the bulk of the people [were] by no means inclined to annihilate the seemingly innocent Ceremonies of their former superstitious Faith. These, consecrated to the fancies of the multitude, by an usage from time immemorial, though erazed by public authority from the *written Word*, were committed as a venerable deposit to the keeping of *Oral Tradition* ... (*Popular Antiquities*, p. xi)

This is a crucial point: Brand formalises that opposition, between oral transmission as the locus of popular culture and the 'public authority' of the written word as its enemy, which had been adumbrated by Aubrey in the passage quoted above, in such a way as to make it a central theoretical plank of antiquarian discourse about popular culture. This obviously has an important bearing on Clare's position as an aspirant poet coming from a culture which is theorised as being entirely oral in nature, and especially so when, as we have seen from his autobiographical writings, the orality of that culture was at best only partial and thoroughly 'contaminated' by literacy. Equally, it sheds light on 'The Village Minstrel', where, as we have seen, Clare represents the village's culture as wholly oral, with ambivalent consequences. This is a topic to which I will return later in this chapter, but I first want to quote one more passage from Brand's introduction, in order to complete my picture of the ideological patterns of antiquarian discourse as they relate to Clare..

Brand dwells very little on explicitly political issues in his introduction, but when he does do so it is particularly revealing:

> The common people, confined by daily labour, seem to require their proper intervals of relaxation; perhaps it is of the highest political utility to encourage innocent Sports and Games among them. The revival of many of these, would, I think, be highly pertinent at this particular juncture, when the general spread of Luxury and Dissipation threatens more than at any preceding period to extinguish the character of our boasted national bravery.
>
> (*Popular Antiquities*, p. xiii)

This lays bare the political presuppositions behind the practice of popular antiquarianism with exemplary clarity: the more of the working-classes' leisure time is engaged in picturesque and 'innocent' (i.e. apolitical?) customs, the less time they will have free for 'Luxury and Dissipation' and, although Brand takes care to leave it merely as a strong implication, for political agitation. It is worth noting that 1795, when the preface was written, was a period of intense anxiety about the revolutionary potential of English Jacobinism and any form of working-class radicalism, and it would be hard to find better evidence for David Vincent's claim, in the passage which I have borrowed for my title to this section, that

> It can be argued ... that the folk-lore movement, whose growth ran exactly parallel to the emergence of working-class radicalism, represented a reaction against the political threat from below. The study of popular culture and its oral traditions was a means of bringing the classes together on ground emptied of conflict.[30]

Vincent is in fact writing about the 1820s and 1830s, and in particular about William Hone, but the quotation from Brand shows that Vincent's characterisation of the *Every-Day Book* as a site where 'an anxious middle-class readership could encounter a vigorous, colourful, authentic working-class world which had no apparent connection with the contemporary political unions and riotous crowds' ('The Decline of the Oral Tradition in Popular Culture', p. 36) is one that holds good for Hone's predecessors in the field of popular antiquarianism, from whom he inherited so much.

As for Hone himself, the sheer size and range of the *Every-Day Book*, the number of contributors, and its consequent multivocal diversity of tone, makes it harder to generalise about its discursive character in the way I have done about the Brand/Ellis volumes. However, although there are exceptions, the characteristics

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[30] Vincent, 'The Decline of the Oral Tradition in Popular Culture', p.35.

of antiquarian discourse which I have identified can all be amply illustrated from the *Every-Day Book*, both in material written by Hone himself and in contributions from his correspondents. The 'Explanatory Address' to which I have already referred establishes the project of the work squarely within the framework of antiquarian orthodoxy - 'Our ancestors were persons of leisure. They appropriated each day in the year to the memory of remarkable persons or events. The EVERY-DAY Book will relate the origins of these three hundred and sixty-five celebrations, with interesting accounts of the individuals and circumstances commemorated' (*Every-Day Book* Vol I, p. ix) - locating the interest of popular customs in their origins, and by the list of Christian festivals and saints' days which follows suggesting a Roman Catholic source for them. This is made explicit in a passage by Hone in the second volume of the book, when commenting on a supposed print of the face of Christ from the Turin shroud - 'Nor let it be imagined that these representations [i.e. relics] have not influenced our own country; there is evidence to the contrary already, and more can be adduced if need require, which will incontestably prove that many of our present popular customs are derived from such sources'(*Every-Day Book* Vol II, p. 64). Nor is it only in Hone's own contributions that we can discern the features of antiquarian discourse which I have been emphasising, but also in the majority of his correspondents. To take just one example from a possible multitude, here is one 'H.T.B' concluding an account of 'May-dancing' in Wales -

> This ancient custom, like many others among the ancient Britons, is annually growing into disuse. The decline of sports and pastimes is in every age a subject of regret. For in a civil point of view, they denote the general prosperity, natural energy, and happiness of the people, consistent with morality, - and combined with that spirit of true religion, which unlike the howling of the dismal hyaena or ravening wolf, is as a lamb sportive and innocent, and as a lion magnanimous and bold. (*Every-Day Book* Vol I, p. 565)

Here we have the external stance which treats the 'people' as an entity having nothing in common with the author, an emphasis on the antiquity of the custom and its current desuetude, and most strikingly, a barely concealed political undercurrent in the author's desperate desire to see the 'natural energy' of the people contained by harmless and picturesque customs and 'innocent' piety rather than unleashed by the 'howling of the dismal hyaena or ravening wolf', a phrase which seems bizarrely melodramatic unless we read it as a

symbolic masking of the author's fear of political agitation amongst the working-classes. Notwithstanding Hone's own radical background, we can discern similar moralistic and de-politicising motives behind the whole project of the *Every-Day Book.* In the 'Preface' which he added to the work in 1826 he laid claim to

> ... other aims than I deemed it expedient to mention in the prospectus:- to communicate in an agreeable manner, the greatest possible variety of important and diverting facts, without a single sentence to excite an uneasy sensation, or an embarassing inquiry; and, by not seeming to teach, to cultivate a high moral feeling, and the best affections of the heart:- to open a storehouse, from whence manhood may derive daily instruction and amusement, and youth and innocence be informed, and retain their innocency (*Every-Day Book* Vol. I, p. viii)

- thereby laying the foundations for a work of antiquarian scholarship and acceptable moralism which will not make 'embarrassing' or 'uneasy' connections between the customs of the working-classes and actual contemporary social conditions.

I have given this sketch of the history of popular antiquarianism because I think it is crucial to have a clear sense of the discursive pressures which bore on Clare as he tried to find a way of writing about popular culture, and I think the outlines of those pressures should now be evident. Those who wrote about popular culture almost invariably came from outside it, from the gentry or the clergy, and their writings reflect that. Popular culture is seen from the outside, as a curiosity; it is seen as subsisting entirely through the medium of oral transmission; and those who actually participate in it do not understand its true meaning or significance, which is in fact located in the past, in that contemporary customs are obscure reflections of a pagan or Catholic past, and are only interesting insofar as that past can be reconstructed from them.

This backwards-looking stance is one that was to remain a defining feature of folkloric discourse, and indeed to become its theoretical basis: as Georgina Boyes notes in her critique of the twentieth-century folk revival movement -

> Cultural survivals theory[31] proposed that persisting activities - traditions - originated directly in the formalising of primitive belief systems in ritual actions. Morris dances were, for example,

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[31] This refers to the folkloric theory, originating with E.B. Tylor, whereby a form of Darwinian evolutionism is applied to cutural practices. Broadly speaking, the theory holds that societies evolve from barbarism to civilisation, but as they do so, traces of earlier states persist as the oral traditions and customs of the

> hypothesised as survivals of "pagan observances prevalent amongst primitive communities ..." ... Uninferred evidence of animism or tribal taboo in late nineteenth-century England, however, proved rather hard to come by ... when questioned by fieldworkers about their motives, most participants in "survivals of primitive rituals" referred to aesthetics and socio-economic factors, to the status or cash profits deriving from their activities ...[32]

Boyes goes on to make a point which is of particular relevance to the situation in which Clare found himself when writing about popular culture -

> ... by constructing the concept of a rural, uneducated, uncreative Folk as the cultural source of their definition, the proponents of the survivals thesis obviated the need for close examination of the role and individual contribution of performers of all folk traditions. Their unequal status and ignorance of the "real" significance of what they "unthinkingly" inherited from their ancestors placed the Folk outside the need for consultation of lengthy consideration. As mere temporary custodians of a common culture, they had no individual rights of ownership in what was clearly a heritage of the nation as a whole (*The Imagined Village*, p. 14)

Boyes here is obviously referring to the practices of folklorists who were working some time after Clare's death, but the basic attitude which she is describing is one that, as we have seen from Aubrey and Brand, has its roots in a long tradition of antiquarian discourse. If the true content, and real interest, of a popular culture lies in what it half reveals and half obscures about the beliefs and customs of a pagan or Catholic past, then it follows that the actual motives and self-understanding of those involved in it are more or less irrelevant to those studying it - as E.P. Thompson has remarked, 'if nineteenth-century folklore, by separating survivals from their context, lost awareness of custom as ambience and mentalité, so also it lost sight of the rational functions of many customs within the routines of daily and weekly labour' (*Customs in Common*, p. 3). This has a good deal of bearing on the situation in which Clare found himself: on the one hand, he was himself by birth and upbringing a member of the 'folk', sharing in their culture, and hence a part of the popular culture which he was writing about. He was thus very well placed to give the sort of account of the function of

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backwards and illiterate 'Folk'. We can therefore study our own past both in the 'primitive' performances of other cultures which are still in their 'infancy', and, as Boyes goes on to discuss, in the popular culture of our own day, which is believed to act as a sort of palimpsest of its own earlier history.

[32] Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 10.

popular customs in day to day life which Thompson rightly identifies as a crucial lack in most nineteenth-century folklore. On the other hand, however, he was by virtue of his literacy and his poetic ambitions aligned with a middle and upper class readership who were decidedly not of the 'folk', and whose understanding of popular culture was largely created and circumscribed by the discursive patterns of the popular antiquarians. He was therefore faced with the very difficult task of finding a language for the representation of popular culture which could do justice to this ambivalence, always bearing in mind the further complicating factor that he was himself being represented to the public as a specimen of that popular culture.

I have already, in my first two chapters, examined the effect that this unstable social identity and complex pattern of mediation and self-representation has when Clare is attempting to formulate validating narratives of his accession to authorship in his autobiographical prose and in 'The Village Minstrel'. In both those chapters I was mainly concerned to explore the ways in which those texts circulated around ambiguous and highly charged representations of popular 'literary' forms - broadsides, chapbooks, oral song and story - and to show that these representations formed a catalyst around which the contradictions and ambiguities of Clare's social status could crystallise.

I now want to return to the 'Letter to Hone', and to explore in more depth the way in which Clare's representations of customary and ceremonial popular culture (both in this letter and in the rest of his work) relate to these representations of popular literary forms. It is obviously impossible to distinguish precisely between these two branches of popular culture as, for instance, singing and storytelling form an integral part of certain customs and ceremonial holidays, and I do not wish to suggest that any such absolute distinction is either possible or necessary. However, it is possible to make a general distinction between those aspects of popular culture which provide Clare with what might be called 'literary' analogues for his own writing in that they are verbal activities (leaving aside, for the moment, the question of whether they are transmitted orally or through the medium of print); and those which, being primarily ceremonial, social and customary in nature would not appear to provide him with the same sorts of problems of representation. I now want to

turn to a consideration of what sort of problems they do provide him with, using my reading of the letter to Hone as a springboard from which to explore other examples of Clare's 'folkloric' writing, and examining the ways in which he manouevres within the discursive constraints which I have been discussing in this section.

3: 'SHADOWS OF CUSTOMS ALMOST WORN OUT': CLARE AS FOLKLORIST

The first two sentences of the 'Letter to Hone' are particularly instructive, as they provide an introduction to the whole piece and set the tone for what is to follow -

> .. I met tother day with a number of your "Every-day-book" & as I feel a great pleasure in any thing relating to the superstitions & manners of former times I need not say how much entertainment I felt in its perusal The following miscellaneous superstitions & shadows of customs almost worn out here are at your service to do as you please with
>
> (*Cottage Tales*, p. 138)

It is immediately apparent that Clare is, at least to some extent, adopting the idiom and some of the assumptions of popular antiquarian discourse. The tone is that of a detached and scholarly observer of the habits of the peasantry, indulging in a leisurely connoisseurship which automatically assumes that these are 'the manners of *former* times' and are merely the 'shadows of customs almost worn out'. This introduction therefore establishes a framework of assumptions which is very much congruent with the ideology of popular antiquarianism as discussed above, i.e. that these customs are 'survivals', and that they are interesting for what they tell us about the past rather than the light they can shed on the present.

It is important at this stage to make two qualifying points. Firstly, that I am not primarily concerned with the truth or otherwise of the assumptions of popular antiquarianism - it may very well be true, for instance,

that many customs did have their origin in Roman Catholicism or even pagan ritual and that they can therefore be illuminating sources of information about 'former times'. My concern is rather with what is entailed by the fact that it is this origin that is considered to be the important and interesting thing about them, and not the actual function of the custom in the community, or the self-understanding of the participants.

Secondly, the discursive characteristics of popular antiquarianism which I have outlined above should not be thought of as imposing a rigid frame on Clare's writing entirely against his will or outside his control. Indeed I would suggest that in the 'Letter to Hone' he is quite deliberately adopting this style as being the appropriate manner in which to discuss popular customs in a scholarly manner and for a wide public, and that insofar as this was his purpose, he had little choice but to do so. However, the mere choice of this style entails a set of structuring assumptions - about the nature and interest of the subject matter, about the social status of the author and his relationship to the material, and about the readership - which are to a greater or a lesser degree inappropriate to Clare. He was himself a member of the community whose customs he is setting out to describe, albeit one distanced by the self-imposed alienation of his poetic vocation and by the non-comprehension and often downright hostility of his fellow-villagers. The adoption of the role of popular antiquarian thus becomes an uncomfortable analogue of the social displacement involved in his attempt to become a poet, as both seem to involve stepping outside a limited and limiting partial social identity into a wider space of supposed objectivity and freedom, which turns out on arrival to be just as hedged about and circumscribed with markers of social power and constraint as the post-enclosure landscape of Helpston.

The lengthy second paragraph of the 'Letter to Hone' is a good illustration of the ways in which this tension manifests itself in the texture of Clare's prose. He is providing an account of several customs which purport to predict the marital future of their participants, and he begins in a manner which is thoroughly in accord with the assumptions and practice of popular antiquarianism – 'On Saint Marks Eve it is still a custom about us for young maids who are some times joind by young men to make the "dumb cake" a mystical ceremony which has lost its origin & in some countys may have ceasd altogether' (*Cottage Tales*,

p. 138). We can again note that Clare is following antiquarian practice by treating the custom as a survival - it has 'lost its origin'. Indeed most of the customs described throughout the 'Letter to Hone' are similarly placed as garbled and misunderstood survivals of ancient practices: the Whitsunday custom of drinking from Eastwell spring is described as 'undoubtly a roman catholic custom'; the customs of Holy Thursday are variously described as 'ancient' and as 'a curious superstition which has forgotten the cause in which it origionated'; and the morris dance is conjectured 'to have been a burlesque parody on some popular story at the time but it has been so mutilated by its different performers that I coud not make sense of it'. The effect of such temporal placements is to distance both author and readers from the participants in these apparently senseless rituals by providing an external viewpoint from which their activities can be placed in a historical perspective which is unavailable to them.

This distancing is particularly apparent in the the way in which the opening sentence of the second paragraph of the letter (as quoted above) places the custom and its participants not just temporally but also geographically - 'in some countys [it] may have ceasd altogether' - thereby bringing author and readers into a position of collusive superiority whence they can lay claim to a synoptic view of the custom, both in its history and in its present geographical distribution.

The separation of author and readers from the people who are their objects of study is further exacerbated here by the very texture of the language - to write of the 'dumb cake' as 'a mystical ceremony which has lost its origin & in some countys may have ceasd altogether' is to adopt a construction which through its syntax effectively disempowers the actual 'young maids' and 'young men' who participate in the custom by ascribing to the ceremony an agency which it denies to them. Nor is this an isolated example - Clare uses the same construction in the fourth paragraph of the letter in describing a Holy Thursday custom as 'a curious superstition which has forgotten the cause in which it origionated' (*Cottage Tales*, p. 139). I am not arguing that this syntactical 'disempowerment' of his fellow-villagers was a part of Clare's conscious intention, and I would not wish to place too heavy a weight upon it. My point is rather that it is just one of the ways in which his use of the idioms of popular antiquarianism constructs a relationship between himself as author and the

working-class people of Helpston as his subject-matter which is very different from the actual social relationship in which he stood towards them, and that this sets up a tension which can be read off from the letter's fluctuations in tone.

These fluctuations can be observed in the rest of the paragraph under discussion. After this initial placement of the 'dumb cake' custom in its temporal and geographical contexts Clare goes on to give a detailed description of the custom. He begins in a tone of voice which could easily be that of an antiquarian taking care to present all the details of the custom as accurately as possible - 'the number of the partys is never to exceed three they meet in silence & at twelve oclock they eat it still silent for if one speaks the spell is broken ...' (*Cottage Tales*, p. 138). However, whilst never explicitly departing from this tone of informative objectivity, the description of the custom increasingly takes on the character of a psychological exploration of the frame of mind of the participants - 'the maids being apprised of this before hand take care nearly to undress them selves before they start & are ready to slip into bed before they are caught & if nothing is seen the token is sure to be heard ... & to be convinced that it comes from nothing else but the desired cause they take care to turn out the cats & dogs on that night in particular' (*Cottage Tales*, p. 138). These homely details give the account a greater particularity and suggest a much closer involvement with the custom and with its participants than would be available to the sort of studiously neutral outside observer who was evoked by the authorial stance of the beginning of the paragraph.

This is further brought home at the end of the paragraph when, after a briefer account of some of the other customs associated with this night, Clare introduces a specific individual -

> ... an odd character who had no fear calld Ben Barr a prophet usd to watch the poach every year & pretended to know the fates of every one in the villages round as who should be married or dye in the year but as a few pence generally predicted a good omen he seldom prophecied the deaths of his believers (*Cottage Tales*, p. 139)

This is both wry and affectionate, as it simultaneously mocks Barr's pretensions to prophecy and celebrates his memory, and it signals a shift in tone from the beginning of the paragraph with its implicit claim to an overarching historical and geographical knowledge which would appear to rule out such an intimate concern

with the specific individuals of a locality. It also undercuts that aspect of antiquarian discourse which tended to view customs as subsisting in a contextless ritual space, providing a counter-example to Thompson's charge that 'nineteenth-century folklore, by separating survivals from their context ... lost sight of the rational functions of many customs within the routines of daily and weekly labour' (*Customs in Common*, p. 3). Ben Barr had a perfectly rational motive for his participation in this custom, in the form of 'a few pence', and far from being impelled by a half-understood generalised ritual imperative, tailored his answers in a thoroughly businesslike manner to what his customers wanted.

That this marks a departure, albeit very slight, from standard antiquarian practice can be further confirmed by the fact that Hone, who published this account of St Marks' Eve, felt the need to comment on it at some length -

> This "Ben Barr", of Helpstone, must be an useful fellow to timid believers in such affairs. He seems to have created for himself a place of trust and profit; if he is only a wag he may enjoy his emoluments with his humour, and do no harm; but should he assume to foretel mischief to his believers, he is, legally speaking, a 'sturdy rogue'.The seeing of supernatural sights by a paid proxy is a novelty in the annals of superstition. But if Ben Barr is the first, so he is the last of such seers. He will have no successor in office, there will be little demand for such a functionary, the income will fall off, and no one will undertake to see "Satan's invisible world" and warn unbelievers of ghosts, for nothing. (*Every-Day Book* Vol I, p. 525)

The arch humour of this serves to dispel some of the bluntness which might otherwise be found offensive in Clare's account, and it is noteworthy that even in such a piece of attempted comedy, Hone still operates with the assumptions of popular antiquarianism, assuming that the superstitions described are dying out. In fact, Hone's assertion that Barr was the first person to derive a profit from 'watching the porch' can be contradicted from within the pages of the *Every-Day Book* itself. A contribution by a correspondent from Yorkshire (signing himself J.P.) describes a character called Joe Brown, who began a criminal career by delivering prophecies as a 'porch watcher' before progressing to robbery and murder, finishing on the gallows in York, and it is instructive to compare the accounts of the two men. J.P., following a lengthy account of Joe Brown's criminal activities, concludes thus -

> ... he seemed completely identified with the local superstitions of the county. In some degree he made them subservient to further his roguish designs, by assuming the goblin appearance of the "Barguest", and with his auxiliary, turned it to no bad account. This preternatural appearance alarmed the superstitious, who fled, pursued by the supposed demon. In their panic haste they would leave their doors or gates open, and the rogues never failed to turn these oversights to good account, plundering the house or robbing the premises ... By the by, it may be observed, that the "Barguest" is an out-of-door goblin, believed by the vulgar to haunt the streets and lanes of country towns and villages. Its alleged appearance indicates death, or some great calamity (*Every-Day Book* Vol II, p. 551)

In contrast to the wryly matter-of-fact brevity of Clare's account of Ben Barr, this is almost gothic, and the focus of the interest is twofold: firstly, on the shocking details of Joe Brown's career, and secondly, on the details of the 'vulgar' superstitions which he manipulated to his own ends. Clare's account, however, seems fully focussed on the individual concerned, and he certainly shows no interest in titillating his reader with details of Barr's prophecies. The verbose texture of the prose in J. P.'s contribution, and the authorial viewpoint, which is firmly distanced from the people of whom it treats, are also typical of the majority of the contributors to the *Every-Day Book* and should give some idea of how different Clare's tone in his letter is, even when he is apparently operating within the conventions and constraints of antiquarian discourse.

This tension, between the structuring assumptions of antiquarian discourse with their tendency to separate discussion of popular customs from any form of political or social context, and the intimate knowledge, both of the locality and of its inhabitants, which Clare cannot help introducing into his account, can be found throughout the letter in various forms. For instance, in his account of May day customs in the fifth paragraph of the letter, Clare again begins in a scholarly manner, wishing to point out a few local variations which have not previously been noted - 'On may day a multiplicity of sports are stil observed but some of them are so popular that they need no mention yet they differ in places' (*Cottage Tales*, p. 139). However, his discussion of the Queen of the May is couched entirely in terms of the function the custom plays in the community of regulating contact between the sexes, dwelling on its coercive nature and the importance of adhering to it as a means of preserving the woman's status - '... the man wether her favourite or not claims her as his partner for the dance at night a custom that she dare not refuse to comply with as she woud loose her reputation & sweet heart into the bargain & grow into a byeword for a shrew & be shund accordingly'

(*Cottage Tales*, p. 140). This sort of emphasis on the role that a custom plays in the ordering of community life is, as we have seen, not common in antiquarian writing. While it is not in itself explicitly political, it certainly helps to situate the concepts of custom and ritual in a context that is much closer to contemporary political reality than is usual in antiquarian writing - compare Clare's account of this custom with the distancing and archaicising language of 'H. T. B.' - 'there still exists among the labouring classes in Wales the custom of May-dancing, wherein they exhibit their persons to the best advantage, and distinguish their agility before the fair maidens of their own rank' (*Every-Day Book* Vol I, p. 562). It thereby suggests the possibility of an interest in them which is not solely concerned with their status as quasi-archaeological survivals to be quarried for information about the past or to be appreciated as picturesque adornments of the rural scene.

A further example of this more realistic approach to the conventions of antiquarian writing occurs in Clare's account of the customs attaching to Plough Monday, and it is particularly revealing in that Clare is explicitly responding to and revising Hone's own account of the custom[33]. Hone emphasises the picturesque - the ploughmen wear 'clean white shirts' and decorate themselves with 'gay-coloured ribbons', there is a 'sportive dance with a few lasses in all their finery, and a superabundance of ribbons' - and treats the whole custom as a spectacle to be enjoyed by the onlooker - 'when this merriment is well managed, it is very pleasing'. Clare's account is presented as a response to Hone - 'I am sorry to bring a dirty reality so near your poetical description of plough monday' - and he takes pains to emphasise the somewhat less sanitised nature of the custom in his experience - 'the plough boys ... meet at the black smiths shop to dress themselves & get ready not with white shirts & ribons but to black their faces with a mixture of soot & grease & all that will not under go this are reckond unworthy of the sport & excluded the company' (*Cottage Tales*, p. 142). He also stresses the unruly nature of the custom in a way which is quite at odds with Hone's version - 'as it is reckond a lawless day the constable will rarely interefere if calld upon ... the different villagers usd to hang each others ploughs together & pull against them to try which was the strongest - which caused such

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[33] This can be found in *Every-Day Book* Vol. I, pp. 71-73.

confusion of quarreling that it was abolished' (*Cottage Tales*, p. 142). The whole passage is a good example of how Clare, whilst still operating within the conventions of antiquarian writing (he begins by carefully noting the extent of the custom as he knows it - 'in our county (Northamptonshire) & in the neighbouring ones of Rutland Lincoln Cambridge &c'), is nevertheless striving to re-orient them towards a much more realistic description of popular customs, and one which is not predicated on the external viewpoint which is such a key feature of those conventions.

There are a couple of occasions in the letter where Clare appears to become more explicitly political, and they occur when he considers the impact of enclosure on popular customs. These are particularly important passages as they not only show us Clare breaking free from the self-imposed shackles of antiquarian discourse, but also provide crucial hints as to why the popular culture of Helpston was so important to Clare. The first occurs in his discussion of the customs associated with Eastwell spring - '... the custom of meeting at the spring on Whitsunday to drink sugar & water has been abolished ever since the inclosure' (*Cottage Tales*, p. 139). This is all that Clare has to say on the matter, and although the use of the word 'abolished' is suggestive, the tone is sufficiently level to give the impression that the author has no emotional involvement in the matter and merely reports it as an interesting fact.

The second reference to enclosure is much less bland, and occurs in a discussion of the customs associated with stone gathering - '... from what scourse could such a strange custom origionate - inclosure came & destroyed it with hundreds of others - leaving in its place nothing but a love for doing neighbours a mischief & public house oratory that dwells upon mob law as absolute justice' (*Cottage Tales*, p. 141). This is an extraordinary outburst in its context, and it constitutes a dramatic disruption of the tone of the letter. Elsewhere, as we have seen, the texture of the prose is largely akin to that of a scholarly antiquarian, albeit that it manifests tensions between that style and a more personal, contextualised approach which arises from the nature of Clare's relationship to his material. However, nowhere else in the letter is there such an upsurge of emotion, as though the style he has adopted can no longer contain the intensity of his emotional involvement with the customs and communal life which he is writing about. What is crucial to note here is

the way that enclosure's disruption of the customary life of the community is represented as causing a fall into mutual animosity and political friction ('public house oratory that dwells on mob law as absolute justice'), thereby suggesting that custom and ritual played a significant role in maintaining social cohesion and equity in the community.

Clare's attitude to the enclosure of Helpston was extremely complex and involved many disparate factors, but one common theme of his writings on the subject is that which is displayed here - the sense that enclosure was the cause of a loss of fellow-feeling in village life, setting neighbour against neighbour and class against class. Hence many of his writings on the subject take the form of a lament for the passing of a perceived golden age 'When masters made them merry wi their men'[34], when social relations were more neighbourly and less antagonistic than since the enclosure. As Raymond Williams has shown[35], this lament for the passing of a rural golden age is a perennially recurring trope in rural writing, and therefore cannot be taken simply at face value. However, whether or not an 'objective' historical account of Helpston would find evidence for the decline that Clare laments, the fact remains that for Clare it was obviously of crucial importance that the physical disruption of the village landscape brought about by enclosure was equally a social disruption of the community. E.P. Thompson has remarked on the close 'mutual ecological imbrication of the human and the natural' (*Customs in Common*, p. 183) in Clare's 'enclosure elegies'. It is worth examining a little further here how this applies to Clare's representations of popular culture, as I think it is a crucial point for an understanding of what was at stake for Clare in those representations, and will provide a clearer understanding of the reasons why the discourse of scholarly antiquarianism was inadequate to his sense of the importance of popular custom and culture.

I want to explore this sense of the close entanglement of culture and landscape through one particular site which is mentioned in 'Remembrances'[36], one of the poems which Thompson was referring to in the remark quoted above. The site is Langley Bush, and in 'Remembrances' it occurs twice: firstly as the site of

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[34] *Shepherd's Calendar*, 'June', l. 158, p. 68.

[35] In Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1993)

[36] *The Midsummer Cushion*, pp. 369-371.

childhood pleasure - 'Dear heart & can it be that such raptures meet decay / I thought them all eternal when by Langley bush I lay' - and secondly as the first in a catalogue of sites which have been 'levelled' by enclosure - 'By Langley bush I roam but the bush hath left its hill'. Clare refers to Langley Bush on several occasions throughout his career, and I want to explore two of them in somewhat more depth. Firstly, there is the poem titled 'Langley Bush' from *The Village Minstrel*. It is in conception a fairly conventional and sentimental piece of nostalgia and lament for mutability, but it is worth quoting as an illustration of some of the associations the place had for Clare:

> O Langley bush the shepherds sacred shade
> Thy hollow trunk oft gaind a look from me
> ...
> What truth the story of the swain alows
> That tells of honours which thy young days knew
> Of "langley court" being kept beneath thy boughs
> I cannot tell - thus much I know is true
> That thou art reverencd even the rude clan
> Of lawless gipseys ...
> ... Leave thee as sacred in thy withering age
> Both swains & gipseys seem to love thy name
> Thy spots a favourite wi the smutty crew
> & soon thou must depend on gipsey fame
> Thy mulldering trunk is nearly rotten thro...
> (*Early Poems II*, p. 250)

The two points that I want to draw out from this are firstly the sense of Langley Bush as a physical site which is 'sacred' to and 'reverencd' by both the local people - 'shepherds' and 'swains' - and the gypsies; and secondly its status as a presence in both local culture ('the story of the swain') and in the tales of the gypsies - 'soon thou must depend on gipsey fame'. It is thus both a fully natural site - a tree with a 'hollow trunk' which is 'nearly rotten thro' - and a cultural site, the object of 'the story of the swain' and of 'gipsey fame', which depends for a memory of its history (it had in fact been the site of the old hundred court of Nassaburgh[37]) on the act of tale-telling, and may soon in fact live on only in 'gipsey fame'.

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[37] *Early Poems II*, p. 788, note to p. 250.

These remarks lead me on to the second reference to Langley Bush that I wish to discuss – '... nothing is lasting in this world last year Langly bush was destroyd an old white thorn that had stood for more then a century full of fame the Gipseys Shepherds and Herd men all had their tales of its history and it will be long ere its memory is forgotten'[38]. This journal entry, written some four years after the earlier poem, preserves the same double vision of Langley Bush as at once a natural object and a cultural site, and brings it into even sharper focus. It invokes a culture which is local, tied specifically to a place and the landmarks within it, and providing a sort of map of the landscape through a network of stories and customary associations which is also plural and multivocal - the shepherds, herdsmen and gypsies '*all* had their tales of its history', presumably different as according to their differing relations to the place but nonetheless coexisting together in a way which itself constitutes a rebuke to notions that popular culture can be described as a monolithic unitary entity. It is also, crucially, vulnerable - the place's memory will be preserved through these stories and associations, but as it and other similar landmarks are destroyed or altered so also the cultural topography in which they equally have their being will be at worst violated and at least irredeemably changed.

Jonathan Bate, in a discussion of the significance of place-names for Wordsworth, Clare, Hardy and Edward Thomas, refers to this journal entry and claims that 'For Clare, poetry is like those gypsies' and shepherds' stories in that it seeks to "leave behind / The memory of a name"'[39]. This is an important point and, taken together with the points I have been making about the inextricably interwoven status of landscape and culture for Clare, it suggests both a way of reading some of Clare's engagements with popular culture and reasons why the antiquarian discourse adopted in the 'Letter to Hone' is ultimately unsatisfactory as a means of rendering the cultural landscape of Helpston. It amounts to a claim that Clare conceived his own poetry as somehow analogous to the memorialising character of the various oral tales which he identifies in his accounts of Langley Bush; that its function, like theirs, is to preserve the 'memory', 'name' and 'fame' of a

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[38] Journal entry for Wednesday 29 September 1824, *JCBH*, p. 179.
[39] Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 107.

place. It thus suggests the possibility of a means of engaging with popular culture which may not be subject to the same sorts of anxieties and disturbing questions about social status which I have identified in my readings of the autobiographical prose and 'The Village Minstrel' - i.e. if Clare could conceive his poetry as having the same memorialising function which he himself identifies as the most important feature of popular tales and customary associations, he may have been able to escape some of the double-bind which arose from his attempts to represent popular culture through the externally imposed categories of the dominant culture.

Bate provides no evidence for his assertion, however, and my final two chapters will in some sense be an attempt to substantiate it, and question it, through considerations of Clare's use of the simultaneously popular and literary forms of song and verse narrative, and of his attempt to create a synoptic overview of village life, landscape and culture in *The Shepherd's Calendar*. However, to provide a clearer sense of what is at stake in this I want to conclude this chapter by returning once more to the 'Letter to Hone' and examining its lengthy description of morris dancing alongside a sonnet which Clare wrote on the same subject, in order to bring out the very different approaches to popular cultural material employed in each.

The account of the morris dance[40] in the 'Letter to Hone' is perhaps the clearest example in the letter of Clare's attempts to write as a true antiquarian. It reads in places almost like a piece of anthropological fieldwork - 'it appears to have been a burlesque parody on some popular story at the time but it has been so mutilated by its different performers that I coud not make sense of it tho I tryd to transcribe from the mouths of 3 or four persons who had all been actors in it' (*Cottage Tales*, p. 140). We have here many of the characteristics of antiquarian writing - the distanced viewpoint, the assumption that the custom stands in need of a historical explanation which has been rendered impossible by the process of oral transmission, and the attempt at accurate transcription of the custom in its present garbled state[41]. The distancing of the authorial standpoint from the participants in the custom is further exacerbated by Clare's reference to the two

[40] What Clare describes is in fact what we would today think of as a mummer's play rather than a morris dance. See Deacon, *John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, p. 289.

principal actors as 'the Kean & Young of the piece' - which simultaneously diminishes the participants to the status of a mock-heroic parody and allows the author and readers to adopt an ironic overview of the whole custom by placing these rural amateur dramatics in the shadow of the London professional stage. Although the description of the performance which follows is extremely vivid, to an extent that suggests a close acquaintance with the custom and with its participants, Clare never relinquishes this distanced viewpoint, leaving us with a passage which lacks only a learned attempt at tracing the historical antecedents of the custom to be a perfectly orthodox piece of antiquarian research.

I want to compare this with an untitled 'sonnet'[42] which Clare wrote about morris dancers, in order to suggest how radically different an account of the same custom Clare was capable of giving. At first sight the poem might appear to be simplicity itself -

> Deckt out in ribbons gay and papers cut
> Fine as a maidens fancy off they strut
> And act the morris dance from door to door
> Their highest gains a penny nothing more
> The childern leave their toys to see them play
> And laughing maidens lay their work away
> The stolen apple in her apron lies
> To give her lover in his gay disguise
> Een the old woman leaves her knitting off
> And lays the bellows in her lap to laugh
> Upon the floor the stool made waggons lie
> And playing scholars lay the lesson bye
> The cat and dog in wonder run away
> And hide beneath the table from the fray
>
> (*Oxford Authors Clare*, p. 269)

Indeed simplicity is very much the key to the poem's effect, but it is very far from being the artless simplicity which was so often invoked by Clare's contemporary admirers- it is no simple matter to create a

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[41] For a text of what survives of Clare's attempt at transcription, see *John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, p. 293.

[42] I place the term in inverted commas, as the poem, along with many of Clare's, bears little relation to the traditional forms of the sonnet beyond the fact of its consisting of fourteen lines. For a discussion of Clare's achievements and innovations in the field of the sonnet see Rodney Lines, 'Clare's "rough country sonnets"', in John Goodridge ed., *The Independent Spirit: John Clare and the Self-taught Tradition*, (Helpston: The

sense of such fluidity and elegance in a poem which consists almost entirely of end-stopped lines in rhyming couplets. It reads like a snapshot, a freeze-frame of an action which was taking place before the poem began and which will continue after it has finished, but it achieves a multiplicity of viewpoint that no camera could hope to match. As the focus passes rapidly from the morris dancers to the children, then to the 'laughing maidens', the old women, the children again, and finally to the dog and the cat we are presented with a wholeness in variety, the cohesion of which is belied by the apparent simplicity of the syntactical and associational links with which the poem is bound together.

Rodney Lines has written that 'the sonnet became an ideal vehicle for Clare's vision of nature which embraced the simultaneousness of what he saw and the interconnectedness of everything combined with a feeling of movement, itself a product of a poet who experienced and felt the countryside, rather than the eighteenth-century rural observers like Thomson that he had first started out with'[43]. The sense of simultaneity and interconnection are certainly here, as is the sense of relaxed yet deceptively swift movement of focus, but I want to suggest that Lines' comment does not go far enough, in that this sonnet in particular is far from being simply a vehicle for a 'vision of nature'. It is rather a vision of humanity, nature and culture as a unity held together in the act of description: something *seen*, with a wonderful impersonal clarity and exactitude, but also something *made*, as becomes obvious if we compare it with the description of the same custom in the 'Letter to Hone'. The passage in the letter and the poem both describe exactly the same custom, and yet they could hardly be more different, and it is hard to believe they are by the same author. The prose piece is scrupulous, exact and vividly rendered, and yet it leaves us wholly outside the scene, looking in to it as into a painting alongside the author who also remains wholly outside the frame. In the poem, however, we are inside the scene, flitting from viewpoint to viewpoint with swiftness and grace, as the authorial voice identifies itself with different elements in the scene. It is a difference of genre, certainly - between the scholarly neutrality of the antiquarian and the vivid immediacy of the loco-

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John Clare Society and The Margaret Grainger Memorial Trust, 1994), pp. 156-163, and Seamus Heaney, 'John Clare - a Bicentenary Lecture', *John Clare in Context*, pp. 130-147.

[43] *The Independent Spirit*, pp. 158-159.

descriptive poet - but the difference of genre partly masks and partly reveals a complete difference in the attitude taken to the material.

The poem exhibits that sense of place, people and culture held together in a closely interwoven ecological unity to which E. P. Thompson referred in the passage quoted above, and does so in a way that the conventions of antiquarian discourse render impossible. It is this 'holistic' approach to popular culture, seeking to locate it and present it in its fullness as an integral element of a particular place at a particular time, which I want to explore in my next two chapters. It is partly a generic question, and obviously poetry, with its enhanced sense of presence, provides a more suitable medium for this vision than prose. However, poetry, just like prose, is subject to discursive and conventional constraints, albeit different ones, and so my next chapter will examine Clare's use, as collector and adaptor, of the popular oral songs and stories current in his neighbourhood, and attempt to show how that use can be seen to stem from this sense of the mutual involvement of culture, society and nature, and to constitute an oblique attempt to body it forth in verse.

CHAPTER 4:

'GOSSIP TALES' AND 'THE TRASH OF BALLAD SINGERS': CLARE AS COLLECTOR AND ADAPTER OF POPULAR MATERIAL

1: INTRODUCTION

This chapter will primarily be concerned with exploring Clare's activities as a collector of popular oral material during the early to mid-1820s. There are two separate strands to this activity - the collection of songs and ballads during the mid-1820s which has been documented by Deacon; and the several narrative poems which Clare wrote during the early 1820s, based on oral tales prevalent in the village, and which he called his 'gossip tales' (a third strand, the collecting of dance tunes, which is also documented by Deacon, is of less relevance to my purposes here). I will be arguing that Clare's experiments in these genres have been severely under-explored by critics, despite the pioneering work of Deacon in bringing to light the extent of Clare's activities as 'collector', and that Clare's songs and tales - perhaps the two genres with the greatest genealogical ambivalence as between popular and literary traditions - cannot be properly understood without an awareness of the fraught complexity of his relationship to popular culture in general, and in particular of the ways in which that relationship is played out in the song collection and the 'gossip tales'. This lack of attention to a crucially important aspect of Clare's work both results from and helps to perpetuate the misrepresentation of Clare's poetic status which sees him generally pigeonholed as a poet of natural description, and tends to ignore his engagement with his human and social environment.

I will be arguing that these two activities - the song collecting and the writing of the 'gossip tales' - though superficially unconnected, can in fact be seen as two complementary aspects of one overriding artistic project, despite the fact that collecting songs and ballads might not appear to be properly speaking an artistic project at all. Finally I will be arguing that the work which I will be exploring in this chapter cannot be understood properly unless it is situated within an understanding of Clare's artistic project that takes into account the broadened sense of locality -as comprising the totality of a locale in all its natural, topographical, social and cultural aspects - which I hinted at in my previous chapter, and that it is in terms of his engagement with the task of rendering the 'cultural topography' of the locale of Helpston that we can

make sense of the songs and 'gossip tales'. Firstly, however, I will need to provide greater clarification of that enhanced sense of locality than I have yet done.

2: THE TURN TO LOCALITY

It is perhaps worth beginning with a passage in the autobiographical fragments which explicitly refers to the notion of locality. This provides a useful starting-point for a discussion of what might be entailed in claiming that Clare's poetry consistently attempts to render the 'cultural topography' of Helpston in a deliberately 'local' way, and will help to establish a more precise focus on exactly what I mean by such an apparently vague phrase. Clare is recalling his early forays into print -

> I began the Village Minstrel a long while before attempting to describe my own feelings and love for rural objects and I then began in good earnest with it after the trial of my first poems was made and compleated it was little time but I was still unsatisfied with it and am now and often feel sorry that I did not withold it a little longer for revision the reason why I dislike it is that is does not describe the feelings of a ryhming peasant strongly or localy enough I began a second part to effect this ... but ... as I found the verses multiplied very fast and my intended correction of localitys growing very slow I left off (*JCBH*, pp. 113-114)

There are several points worthy of attention here. Firstly, Clare states that 'The Village Minstrel' was written to 'describe my own feelings and love for rural objects'. I want to suggest that it would be unwise to place rigid limits on what is to be understood by 'rural objects' -the obvious interpretation would be to see it as signifying the natural landscape which is often taken to be Clare's only focus of descriptive interest. However, in the light of what I suggested in my previous chapter regarding the 'cultural topography' of Clare's descriptions it should not be taken in such a sense as will exclude human beings and cultural practices from being 'rural objects' just as much as the fields, streams, trees etc. which are its primary meaning. This point obviously requires further substantiation, which I hope to provide in the remainder of this thesis, and I do not wish to dwell on it at great length here. Secondly, there is the suggestion that it was

the completion of Clare's first publication which encouraged him in his task - i.e. the validation of his work provided by publication encouraged him in this effort to describe his 'love of rural objects'. This is an important point, as I think the experience of publication is crucial to the turn to locality which I am exploring. It not only provided a validation and an increased self-confidence which encouraged him to trust his poetic instincts, but it also conferred further anxieties about his status, the cumulative effect of which is to encourage a re-engagement with the inflections of his local culture as an important formative element in his poetic voice. In addition, and this is not a point which should be underestimated, it led to a deepening of his relationship to his publishers, to the point where Taylor and Hessey played an almost equal role with Clare himself in devising possible subjects for his poetry, and many of their proposed subjects entailed a foregrounding of local village life and culture. However, this is not as important to my argument at this stage as the third aspect of this brief but highly suggestive passage which I wish to discuss.

This concerns the reflective criticism of Clare's own work in the sentence at the heart of this passage - 'the reason why I dislike it is that it does not describe the feelings of a ryhming peasant strongly or localy enough' - and it is worth unpicking in some detail, as I think it sheds a considerable light not just on the ostensible subject of discussion - 'The Village Minstrel' - but also on a much wider range of Clare's work in general. The sentence appears at first glance to be straightforward and simple enough, apparently criticising the poem for being insufficiently particularised in its descriptions of place and too weak in its descriptions of the protagonist's feelings. However, on closer inspection it turns out that 'the feelings of a ryhming peasant' are the only object of the sentence, and the poem is being taken to task for portraying these 'feelings' insufficiently 'localy', as well as too weakly. The oddity of Clare's phrasing is worth some consideration - to talk about 'locality' as a criterion to consider in representing the 'feelings of a ryhming peasant' is surprising and suggestive, in that we would be more likely to expect such a criterion to be invoked when considering landscape description, or accounts of local customs or of noteworthy local characters.

While on one level this phrasing could be read as simply a conventional example of the turn from poetry conceived as portrayal of objective reality to poetry conceived as an expression of feelings, which is

supposed to be a feature of the 'Romantic' period, I think there is more to it than that. The emphasis on 'locality' as a defining characteristic of these feelings surely suggests a more complex composite focus - the poem is, or rather should be, concerned not just with landscape, not just with individual people, not just with culture, but rather with all three combined as apprehended through the feelings of the 'ryhming peasant'[1]. In addition to this, the sentence also contains a rudimentary poetic for such writing, in that the phrasing indicates that for Clare 'strength' and 'locality' go closely hand in hand, thus suggesting that any attempt to write better -'stronger' - poetry would simultaneously entail a drive towards greater 'locality'. The apparent simplicity of this sentence thus conceals a complex layering of meanings, and goes some way towards confirming what I suggested at the end of my previous chapter: that Clare's descriptive verse should not be read too superficially - what can appear to be simple 'nature poetry' or picturesque description often also constitutes a negotiation within and between cultural, social and personal forces which are not always apparent on the surface of the text.

However, this one sentence by itself is an extremely flimsy scaffolding on which to build an argument pertaining to the whole tenor of Clare's work during the 1820s, and the validity of the argument can only emerge cumulatively during the course of my discussion in this chapter. However, before proceeding, it is worth making a couple of qualifying remarks about the nature and extent of my claims. Firstly, I might appear to be contradicting my earlier argument in Chapter 2 of this thesis when I took Bridget Keegan to task for making what might appear to be a similar claim regarding a change in Clare's attitude towards popular culture which she located in the early 1820s. She claimed that the representations of popular culture in 'The Village Minstrel' marked a shift to a more positive valuation than was apparent in *Sketches*, and claimed that this was symptomatic of a more general shift in Clare's attitudes. Quite apart from the inaccurate chronology on which she based this claim, I do not believe this to be the case, or at least not in anything like the somewhat simplistic way in which she outlines it. My thesis has consistently attempted to

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[1] An interesting reversal of the more usual 'peasant poet' formula, and one which, if it implies a more active role by stressing the activity of 'rhyming', also inverts its structure to imply that the 'peasant' aspect of the

highlight the sense in which popular culture was always for Clare a complex, ambiguous and refractory body of material, raising difficult and fundamental questions about identity and social status. My suggestion that the work of the 1820s constitutes a turn to increased locality, and hence an increased concern with popular culture, is by no means a claim that there was a simple temporal progression in Clare's attitudes towards and valuation of that local popular culture. It is rather that there was a continuous engagement with such material as an explicit subject of the work, foregrounding it in a number of different ways. This foregrounding of the material does often seem to suggest a more positive valuation than was implicit in earlier treatments of the topic, but it remains fraught with difficulties and ambiguities, and no simple temporal schema can do justice to the complexity of the evidence.

Secondly, and as a corollary, there is the more general difficulty of making any sort of temporal claims about tendencies in Clare's work. There are several reasons for this, but most of them stem from his sheer obsessive productivity as a poet, and the vagaries which have always dogged attempts to publish them. Clare simply could not stop writing, and the vast and confusing bodies of manuscript material, often decaying, often illegible, often very hard to date, make it extremely difficult to order his work into the patterns of development and growth we usually like to apply to writers' work. He was constantly taking up and abandoning particular poems, experimenting with different forms, subject matters and personae, producing different versions of what appear to be the same poem in different manuscripts and abandoning poems apparently half-finished. The correspondence between Clare and John Taylor resounds with his publisher's frequently desperate attempts to prune this unstoppable poetic volubility into some kind of presentable order, and one often has to sympathise. It is largely this untamed overproductivity which accounts for the difficulties surrounding Clare's publication at the time, and it is still a problem for his publishers today. The laudable efforts of the editors of the ongoing Clarendon Press edition of his complete poems to print every scrap of this material, when combined with their questionable decision to print it exactly as it appears in the

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equation is ultimately the strongest - i.e. he is 'a peasant-who-rhymes' rather than a 'poet-who-is-also-a-peasant'.

manuscript, results in such volumes of undigested material that it can be hard even for Clare specialists to discern any overall pattern in it.

This is to overstate the case somewhat, and it is certainly possible to identify progressions, developments and tendencies within Clare's work, but my point is that its sheer profusion makes it impossible to codify these too neatly or systematically. Thus my discussion of the 'turn to locality' should not be taken in too exclusive a sense - rather than being seen as an overarching claim about the tendency of Clare's poetic development, it should perhaps be considered more as a provisional model, a means of focussing attention on one particular strand within the complex fabric of the whole without making any proprietary claim that it is the only, or even the most important strand. However, this is not to abdicate from all responsibility towards the evidence - it is vital to my argument that Clare did consistently attempt to write 'locally', in this broader sense, in the 1820s, and that his activities as a collector of folk songs and writer of his 'gossip tales' constitute a significant and undervalued aspect of this process. It is to a consideration of the evidence for this that I now want to turn.

3: CLARE AS 'COLLECTOR'?

The Search for a Motive

Any discussion of Clare's activities as a collector of songs and tunes must begin with a consideration of Deacon's pioneering efforts in this field[2], and all Clare scholars should acknowledge their debt to his work. However, surprisingly little use has been made of it, beyond cursory nods towards it and the sort of general comments on Clare's debt to 'folk' or popular culture which I discussed in my 'Introduction', and which it

[2] George Deacon, *John Clare and the Folk Tradition* (London: Sinclair Browne Ltd, 1983).

has been my aim to expose as inadequate throughout this thesis. However, if Clare scholars have made little use of Deacon, the fault is perhaps not entirely their own, and a brief examination of Deacon's own avowed aims and practices may shed some light on the reasons for this under-use. In his 'Preface and Acknowledgements', he makes clear the trajectory of his own interests -

> When I set out on the project that was to lead to this book I had a simple, limited, objective - to understand what had constituted the song tradition of Northamptonshire and why it had disappeared. I was an ex-accountant turned folk singer with almost no knowledge of English literature save for a passion for the songs I sang, but the discovery of a hitherto unpublished record of the folk tradition in early nineteenth century rural England was to change that. That the collection had been made by a poet was the least of my initial concerns and at first I was content to transcribe and annotate for a modern folkloric audience. However a chance meeting with a Clare scholar at Peterborough Museum, was to mark a turning point in the book's direction. (*John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, p. 5)

This is admirably clear and honest, and if I go on to imply that as far as literary scholarship is concerned Deacon's fear that he 'may have tried to serve too many masters without satisfying any' (*John Clare and the Folk Tradition,* p. 6) is justified, I do not want to suggest that this is anything other than a result of the book's being written by someone whose background and initial interests were avowedly far from academic literary scholarship. Deacon, as he admits, was an amateur folklorist who stumbled upon his subject by accident, and if he lacked the critical and theoretical background to do it full justice, he can hardly be blamed for this and we should rather be grateful for the mass of material he gathered. However, for the scholar whose primary interest is Clare, the book contains a number of major flaws.

Firstly, and despite his awareness of the close relationship between oral and print traditions in the transmission of popular song, he makes no attempt to question or sophisticate the notion of popular culture with which he is working, being content to use the ad hoc and artificial concept of 'folk-song' or 'folk-culture' which many folklorists are still content to use. As a result of this, and of his lack of literary critical background, Deacon's discussion of the role of 'folk-culture' in Clare's work in his 'Introduction' is of little

interest to the Clare scholar beyond that of providing a useful summary of some of the references to popular customs and practices in Clare's work.

Secondly, there is the confusing layout of the main body of the book, with its inclusion not just of song texts as collected by Clare, but also of broadside versions of some for which he collected tunes, some which he simply mentions by name, and even of poems undoubtedly Clare's original work, but which bear some sort of relationship to folksongs or broadside ballads[3]. Deacon's attribution of tunes to the song texts (often apparently arbitrarily), while it would make sense in a book lacking the scholarly panoply of this one but directed simply to the folksinger with an eye to the collection of material, further adds to the clutter and confusion of the text. This confusion of layout makes the book awkward to use, and when combined with the frequently speculative notes, particularly concerning the vexed and finally unanswerable question of to what extent these song texts have been added to and emended by Clare, means that it falls between two stools. On the one hand there is the muddled and ultimately unsuccessful attempt at scholarly accuracy, with all its confusing apparatus, while on the other is a more unassuming book, directed primarily towards the practising folk-singer, presenting a mass of previously uncollected versions of songs both unknown and common.

Thirdly, and most importantly, Deacon's background and bias as folk song collector and scholar causes him, I believe, seriously to misinterpret Clare's project of song 'collection'. Because his initial interest in Clare was purely folkloric in nature, he 'reads' the song collection as if it were the work of a twentieth-century collector, working within the norms and standards of accuracy which that entails[4]. Thus when Clare departs from those norms, as he constantly does, Deacon is forced to behave as though Clare is a bad

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[3] e.g. the inclusion of 'Dolly's Mistake; or, The Ways of the Wake', *John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, pp. 201-204.

[4] This is not to suggest that Deacon is unaware of the problems involved in reading Clare in this way - on the contrary, he makes a good deal of the fact that there were virtually no English precedents for Clare's song-collecting and that he predates the growth of the folklore and folk-song movements by many years. It is rather that Deacon's background as a folk-song scholar renders him unwilling to conceive of an alternative way of trying to understand what is involved in Clare's song-collecting such as I am attempting to adumbrate in this chapter.

collector, one who fails to live up to certain anachronistic standards of accuracy, instead of being able to admit that Clare's aims and intentions were simply very different to those of a more modern folk-song collector, and that the song-collection should be read not as a failed attempt at folkloric accuracy, but as an outcrop of and fascinating sidelight on his general artistic project. This is an important point, but I do not want to dwell on it at length here, as this chapter as a whole is an attempt to construct such an alternative reading of the song collection, and the full force of this aspect of my criticism of Deacon can only be revealed if I return to the main course of my argument.

The first point to be made about Clare's activities as a collector is, as Deacon emphasises, the sheer lack of precedent for such an activity - '[he] probably stands as the earliest collector of the songs people actually sang in Southern England' (*John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, p. 18). The second, which is extremely frustrating in the context of the first, is the extreme paucity of the evidence both for Clare's intentions in setting out on such a task and for his own understanding of what that task entailed - he refers only briefly and tangentially to his collecting activities in his prose and his correspondence, and as the songs he collected were not published in his own lifetime[5], there is no evidence to be had from that direction either. I want to consider these two points together, as an understanding of such precedents as there were for Clare will certainly throw some light on the question of his own intentions, and I want to begin with a brief survey of the evidence for Clare's intentions which can be gathered from the few comments which shed some light on the matter.

The most apparently clear-cut evidence for this comes in a passage with which he prefaced one of his manuscripts of songs:

> I commenced sometime ago with an intention of making a collection of old Ballads but when I had sought after them in places where I expected [to] find them viz the hay field & the shepherds hut on the pasture - I found that nearly all those old & beautiful reccolections had vanished as so many old fashions & those who knew fragments seemed ashamed to acknowledge it as old people who sing old songs only sung to be laughed at - & those who

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[5] See *John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, pp. 20-21.

> were proud of their knowledge in such things - knew nothing but the sensless balderdash that is brawled over & sung at County Feasts Statutes & Fairs where the most sensless jargon passes for the greatest excellence & rudest indecency for the finest wit[6]

This is interesting as far as it goes, particularly in the way that the tone of its lament for the passing of the 'old ballads', without making the connection explicit, nevertheless closely mirrors that of the many in which Clare laments, in both prose and verse, the destructions wrought upon Helpston's physical and moral landscape by enclosure. This, as Raymond Williams has shown, is a commonplace of rural nostalgia, but it is nevertheless such a recurring trope in Clare's work that we must take it seriously, if not as an accurate historical representation, nevertheless as a crucial factor in Clare's own mental landscape. That this trope of loss and cultural degradation is here applied to the quality of the songs which Clare was collecting transforms what might otherwise seem to be a straightforward antiquarian lament for the degrading status of the oral tradition into a much more personal and emotionally complex piece. However, this complexity is implicit, and the passage gives frustratingly little insight into the reasons why Clare commenced his attempt at song collection in the first place, a situation which is mirrored if we turn to the evidence of his letters.

The first reference in these to the notion of collecting songs occurs in a letter to Taylor of February 1821, and in the context of a discussion of one of Clare's poems ('Peggy Band' - which Deacon, with a characteristic disregard for any possible confusion, prints amongst the collected song texts, despite acknowledging in his note that it is entirely Clare's own work[7]) -

> the old song aluded to is "Peggy *Band*" there is a Song of modern date thats call'd "Peggy Bond" but tis nothing like the old one neither in words or music for the tune of the old one is capital as my father used to sing it but I cannot say much for the words for you know the best of our old english ballads thats preserved by the memorys of our rustics (what ever they might have been) are so mutilated that they scarcly rise to medeocrity while their melodys are beautiful & the more I hear them the more I wish Id skill enough in music to prick them down[8]

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[6] Northampton MS 18, p. 1, quoted in *John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, p. 43.
[7] See *John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, pp. 146-149.

[8] Clare to Taylor 15 February 1821, *Letters*, pp. 152-153.

Although this obviously sheds little light on the motives that would lead Clare to collect the words of the songs which he here characterises as less than mediocre, it does contain some points of interest. Firstly, as regards 'Peggy Band', there is the easy lack of concern with which Clare appropriates material from popular sources, in this case the old ballad as sung by his father, and uses it as a sort of creative springboard for his own invention, which nonetheless depends for some of its force on his audience recognising the 'allusion', as he calls it. This point, and others raised by this practice of Clare's, is one to which I will return later in this discussion. Secondly, there is the concern for detail which Clare displays in his discrimination between the two popular sources with similar names which have confused Taylor. He insists strongly on the difference between the old song as sung by his father, with its fine tune though indifferent words, and the modern song with its implied inferiority, in a way that is almost reminiscent of an early twentieth-century folk-song collector discriminating between a 'true' folk-song and a music-hall song or parlour ballad. Thirdly, there is the complex and ambiguous attitude to the oral tradition as a process and to the songs of which it is composed. On the one hand, Clare seems to praise the 'old' 'Peggy Band' as sung by his father at the expense of the modern song, and he expresses the desire to note down the tunes of other 'old english ballads' which he praises for their beauty. On the other hand, he denigrates the words of the old song, and broadens this out to a condemnation of the words of all ballads as preserved by the oral tradition, in terms which echo the prose passage appended to Northampton MS 18, and which are highly reminiscent of the comments by Scott on the oral tradition which I discussed in my second chapter.

This letter is thus a tantalising but ultimately frustrating piece of evidence for Clare's motives in his later collection of songs. It suggests a perfectly straightforward motive for the tune collection - Clare found the tunes beautiful, and once he had 'skill enough in music to prick them down' he did just that. As far as the words of the songs are concerned, though, his attitude verges on scornful, and would seem to be pretty much of a piece with the comments on the 'trash of Ballad Singers' (*JCBH*, p.10) in *Sketches*, which was of course being written at this time. There is therefore little in this letter to suggest that its writer would go on to make a comprehensive collection of the words of just these songs. Unfortunately, this is one of very few surviving

letters of Clare's to shed any explicit light on the subject of song-collecting, and as it was written some time before Clare actually began his collecting, and as it gives no indication of an intention to start doing so, it does not take us very far.

Deacon refers to a later letter to Taylor as providing some more evidence on this matter[9], but he appears slightly to misunderstand the significance of it. The passage he quotes runs as follows:

> Robin Hood is good but I have seen ballads that pleased me better in an old book called the Garland of Robin Hood at least I think so but I shall leave it off a while to pursue my "Visits" of which I hope to get up a good sample bye & bye - but do you know I shall insert some imitations of the Provincial Poets in Sea Songs Love Ballads &c &c & a specimen of each shall be quickly with you[10]

Deacon interprets this as suggesting that Clare was hoping to collect better versions of Robin Hood ballads, and that he was writing 'to explain that he was continuing with his "visits"' (*John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, p. 18), but this interpretation depends on a misreading of the word 'visits'. Deacon reads it as Clare's term for his collecting activities, which would be plausible enough were it not for a letter to Taylor from earlier in the same year which gives a very different meaning to the word - 'I am very pleased with your idea of "Visits of the early Muses" as a Title for my *old* Poems & shall keep adding to the number as I feel inclined ...'[11]. As the context makes clear, the 'old poems' referred to here are Clare's imitations of Elizabethan and 17th Century poets, rather than the traditional and tradition-based material which Deacon is interested in (although such a distinction may not be quite as clear-cut as it seems at first glance, as will become clear during the course of this chapter). Thus, when Clare uses the word 'visits' capitalised and in inverted commas, in the letter which Deacon quotes from, it is almost certainly in reference to this idea of a volume of Clare's imitations rather than to Clare's song-collecting.

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[9] See *John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, pp.18-19 and p. 169.

[10] Clare to Taylor, 1 December 1826, *Letters*, p. 387.
[11] Clare to Taylor, 15 July 1826, *Letters*, p. 383 (Clare's italics)

A letter written to Hessey the following month establishes certainly that Deacon's interpretation of the term is erroneous, and the relevant passage is worth quoting in full, as it also contains some remarks about collecting -

> I have been amusing myself latterly in collecting fragments of old Ballads not with any other view then amusement & I have found a very simple one & yet I think a very pretty one it is called "The Song of all the Birds in the Air" but I have not yet got the whole of it tho a lady at Milton that is one of the headservants knows it & Henderson has promised to copy it from her singing for me & if he does I will send it to you somtime or other as I fancy it just such a thing as you would be pleased with merely as a trifle - I have got on a good way with my "Visits &c" but have done nothing at them latterly I intend that they shall be my best & therefore I spare no pains in trying to make them so[12]

Clare here clearly distinguishes between ballad-collecting and his 'Visits' - he says he has lately been collecting ballads, and then after a dash (a symbol he usually uses to signify a change of subject) goes on to say that he has done nothing at his 'Visits' recently. This further proves Deacon's reading to be misconstrued, but the prime importance of this letter for my purposes lies in its reference to Clare's actual collecting, given that there are so few in the letters. Having said this, there is frustratingly little to be gathered from Clare's comments here - his remark that he has been collecting ballads 'not with any other view then amusement' is too much of a throwaway disclaimer to shed much light on the motives behind his song collecting as a whole.

It would seem, therefore, that if we are to seek for a motive in our efforts to understand Clare's song-collecting we will have to find it in the actual evidence of the texts themselves. Before doing so, however, I want to consider what light can be shed on the song collection by considering the possible models for such an activity which may have been available to Clare. As Deacon points out, there were virtually no previous song collections made from oral sources in England. There were however a number made in Scotland, notably by Burns, a figure Clare greatly admired, and whose example would have weighed heavily with him. Before considering the influence of Burns' example, though, I want to consider the effect of Percy's *Reliques* as a possible precursor to Clare's song collection.

The first point to be made, of course, is that Percy's collection was derived entirely from a written manuscript with no attempt to collect surviving examples of the ballads from the oral tradition. It cannot therefore have been strictly speaking a methodological exemplar for Clare in his attempts to collect songs directly from oral sources. However, this is not to rule out its possible influence on Clare in a more general and formative manner, and there are two comments in his letters and journal which are highly suggestive in this context[13]. The first occurs in a letter to Hessey of 1820 - 'D[rury]has sent me 3 vols calld "Percys Relics" there is some sweet Poetry in them & I think it the most pleasing book I ever happend on the tales are familiar from childhood all the stories of my grandmother & her gossiping neighbours I find versified in these vols'[14]. The second reference that I want to consider occurs in Clare's journal entry for Friday 5th of November 1824, and is worth quoting in full -

> Read in Bishop Percys Poems the "Relic of ancient poetry" take them up as often as I may I am always delighted there is so much of the essence and simplicity of true poetry that makes me regret I did not see them sooner as they woud have formed my taste & laid the foundation of my judgment in writing and thinking poeticaly as it is I feel indebted to them for many feelings (*JCBH*, pp. 192-193)

The most initially striking feature of these quotes occurs in the letter, with Clare's admission that a large part of the books' appeal was the fact that 'the tales are familiar from childhood', clearly indicating that a large number of the ballads printed by Percy were still current in some form in the oral culture of Helpston[15]. The effect of thus seeing familiar elements of the popular oral culture of his village printed in a serious scholarly publication and treated with all the dignity of true poetry must have been great, albeit impossible to quantify. It is certainly worth bearing in mind that this contact with Percy's work, and the print authority and

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[12] Clare to Hessey, 21 January 1827, *Letters*, p. 391.

[13] I have already quoted from and briefly discussed these passages in my first chapter, but it is worth quoting them again here, as they constitute crucial evidence.

[14] Clare to Hessey, 4 July 1820, *Letters*, p. 82.

[15] This is not to make any untestable claim about the 'purity' of the oral tradition - some or all of the 'tales' which Clare recognised may have been preserved in broadsides or as the basis for prose narratives in chapbooks, but the point is that as his reference to his 'grandmother & her *gossiping* neighbours' (my italics) makes clear, they were actually current in Helpston in an oral form.

validation which it gave to the popular oral culture which must have previously seemed an obscure and parochial feature of his upbringing, occurred comparatively early in Clare's poetic career, only a couple of months after the publication of *Poems Descriptive*. While it is impossible to trace any precise link between the two, it is also true to say that Clare's song-collection post-dates this first acquaintance with the *Reliques*, and it is hard to believe that there was no relationship, if only in that Percy provided Clare with proof that the popular culture of his locality was neither isolated, nor without interest to the polite literary culture which was the main readership for the *Reliques* as for his own work.

However, as I pointed out in my previous chapter, the significance of Percy for Clare was not confined to those ballads which Clare recognised as forming part of his local oral culture, but was also as a repository and source for examples of that 'ancient poetry' which Clare so much admired[16]. Thus we cannot take Clare's comments on the *Reliques'* 'essence and simplicity of true poetry' as being simply an endorsement of popular poetry without heavily qualifiying what we mean by 'popular'. For instance, we must recognise that to Percy in his introduction, and hence to Clare, even those ballads in the collection which seem to us now unequivocally 'folk' material would have been thought of as the productions of an order of 'minstrels', i.e. professional poets whose work has survived in the oral tradition only because 'they ... never designed their rhymes for literary publication, and probably never committed them to writing themselves'[17].

Percy's *Reliques* must have made a great impression on Clare, and one which was not confined to its influence as a spur to his song-collecting. In addition to the example it provided of an apparently harmonious yoking together of popular and polite poetry, it also provided, particularly through Percy's introductory essay, an alternative model of poetic life and practice which would have seemed highly attractive to Clare, whose own poetic status was so compromised by his social status. Percy's conception of the minstrels provided a model of the practising poet which, whatever its status as history, contrasted extremely favourably with Clare's own condition. Firstly, they were independent, itinerant performers, like

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[16] See my discussion of Clare's use of a pseudonym from Percy for his Marvell forgery and the complex manifold of his sense of 'ancient' Elizabethan poetry as bound up with popular balladry in my chapter 3.

the gypsy fiddlers who exerted such a fascination for Clare. Secondly, they made their way in a very different literary marketplace from that in which Clare was struggling to be heard - as performers, they were in direct contact with their audience in a way which Clare could never be, writing for an audience far removed from himself, both physically and socially, and which would only have been mirrored in his own experience by the storytellers and folksingers of his village. Thirdly, they were respected - although Percy's essay tracks the decline in status of the minstrels, he portrays them in their day as being confidantes of kings and nobles, and exempt from the ordinary bonds of class through their privileged status. Beattie, indeed, in his preface to *The Minstrel*, goes so far as to describe the profession of minstrel as being held by 'our forefathers, [to be] not only respectable, but sacred'[18]; a pious commonplace maybe, but it must have seemed to Clare like a glimpse of the possibility of a poetic career which could proceed outside the socially-defined limitations he found himself labouring under. Fourthly, of course, they were also held to have been the authors of much of that poetry which still survived as songs sung by Clare's 'gossiping neighbours'. The *Reliques* thus set up an intriguing spiral of associations between popular culture, sixteenth and seventeenth century poetry, and an ancient and high order of free poets, respected for the sacredness of their art in a way that Clare so clearly was not.

I am not suggesting that Clare necessarily thought consciously in these terms, but these characteristics of the minstrels as described by Percy must have been extremely attractive to him and surely formed a part of the reason for his intense admiration of the poems collected in the *Reliques*. It is tempting to suggest a link between this and Clare's fascination with and attempts to imitate Elizabethan and 'ancient' poetry, that the freedom which he sought in his impersonations of Marvell and the like was not just a negative freedom from his own present self, but also a way of re-imagining the possibility of a poetic vocation untrammelled by the bounds of present circumstance. It is also tempting to suggest that these associations also fed somehow into

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[17] Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* Vol I (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1864), p. lvii.
[18] *The Poetical Works of Beattie, etc.*, p. 1.

Clare's song-collecting practice, but as we have already seen there is frustratingly little external evidence to be had about his motives in this.

Nonetheless, it is clear that if we are to say that the *Reliques* constituted a model for Clare when he came to collect songs from his fellow-villagers, we will have to do so carefully, and bearing in mind the far from straightforward sense in which the contents of that book can be assimilated under the heading of popular poetry. We can however say two things with reasonable certainty: firstly, that at least some of the ballads in Percy were orally current amongst Clare's acquaintance, and recognised by him as such; and secondly, that he greatly admired the *Reliques* and considered them as a touchstone of poetic taste - '[I] regret I did not see them sooner as they woud have formd my taste and laid the foundation of my thinking poeticaly'. This is important, as it demonstrates that, insofar as Percy can be seen as an influence on Clare's collecting, it is as an aesthetic, literary model rather than as a model for proto-folkloric fieldwork. Combined with the close association which the work set up between Elizabethan (and earlier) models of poetic taste and the popular culture in his immediate environment, this helps us to shed some light back on Deacon's confusion between Clare's collecting and his 'Visits [of the early Muses]' which I remarked on earlier.

If we now reconsider the letter which Deacon is discussing when he makes this confusion[19], it turns out to be extremely interesting. Deacon assumes that when Clare writes that 'Robin Hood is good ... but I shall leave it off a while to pursue my "Visits" of which I hope to get up a good sample bye & bye' (*Letters*, p. 387) he is signalling a desire to collect superior versions of Robin Hood ballads from oral sources. As we have seen, this interpretation rests on a misunderstanding of Clare's use of the word 'visits', but it also appears to confuse the intended status of 'Robin Hood & the Gamekeepers', the poem to which Deacon, rightly I think, believes that Clare is referring. Deacon obviously assumes that an attempt by Clare to write a ballad about Robin Hood constitutes a clear attempt at an imitation of something which can be unproblematically described as a popular or 'folk' form - 'it would be nice to think that Clare collected this ballad from the oral tradition ...' (*John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, p. 168). However, if we examine the

[19] Clare to Taylor, 1 December 1826, *Letters*, pp. 386-387.

actual text of 'Robin Hood and the Gamekeepers', I think it becomes clear that the poem is much more likely to have been thought of by Clare as one of his 'Visits' than as an aspect of his song-collecting -

> As under Sherwoods snubbled oaks
> In musing wise lay Robin Hood
> A losel lout him thus bespoke
> Fast pricking thro the pleasant wood
>
> Up knave as idle as a bird
> An outlaws man I trow ye be
> ...
> Id lever be a motley fool
> Than lout me at his caytive throne
> ...
> I never woke fair lemans sighs
> Beshrew the knave as he hath done
>
> (*John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, pp. 164-165)

The texture of the language here, with its frequent inversions and archaisms, should make it clear that, despite its ballad metre and the ubiquitous status of Robin Hood in popular song and story[20], this poem must be read primarily as an attempt at an imitation of 'ancient' poetry, and thus is to be aligned with Clare's 'Visits' rather than his ballad collections. However, the complexity of the overlapping strands which I have been trying to draw out - the ambiguity of the influence of Percy's *Reliques* and the multivocal status of Robin Hood as a figure from popular culture who nevertheless is used here as a template for an attempt at impersonating an 'ancient' poet - suggests that to make such a clear-cut choice is to impose too rigid an oppositional framework on what is a fluid and subtle process, and I have only emphasised the distinction in order to illustrate Deacon's misunderstanding.

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[20] One of the first books owned by Clare was a chapbook called *Robin Hood's Garland* (see *JCBH*, p. 57), and he also owned Ritson's collection of Robin Hood ballads (See *Catalogue of the John Clare Collection in the Northampton Public Library* (Northampton: County Borough of Northampton Public Libraries, Museums and Art gallery Committee, 1964), p. 31) - a further instance of the fluid transmissions of material between popular and polite formats.

The 'Collection' Itself

We can thus begin to set Clare's 'collecting' in a context which is far from being simply that of antiquarian curiosity. It is clear that it was far from the disinterested amateurism of an outsider, keen on preserving a dying culture to which he stands as an outsider, but with no personal or creative motive, but was rather a complex negotiation between and within cultural space. Clare is consciously collecting songs which formed a part of his earliest upbringing, which he has heard from his parents' lips, and which are a major strand in the cultural fabric of his village, but this extreme familiarity with the material is qualified by the penumbra of associations derived largely from Percy which I have been discussing, and the songs are haloed by their connection with a mediaeval past, and their supposed authorship by minstrels whose glamour and status is in sharp contrast with Clare's own condition as a struggling working-class poet. Thus the folkloric model, which Deacon understandably enough imposes on the song collection, is unlikely to do justice to the complexity of what is going on here, and if we consider the material printed by Deacon as the 'collection' without imposing this model on it, it will become abundantly clear that it does not do so.

As I have already noted, many of the songs printed by Deacon are unquestionably entirely Clare's own work, and admitted by him to be such - I have already discussed 'Peggy Band' and 'Robin Hood and the Gamekeepers', but there are many more[21]. However, it is not just these songs that call into question the nature of Clare's collection - after all, the fact that Clare wrote many songs which were influenced by popular models is no proof that he did not also faithfully collect others from oral sources, and I see no reason to doubt him wherever he gives a derivation for his song text (most usually they are described as

[21] There are too many to list in full, but as an indication of the number of songs which Deacon himself admits to be entirely Clare's own work, it should suffice to note that at least four of the first fifteen songs he prints fall into this catgory - e.g. '[One friday night the dogs did bark]', pp. 97-98; '[O would I were the little bird]', pp. 100-101; 'Old Ballad' pp. 110-111; 'The Maidens Welcome', pp. 121-123 etc..

being taken from the singing of one or other of his parents, but several are ascribed to other sources[22]). However, it is the 'faithfulness' of these supposed transcripts that is most heavily in doubt. On many occasions Clare in his attributions admits to having made some 'touches at correction' or 'additions', but it is impossible to say with any certainty how extensive these alterations are in any instance - thanks to the vagaries of the oral tradition it is impossible ever to point to any one alternative version of a song from which Clare's variations can be measured. In addition to this, although it is often possible to be fairly certain on stylistic grounds where a particular passage is to be attributed to Clare, it is never possible to be certain that any passage is *not* by him, as he was so steeped in the idioms of these songs that he was able to mimic them with great accuracy. Even in those songs which he does not claim to have altered, there is often plenty of room for doubt as to the extent to which they have been 'corrected' by Clare.

It should be no surprise, perhaps, that a collection of songs made by an early nineteenth-century working-class poet does not appear to conform to the standards of accuracy we would expect of a modern folklorist (even if Deacon does at times appear to be somewhat frustrated by this fact). It is equally no surprise that Clare saw it as a necessity to tidy and 'improve' his source materials - Percy had done the same, as had Burns and Scott - and Ritson had been more or less a lone voice in calling for a greater faithfulness to the precise text as delivered by oral tradition. However, I do not think that such qualifications are anything like sufficient to explain the real nature of Clare's project in the song collection and in order to explain why not, I want first to look at a group of songs in which Clare appears to have collected a version from oral sources, and then used it as a template for the composition of his own work on the same theme and in the same style.

The songs occur on pp. 83-89 of *John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, and are particularly interesting as an index of the various motives and purposes at work in Clare's 'collecting'. The song which Deacon prints on pp. 84-86, from Peterborough MS. B7, is titled by Clare 'Song taken from my Mothers & Fathers recitation & compleated by an old shepherd', which certainly signals an attempt at scrupulous fidelity to sources. It is

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[22] e.g. 'Mary Neil a Ballad', pp. 158-159, which is described in Northampton MS 18 as being 'taken from a ploughmans singing with additions'; and the magnificent ballad 'The False Knights Tradegy', pp. 172-175, which in its subtitle is claimed to have been 'recited by a shoemaker'.

the version from Northampton MS. 25, which Deacon reproduces on pp. 88-89, though, that is most intriguing. Its text is substantially the same as that of MS. B7, though with some omissions and a few minor differences, but it is the title and brief headpiece appended to it by Clare that suggest a fascinating complexity of motive -

> The Origin of Burns' Red Red Rose
>
> "This is an old Ballad which my father sings, he learnt it when a child of his mother who knew it when a lass, therefore it cannot be much less than 100 years old." John Clare

This is an intriguing piece of evidence. Firstly, it shows that Clare was perfectly capable of giving a precise history of a song, including the identity of the singer and some history of the song's transmission, if he wished to. The fact that he generally does not do this is further evidence that his primary concern in the song collection is not with placing the material in its social and historical context. Secondly, Clare is making an explicit and conscious connection between himself and Burns, who is obviously a crucial value in any discussion of the creative appropriation of popular oral material by a poet at this period.

Clare's admiration for Burns was deep and longstanding. In one of his earliest extant letters he pays this tribute and affirms the extent of Burns' influence on him - 'its my Opinion that [Burns is] an Exelent Poet ... I have sent an Imitation ... of his familiar Epistles - I was charm'd with the Manner of Expressing his home spun thoughts'[23] - and some nine years later he was still expressing similarly warm approbation:

> ... situations in life however humble afford no apology in this age ... when we turn to the sun burning exellence of a Burns & a Bloomfield two poets tho of very different powers yet inimitable & perfect in their own exellence for both of whom I feel more than admiration & I dont care who laughs or calls me fool for odd opinions but if I may judge from Popes translation (for I have no latin) I would sooner be the Author of Tam o shanter then of the Iliad & Odyssey of Homer[24]

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[23] Clare to Holland, early 1819, *Letters*, p. 5.

[24] Clare to Pringle, 29 August 1828, *Letters*, p. 437.

Making allowances for the hyperbole here, it is nevertheless clear that Clare's admiration for Burns remained constant, and was based on an awareness of commonality between their respective social backgrounds. Bearing this in mind, Burns' deep and explicit relationship with popular song[25] must have been intriguing to Clare, and the great virtue of this song transcript is that it shows him "taking on" Burns on just this territory.

Thirdly, this transcript goes some way to illustrating the complex cultural and social factors which must be taken into account when considering Clare's 'collecting'. To begin with, it is clear that the song text is valued for its familial associations - Clare's father learnt it as a child from his mother - and thus is as much a piece of family history as an artefact. This is far from being the work of a song collector, a phrase which implies a disinterested, almost dilettante enthusiasm for the songs considered as artefacts to be removed from their original context and studied in isolation from it. It is rather the outcome of an act of local, even filial piety which sees the song as part of a long history of intimate familial relations, with close links to Clare himself; as a precious cultural deposit, valued as much for its associations as for its inherent value. Indeed it would have been difficult for Clare to make any considered assessment of the intrinsic value of a song such as this, in that its very familiarity would preclude the necessary objective distance required so to do. Thus far is simply to rehearse the argument of much of my previous chapter, that Clare's closeness to his material, as a member of the culture about which he is writing, makes it difficult for him to construct his relationship with it in accordance with accepted (and acceptable) antiquarian discourse. However, in this instance the closeness of Clare's relationship to the song text is intriguingly pointed up by the use which he makes of it: the extreme locality and particularity of his relationship to the song is placed in a much wider cultural context by his use of it to question the authenticity of one of Burns' best-known poems. Thus we can see an almost opposite process going on here to that which we previously noted in Clare's comments on Percy's *Reliques*. There, we noted the way in which finding the songs of his 'gossiping neighbours' printed in a respectable and scholarly publication must have altered the way he perceived those songs: here, we see

[25] For an extended discussion of Burns' manifold relationship to popular culture, see Mary Ellen Brown.

him reversing the process, and using one of those songs to feed back into and question an element of the dominant literary culture. This is further complicated, of course, by the ambiguous status of Burns himself - a famous poet, certainly, but one whose canonical status was troubled by his ambivalent standing both culturally, socially and nationally[26]. There is thus a complicated pattern of overlapping processes of mediation going on here, between oral and print, popular and polite, English and Scottish, and it should be abundantly clear that the folkloric model of song-collection which Deacon works with cannot begin to do justice to them. However, I want to move on to discuss a fourth aspect of this transcription, as I think it sheds a crucial light on the whole 'song-collection'.

On the face of it, it might appear that Clare is taking Burns to task for indulging in a quasi-plagiaristic attitude to traditional material, the careful annotation of the song's longevity in his own family's memory standing as a rebuke to the notion that Burns was responsible for anything more than editing and emending this, one of his most famous poems[27]. Certainly, Clare's extreme sensitivity to charges of plagiarism on his own account, some of which arose in relation to Burns himself[28], may have caused him to seize upon an instance of what might appear to be plagiarism in Burns, particularly when its source was a song which Clare knew from the singing of his own family and which he might have supposed to be widely unknown.

However, I am far from certain that this is the right interpretation of what Clare is really doing here. The tone of the prose headpiece is neutral and certainly not accusatory, as is the title – 'The Origin of Burns' Red Red Rose'. I want to propose an alternative reading, whereby this manouevre (i.e. the entire process of

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Burns and Tradition (London: Macmillan, 1984).

[26] See e.g. Valentina Bold, 'Inmate of the Hamlet: Burns as Peasant Poet', in Kenneth Simpson ed., *Love and Liberty: Robert Burns: A Bicentenary Celebration* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1997), pp. 43-52.

[27] It is, of course, true that Burns' 'authorship' of this poem probably did amount to little more than editorialship - see Mary Ellen Brown, *Burns and Tradition*, p. 73.

[28] Comparisons between the 'Northamptonshire Peasant' and the 'Ayrshire Peasant' were a commonplace of contemporary critical reaction to Clare, and it is worth noting the delicacy with which Taylor attempts to ward off potential charges of plagiarism in his 'Introduction' to *Poems Descriptive* - 'This song ["The Meeting"] is written nearly in the metre of one by Burns ... and the subject is the same, but in the execution they are quite different. CLARE has a great delight in trying to run races with other men, and unluckily this cannot always be attempted without subjecting him to the charge of imitating; but he will be found free from this imputation in all the best parts of his poetry', *Critical Heritage*, p. 52.

collecting the song, transcribing it and placing it in this way as an oblique commentary on Burns' poem) is to be seen as Clare essentially appropriating the authority of Burns for the practice of creative re-working of traditional material. The evidence for this lies not so much in this transcription - as I have said, the headpiece is studiously neutral in tone, and frustratingly brief - so much as in the other song texts which Deacon groups together with it, and in particular, in the untitled song from Peterborough MS A40 which he prints on pp. 83-84. This, as Deacon suggests in his note on p. 90, is surely Clare's own composition on the same theme, using the same basic scenario and imagery as the version of 'The Turtle Dove' I have been discussing, and standing in much the same relation to it as 'A Red Red Rose' does to Burns' source in oral tradition. This is fascinating, in that it lays bare some of the processes involved both in Clare's collecting and in his creative reappropriation of popular oral material. It shows on the one hand that he was capable of transcribing songs more or less faithfully, and with respect for their origins and history; and on the other hand, that he was equally capable of using such songs as a template for his own creative ends, and was consciously aware of the example of Burns as a precursor in just such a practice.

It is the light which this group of songs sheds on this process that is crucial, in that it can begin to give some concrete form to the vague phrases which are so often used to describe Clare's relationship to popular literature. Rather than repeating vacuous banalities about his 'rootedness' in popular culture, we can appreciate the complexity of his relationship to that culture as a creative source. There are many other examples amongst the songs printed by Deacon where we can discern a similar process - the four 'Admiral Benbow' songs on pp. 124-129 are particularly clear, in that, as with the 'Turtle Dove' group, we have clear demarcations between an original version 'taken down from my Fathers memory' and succeeding variations on that theme, but there are many other songs clearly bearing similar relationships to oral originals, where we lack such an obvious source text, e.g. 'Shipwreckt Ghost' (pp. 142-143) and the two versions of 'The Lords Daughter'. Deacon admits that the songs in question are Clare's own work, as he admits that almost every song in the collection has been at least partly composed by Clare, and yet persists in treating the texts

as though they constitute a folkloric record. If we are to regard them in this way, and obviously they do provide much information about the oral tradition of Helpstone at the time, it seems to me crucial to note clearly the extent to which they are *not* a straightforward record, and that is my purpose in this chapter.

The question thus remains, how did Clare conceive of his relationship to this material, if not as that of a scholarly antiquarian, preserving the last remains of a dying culture? There are a number of possible answers, and they each contain some truth. Firstly, it is worth noting that there *was* an aspect of his interest in the material which could be described in these terms. We have already seen how he meticulously annotated the history of his family's version of 'The Turtle Dove', and he does on occasion provide some evidence for this sort of understanding of his task - see for instance the comment appended to 'The False Knights Tradegy' - 'the above is poor but I thought from its rude simplicity that it was very old so I inserted it' (*John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, p. 175). This bears all the hallmarks of antiquarian discourse, with its concern for the antiquity of the song, and its distanced, patronising stance towards its material. However, this is the exception rather than the rule, and certainly cannot be taken as indicating more than an occasional shift of focus on Clare's part. The distinguishing feature of his treatment of the songs remains his freedom with them - there appears to be a continuum of effort between his own song-making and his collecting, such that he not only uses collected songs as templates to be re-fashioned into semi-original poems, but also feels no compunction about emending, adapting, and re-writing song texts into hybrid versions in which it is impossible to say with any certainty how much is his own work. The question with which I began this paragraph thus resolves into two parts - why did Clare employ this freedom with his material, and what were his overall ends in so doing?

One possible solution would be to say that Clare is simply displaying a litterateur's casual attitude to the oral songs of his neighbourhood, that he feels free to treat them merely as raw material, as grist to his poetic mill. There is certainly some truth in this - Clare's sheer volubility as a poet meant that he constantly required new material, and he was always a diligent practitioner of his craft, constantly seeking to widen his scope both formally and in terms of subject-matter. Such a position would have something in common with

that of Taylor, who, in seeking to defend Clare against accusations of plagiarism (in respect of Burns, interestingly), remarks that 'The propensity to emulate another is a youthful emotion, and in his friendless state it afforded him an obvious, and, perhaps, the only mode of endeavouring to ascertain what kind and degree of ability he possessed as a poet' (*Critical Heritage*, p. 52), and Clare himself describes his first attempts at poetry as having taken the form of imitations of popular songs[29]. However, as is clear from his continual sensitivity to charges of plagiarism, Clare's imitations of other poetry were never a simple matter, and as I have already discussed in my first chapter his early imitations of popular poetry were highly charged and far from being merely idle honing of his skills, as were his later imitations and impersonations of Marvell[30].

It therefore will not do to say that his attitude to this material was merely casual - he spent enough time and effort both in collecting and in re-writing it for us to deduce that it was of some importance to him. I would suggest that his freedom with it was rather the result of his closeness to it; it is the freedom of one who was born into this culture, who grew up hearing these songs daily, from the lips of his parents and his neighbours. This closeness, of course, cuts both ways. If these songs, like the rest of the popular culture of Helpston, were his birthright, we have already seen how ambiguous that birthright was, and how he constantly wrestles with it, struggling to find a way of writing about it that does not entangle him in unbearable contradictions between his social status and his aspirations to success as a poet. After all, the 'freedom' which I have been discussing in his treatment of the songs could equally be represented as a continual struggle, a bitter effort to re-shape and stamp his own mark on the intractable Oedipal burden of his parents' cultural repertoire, the inadequacy of which was painfully obvious when placed in the scales with the 'real' poetry to which he aspired.

However, I want to suggest that the freedom which I have noted in Clare's treatment of the oral songs he collected is more due to the fact that he regarded them as a part of his overweening artistic project than to a

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[29] See *JCBH*, pp. 13-14 and pp. 98-99.

[30] See my chapter 3.

sense of struggle of this nature. In order further to establish the dimensions of this project, and to throw a clearer light on what I believe Clare was attempting to achieve by it, I now want to turn to a set of poems written in 1819 and the early 1820s, as I think they essentially form a part of the same project, despite their lack of any superficial resemblance. The poems I have in mind are a loose group variously referred to by Clare as 'gossip tales' and 'gossip stories', and they include 'The Lodge House', 'The Fate of Amy', 'Rob's Terrors of Night' and 'the Cross Roads'.

4: CULTURAL TOPOGRAPHY: THE 'GOSSIP TALES' AS RECORD AND ARTEFACT

The first reference to them, and to the distinguishing characteristics which bind them together, comes in a letter from Clare to Holland in mid-1819. He had sent Holland the manuscript of 'The Fate of Amy', and he describes how the poem came about - 'I heard it related (some years ago) by an old Woman in this manner - "The poor Girls name was Amy" said she "& as fine a girl as ever was seen she liv'd at "Garners Farm" (now call'd) & and at this time belonging to Mr Clark' (*Letters*, p. 13). The important feature, and the one which is emphasised by Clare, is that the poem's story was derived from the oral repertoire of Clare's neighbourhood, and is placed in that specific locale by details such as the name of the farm and the reference Clare goes on to make to '"the Pond below in the Close - which" says the simple narrator "was call'd when I was a Child "Amy's Pond" ...' (*Letters*, p. 13). Similar features can be discerned in Clare's first reference to another of these tales, 'The Lodge House', in a letter to Gilchrist of late December 1819 - 'I am now Ryhming some of my Mother's "old stories" as she calls 'em they are Local Legends Perhaps only known in these Places As my enquiry as never gained any hints of 'em elsewhere "the Lodge House" is one & nearly finished ...' (*Letters*, p. 24). Again we have a story taken from the repertoire of local oral storytellers,

and Clare again stresses the specific locality of the story, its rootedness in the place of its origin and its unique status as a part of the oral history of that place. The concurrence between these two accounts was not just a coincidence - there is evidence that this adoption of the oral tales of the village as material for his poetry formed a deliberate artistic strategy for Clare at the time. In a letter to Gilchrist in early January 1820, Clare refers to a new manuscript book which he has entitled '"Songs Ballads & Gossip Stories"' (*Letters*, p. 25), although he characteristically admits to not having got any further with the endeavour than this title. Further clarification of the status of the 'gossip tales' can be had from a letter to Sherwill from the next month - 'the Gossip Tales are taken from the mouths of my unletterd Parents & nearly related as they told them'[31].

We thus have a series of poems which are explicitly conceived as renditions into verse of the popular oral storytelling culture of Clare's locality - effectively, 'collections' of this tale repertoire which, rather than being recorded verbatim as a modern folklorist might attempt to do, are transposed into the medium of verse and thus subsumed into Clare's overall artistic project. This is fascinating, and obviously sheds a good deal of potential light on the possible motives behind the song collection, and in particular on the freedom with which Clare there treats his raw material - just as he was perfectly willing to re-write the 'gossip tales' into verse, so he felt an equal liberty to re-write and imitate the songs. I would suggest that the two projects are essentially the same - both involve the collection of oral material from Clare's family and the working-class culture of Helpston, and its rendering into verse whose status as between original composition and transcription is fluid and ultimately impossible to define securely - and that the similarity between them has tended to be obscured by the fact that the 'gossip tales' appear more like 'original' work than the song collection does.

However, the 'locality' of the 'gossip tales' goes further than their simply having been taken from the local tale repertoire. Their subject-matter is, as has been hinted at above, unapologetically local, even parochial - these are not tales which have a wider currency in the oral tradition, nor are they chapbook or

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[31] Clare to Sherwill, 9 February 1820, *Letters*, p. 31.

broadside stories re-told by the villagers, as was the case with the repertoire of the women in 'The Village Minstrel'. They are rather tales specific to the area of Helpston, forming a local history and mapping out a 'cultural topography' of the kind I referred to at the end of my previous chapter. Here is Clare describing the origins of 'The Lodge House':

> it was a current [story] in the village and the place were it was said to have happend was a lone house calld the "heath house" about 2 miles from the Village it stood in a lone hollow in the ground northward below the present new one called Milton Farm it was disinhabited and in ruins when I was a boy it had been a farm house and one of the barns was kept up were my father used to thresh in winter for several years - there were sever[a]l dismal storys afloat of midnight murders done in this place in the days of its prosperity and of course a great many accounts of shrieking women and groaning men heard and seen near the spot by passing shepherds and feast goers in the night
>
> I remember with what fearful steps I usd to go up the old tottering stairs when I was a boy in the dinner hours at harvest with other companions to examine the haunted ruins the walls were riddeld all over with names and dates of shepherds and herdsmen in their idle hours when the[y] crept under its shelter from showers in summer and storms in winter and there were mysterious stainings on the old rotting floors which were said to be the blood of the murderd inhabitants - it also was the haunt of Gipseys and others who pulld up every thing of wood to burn till they left nothing but the walls - the wild cat usd to hide and raise its kittens in the old roof an animal that used to be common in our woods tho rather scarce latly - and the owls usd to get from the sun in its chimney and at the fall of evening usd to make a horrid hissing noise that was often taken for the waking noise of the hanting spirits that made it a spot shund desolat and degected (*JCBH*, pp. 101-102)

I have quoted this at some length, because I think it provides a wonderful sense of the complexity of what the 'gossip tales' and the song collection are trying to convey, the extraordinary manifold of emotion and association which is present for Clare in both the story and the place about which it is told. Particularly striking here is the sense of 'nesting' inherent in the description of the house's function for the young Clare, for the shepherds, the gypsies, the wild cat and the owls - it is precisely this sense of the mutuality of humanity, culture, landscape and nature that constitutes the enhanced sense of locality which I have been referring to in this chapter, and which the 'gossip tales' attempt to evoke.

The story is thus not simply a product of the oral culture of the area, it is also about a specific, 'haunted' house, serving in its original oral form simultaneously as a warning and as a satisfyingly titillating history of

it. However, as rendered into verse by Clare, it becomes subject to a complex process of mediation: the tale is told, apparently 'straight' and without any framing devices in the narration, in an apparently vernacular, free-flowing style which appears to mirror that of an oral storyteller. However, simply by its having been rendered into verse and shaped into stanzas its status has been radically altered from its original context - it is a splendidly achieved mimetic presentation of the effect of oral storytelling, rather than the thing itself, and the sheer artfulness involved in creating such an effect of simplicity and artlessness should not be underestimated. It is difficult, though, to see how a reader unversed in the lore of Helpston could have retrieved from the poem more than a fraction of the associations the place obviously had for Clare, as indicated in the passage from the *Fragments* above, and this appears to have been the case.

Clare reported that 'The Lodge House' had met with approval from his parents and neighbours (precisely the people who would be most likely to share Clare's associations both with the tale and the place which was its subject) - 'my lodge house I think will be above your thumbs & Keats too it is ... undergone the Critiscism of my father & mother & several rustic Neighbours of the town & all aprove it'[32]. However, Taylor disagreed - 'it has not that superiority about it which makes Good Poetry'[33] - as did Eliza Emmerson - '... "The Lodge House" is not to my taste: I could almost wish it may never be published: it is laboured and incoherent: has very little to interest, and much less to delight. These are not the subjects wherein Clare excels'[34]. In fact the poem never was published, and I will discuss the reasons for this in my concluding chapter. First, though I want to look briefly at another of the 'gossip tales', and link them back to my discussion of the song collection.

'The Cross Roads or Haymakers Story'[35] was written in 1820, some half a year after 'The Lodge House', and was in fact published in *The Village Minstrel*, Taylor writing to Clare that 'The "Cross Roads" is one of

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[32] Clare to Taylor, 19 March 1820, *Letters*, p. 38.

[33] Taylor to Clare 18 April 1820, *Critical Heritage*, p. 122.

[34] Emmerson to Taylor, 25 April 1820, *Critical Heritage*, p. 120.

[35] *Early Poems II*, pp. 619-629.

your very best pieces. It has affected me to tears every time I have read it'[36]. Clare in response to this praise by Taylor provided the following brief comment on its composition - 'I am happy you like the "cross roads" so much the tale often touchd me as I heard it told from the simple old grannys of the village & I have preserved all their simplicity I coud by putting it in their mouths to tag in ryhmes'[37]. This is interesting, in that it confirms that this is another 'collected' piece, and also shows that Clare quite deliberately deviated from his practice in 'The Lodge House', which consists only of the tale presented without any framing devices, and chose to present it through the mouthpiece of an old woman storyteller.

This dramatisation of the actual telling of the story is commented on by the editors of the *Cottage Tales* as providing evidence that Clare was '... far from merely transcribing the "Gossip Tales" of his native village. Rather they provided him with a model of narration which he was able to apply to material from a great variety of sources' (*Cottage Tales*, p. xiii). While this is true, and it is central to my argument that neither in the 'gossip tales' nor in the song collection was Clare 'merely transcribing' his material, what I think is most interesting about this framing device is the way it enables Clare not just to tell the story, but also to represent the act of oral storytelling in all its natural and social context. The poem begins and ends with natural description in such a way that the 'old dames' and their audience are placed in both their social context (as haymakers enjoying 'an hours restraint' from their work - a striking echo of the description of oral storytelling in 'The Village Minstrel' which I commented on in my second chapter) and their natural context as figures in a landscape. The social context is further enforced by the way in which Clare presents the act of storytelling as containing a strongly cautionary element - the tale is told by the old woman 'to give her counsels more effect / & by examples illustrate the fact / Of innoscence oercome by flattering man'[38]. In other words, we have here another example of Clare presenting an element of popular culture not for its picturesque or antiquarian interest, but in a more holistic way, showing it as a fully functioning element of

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[36] See *Letters*, p. 182, n.3.

[37] Clare to Taylor, 18 April 1821, *Letters*, p. 183.

[38] *Early Poems II*, p. 620, ll. 21-23.

the moral economy of the village, tied in both to the lives of the people involved and to the specific landscape of Helpston. As in 'The Lodge House', so here the topography of the poem is specific and local, and in this case it is presented as a part of the shared knowledge of the storyteller and her listeners - '"That grave yeve heard of were the four roads meet / "Were walks the spirit in a winding sheet / "Oft seen at night by strangers passing late' (*Early Poems II*, p. 620, ll. 35-37); '"Ye know the foot pad sidles down the hill'[39] and the overall effect of the poem is both to situate that specific place within a cultural, moral and social network of narratives - a 'cultural topography', in my earlier phrase, and to show how the popular oral culture of the place does that for its participants.

These 'gossip tales', then, despite their ostensible simplicity, constitute a subtle attempt to mediate both the form *the* content of the local popular oral culture to a literary audience, in a way that adopts the accents neither of the pastoral picturesque nor of antiquarianism, and in which the *locality* of what is presented is absolutely crucial. Clare never attempts to re-tell the story of those tales which owed their currency in local oral tradition to broadside or chapbook publication - the 'gossip tales' consist only of the network of narratives which could be said to constitute the 'customary consciousness' of Helpston, mapping out the village and its environs both physically and morally.

While this is obviously not true of many of the songs which formed a part of the later song collection - Deacon traces alternative versions from broadsides and/or other oral transcriptions for most of them - I nevertheless believe that his artistic freedom with those song texts, and the assiduity with which he concentrated his collecting in his local area marks them out as constituting at least an analogous project, if not the same. That project I have defined as the bodying-forth of his locality in all its natural, cultural and social aspects, and a better appreciation of the sense in which his treatment of the oral song material fits into this can perhaps be approached if we look at the title Clare appended to one of his manuscript collections of songs - 'National and Provincial Melodies Selected from the Singing and Recitations of the Peasantry in and

[39] *Early Poems II*, p. 625, l. 166 (NB 'pad' here is a dialect word for 'path').

about Helpstone and its neighbourhood with some alterations and corrections nessesarily required'[40]. Clare was engaged between 1825 and 1827 in a fitful and inconclusive correspondence with Henry Van Dyk[41] about the possibility of publication of some songs under a title of this nature, but nothing ever came of it (perhaps owing to the death of Van Dyk in 1828). However, what is important here is the intention signalled by the title of making use of his collections and imitations of popular songs under a title of this grandiosity, evoking the examples of Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies*[42], Byron's *Hebrew Melodies*, and more generally of the cultural nationalism of Scots such as Burns and Scott. Once again, we are forced to broaden the context in which we view Clare's writings about popular culture - as so often, it turns out to be embedded within complex allusive patterns of cultural mediation between 'high'and 'low', centre and margin, here signalling an abortive attempt to find an alternative way of projecting Clare into the literary marketplace.

The crucial point, though, is that Clare's title, while gesturing towards such cultural nationalism, in fact places a much greater weight on the 'provincial' side of the equation. With its reference to Helpston by name, it explicitly affirms that the focus of the collection will be on a specific locality, and by referring to the 'peasantry' as the source of the material it signals a focus on the popular working-class culture of that region. When we align this with the fact that most of this material purporting to be collected from the local area was in fact written or at least heavily amended by Clare himself, it should become clear that this particular collection, and by extension the song collection as a whole, represents, like the 'gossip tales' a deliberate artistic project - of presenting as an aesthetically apprehended whole the cultural context of Helpston and its surroundings - rather than the simple folkloric activity that it is usually taken, following Deacon, to be. We thus find once again that Clare's representations of popular culture (and it is important to stress that the song collection as a whole is just that - a representation which is more like a vast and loosely-connected artefact than a transparent record) cannot be adequately addressed without a considerable effort to

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[40] *John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, p. 20. In fact, as Deacon admits, only four of the poems included in this manuscript are directly derived from the oral tradition, and this in itself is significant, in that it provides further proof of Clare's lack of concern about fidelity to his source material.

[41] See John Clare and the Folk Tradition, pp. 19-20.

[42] A copy of which Clare owned - see *Catalogue of The John Clare Collection*, p. 30.

unpick the mediatory artifices in which they are embedded, and prove to be closely bound up with the wellsprings of his main poetic projects.

However, Clare's song collection was never published as such in his own lifetime, and as we have seen the 'gossip tales' met with mixed reactions at best from Taylor –'The Lodge House' is one of the finest yet was never published in Clare's lifetime - and in my concluding chapter I will use a consideration of some of the reasons for this as a springboard to a brief overview of Clare's representations of popular culture in his poetry, culminating in *The Shepherd's Calendar*.

CHAPTER 5 (CONCLUSION):

'OLD CUSTOMS O I LOVE THE SOUND': VOICE, CULTURE AND LANDSCAPE IN *THE SHEPHERD'S CALENDAR*

1: THE PROBLEM OF STYLE

This chapter will conclude my discussion of the representations of popular culture in Clare's poetry by examining *The Shepherd's Calendar*, both as Clare's largest, and arguably finest single achievement, and as a culmination of the themes I have been picking out in his treatment of popular culture - the difficulty of finding a language to write about it without betraying anxieties about his social status and his entitlement to poetry, and the inadequacy of contemporary antiquarian discourse as a means of expressing his distinctive sense of the interweaving of landscape, culture and society in the local environment which he took as his main theme. In order to lead into this discussion, though, I first need to consider briefly the specifically poetic difficulties involved in writing about popular culture in this way, and to this end, I will begin by returning to a discussion of 'The Lodge House', as it provides a particularly clear example of the sorts of problems faced by Clare in this respect.

In my previous chapter, I referred to the fact that 'The Lodge House' was never published in Clare's lifetime, and an examination of the reasons for this proves enlightening. Clare himself was consistently proud of the poem: shortly after it was written he wrote to Sherwill claiming that of a number of recent poems 'the Lodge House I must confess this bit of pride is I think the best'[1] and despite the fact that Taylor had disliked it Clare was still pressing for its publication at the end of the following year - 'what think you by the insertion of the "Lodge house" in one of the "Londons" some time or other - My consciets not dampt about it yet & I fancy it one of the best I have still written'[2]. To modern eyes, Clare's confidence in the piece seems reasonable. It was one of the finest poems Clare had yet written, 'a masterpiece of verse story-telling'[3] - fluent, fast-flowing, colloquial and sure-footed. The scene is set economically, the isolation of the place

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[1] Clare to Sherwill, 24 February 1820, *Letters*, p. 33.

[2] Clare to Taylor, 6 November 1821, *Letters*, p. 219.

[3] Robinson and Powell, in the introduction to *Early Poems I*, p. xvi.

being evoked swiftly, memorably and humorously in stanza five through the image of 'the maidens' sitting listening eagerly to 'the squeakings of mice' and 'the chirp of the sparrows', because 'they put em in mind of a town'. The characterisation of 'hodge' is also a fine piece of understated humour; cowering with fear all through the night, but erupting into swaggering bravery as soon as the danger is passed -

> & hodge sorely frightend wi what he had guest
> Bawld out to know what were amiss
> & soon as he heard twas his prophesied trick
> & the theif were lockt out - then he took up his stick
> & bragd wi the best hadnt skulls a bin thick
> They might a seen easy in this[4]

Perhaps the most impressive feature of the poem, though, is its verbal texture, which is richly vernacular throughout - apparently the result of a deliberate policy on Clare's part to avoid 'poetical' and respectable diction when more colloquial usages were available[5]. This, when combined with the tumbling, helter-skelter motion of the anapaestic rhythms, and the inclusion of little proverbial tags such as 'Most votes the day carried' (l. 117) and 'All keep out as is out' (l. 181), adds up to create a splendid piece of mimetic art, imitating the mannerisms and inflections of an oral story-teller, in a way that obviates the necessity of a framing device such as that used in 'The Cross roads'. So why was it never published in Clare's lifetime?

Much of the answer to this lies in a letter which Taylor sent to Clare shortly after receiving 'The Lodge House' (and Clare's description of the poem's reception amongst his family and neighbours[6]) in which he gives the following criticisms of the poem:

> if you tell a Story again, like the Lodge House, don't let the Circumstances occupy so much of your Attention to the Exclusion of that which is more truly poetical ... I can conceive that as a Story this of Lodge House may appear to all your Hearers capitally told, and yet that it has not the Superiority about it which makes Good Poetry - Poets do not tell Stories like other people;

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[4] *Early Poems II*, p. 242, ll.187-192.

[5] A later manuscript copy of the poem (in Peterborough MS A40) than that given by Robinson and Powell appears to have been tidied up in this respect, e.g. 'Poor hog serving hodge frit to dead as it where' is recast as ' poor Plough driving Hodge scared to stone as it were' (*Early Poems II*, p. 236, l. 77 and note). See also *Cottage Tales*, p. xxxiv.

[6] See *Letters*, p. 38.

> they draw together beautiful and uncommon but very happy Illustrations, and adorn their subject, making as much Difference as there is between a common Etching and a full painted Picture[7]

The tone of this is suggestive of a fundamental inability on Taylor's part to understand the sort of poetry that Clare was trying to write in 'The Lodge House'[8]. His stress on the poem's lack of 'Superiority', his insistence on the need for 'beautiful and uncommon ... illustrations', and on the unworthiness of 'a *common* etching', are all uncomfortable reminders of how closely implicated the discourses of literary criticism and of class distinction could be. It reads almost as though Clare is being upbraided for a social solecism as for a poetic one - for not keeping himself at a discreet distance from his 'low' subject matter. However, as we have seen the poem is one of a group of 'gossip tales' which were expressly designed to mediate popular oral tales into the realm of literature, and its virtue and its aesthetic value lies in its very enmeshment in local culture and the reciprocities of oral storytelling. For Taylor, though, 'Poets do not tell stories like other people' - the poem is being damned for what is really its greatest achievement - the closeness with which it mimics the voice of an unlettered story-teller. In the light of my discussion of the concern for specific locality evinced by the 'gossip tales', the phrase with which Taylor begins his criticism is also very telling - 'don't let the Circumstances occupy ... your Attention to the Exclusion of that which is more truly poetical ' - it is fundamental to Clare's intentions here (as it probably was for the 'gossip' and her original listeners) that it is the 'Circumstances' that *are* truly poetical, that its closeness to the grain of the 'actually loved and known' is what is most valuable in the tale.

In the light of comments like this, and despite his own high regard for the poem, it is perhaps not surprising that Clare soon abandoned the 'gossip tales' project, and tried to recuperate it, via the song collection, in a form which had more promising literary antecedents, and, he might have thought, prospects

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[7] Taylor to Clare, 18 April 1820, *Critical Heritage*, p. 122.

[8] As I have made clear in my chapter on 'The Village Minstrel' I do not share the view apparently held by the editors of the Oxford edition of Clare and by some other critics, that Taylor's editing and understanding of Clare was inappropriate and invasive - I do not think Clare could have found a much more sympathetic or committed editor than Taylor, and as I pointed out in that chapter, their working relationship was frequently

for publication. However, what I want to consider here, in preparation for my discussion of *The Shepherd's Calendar*, are the purely poetic and linguistic problems for Clare's poetic representations of popular culture which are cast into focus by Taylor's comments here. In order to do so, I want to look at another poem, from slightly later than 'The Lodge House', which sheds a different light on the matter, and helps us to appreciate the full contours of this issue.

'Rural Morning', unlike 'The Lodge House', did find its way into *The Village Minstrel*, and I want to examine its opening passage:

> Soon as the twilight thro the distant mist
> In silver [h]emmings skirts the purple east
> Ere yet the sun unveils his smiles to view
> & drys the mornings chilly robes of dew
> Young hodge the horse boy with a soodling gait
> Slow climbs the stile or opes the creaky gate
> With willow switch & halter by his side
> Prepard for dobbin whom he means to ride
> The only tune he knows still whistling oer
> & humming scraps his father sung before
> As "wantley dragon" & the "magic rose"
> The whole of music which his village knows
> That wild remembrance in each little town
> From mouth to mouth thro ages handles down
> Onward he jolls nor can the minstrel throngs
> Entice him once to listen to their songs
> Nor marks he once a blossom on his way
> A senseless lump of animated clay[9]

I have chosen this passage as a near-contemporaneous counterpart to 'The Lodge House'[10] for the contrast it offers, both stylistically, in its much more 'literary' tone and form, and in its representation of popular culture in the person of the 'horse boy'. I want to discuss the way in which these two aspects of the poem

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one of mutuality and willing creative partnership. However, it is clear from this letter that there were certain profound differences between the two men's conception of poetry.

[9] *Early Poems II*, p. 612, ll. 1-18.

[10] It is dated by the Oxford editors to mid-1820 (see *Early Poems II*, pp. 795-796).

coexist, as I think they take us to the heart of the problems which Clare faced in trying to write the culture of his birth for a literary audience.

The first four lines of the poem are dull in rhythm and diction, and rely too heavily on the rather tired and cursory personifications of the sun and the morning. However, in line 5, the horse boy's appearance brings with it a change in tone and style so abrupt as to be almost parodic in its effect. The bland decorum of the opening lines is broken apart by the heavy alliteration of 'hodge' and 'horse', and the sudden intrusion of the dialect word 'soodling' emphasises the shift in register to something much more like the style of 'The Lodge House'. The focus of the poem then turns from the horse boy's slow progress to work to the tune he is whistling, and this is where the question of Clare's representation of popular culture comes in. There is, as Deacon[11] has pointed out, a powerful physical immediacy about the way he describes the process of oral transmission - the songs the horse boy sings have been 'handled' down rather than simply handed down. However, there is an ambiguity about Clare's description of the process of remembrance as 'wild': it is a surprising adjective to choose, and while the connotations of 'wildness' in Clare are often positive, the word nevertheless suggests something slightly sinister about the process. There is a further surprise in store at the end of the passage quoted, since the vigour of the language and the apparent personal identification with the horse boy would lead us to expect Clare to be at least partially sympathetic to the character. In fact, though, the boy is chastised for his insensibility towards the birds' songs and the flowers in his path, and the passage ends by condemning him as 'A senseless lump of animated clay'. It is almost as though there are two voices in the poem: the one that begins it (and which ends this passage by condemning the horse boy) being that of a somewhat uninspired 18th Century versifier; and the one which intervenes to describe the boy, with its dialect words and vivid sense of local and personal experience, which is much closer to the voice of 'The Lodge House'.

The shape of Clare's problem - of finding a way to write about the popular culture of Helpston in such a way that its locality and fidelity to the contours of the actual place are neither collapsed into a merely

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[11] *John Clare and the Folk Tradition*, p. 54.

externalised pastoral picturesque, nor rendered in terms whose 'vulgarity' will be unacceptable to his audience - is thus revealed to be stylistic and linguistic in nature, only to be resolved through the rhythms and diction of his poetry. 'Rural Morning' quite clearly shows two voices contending for the upper hand - one that of an 18th Century chronicler of rural life in the tradition of Thomson, and one that of a vernacular poet, steeped in dialect and with a sense of rhythm that owes more to oral forms than to the pentameter[12] - and this split in Clare's poetic persona works against the inclusion of the nature, the horse boy and his culture on one plane of discourse.

John Barrell[13] has analysed Clare's debt to Thomson in great detail, showing that Thomson had evolved a method and a syntax for the description of landscape which Clare's earlier poetry emulates, but which is abandoned in his later work. This Thomsonian syntax, according to Barrell, imposes a rigorous sense of order on the landscape, and forges an identity for the speaker of the poem which is strictly differentiated from the landscape. He sees such a 'differentiated identity' (*Poetry, Language and Politics*, p. 119) as inappropriate to the sense of place which Clare is in fact trying to express, in which his own identity cannot be so easily separated from that of the surrounding landscape. This is obviously analogous to my investigation of the differentiated identity which antiquarian discourse imposed on Clare, and to the ways in which his divergence from this discourse enabled him to forge a different sense of the relationship between popular culture, place and self. It also has an obvious bearing on the sense of cultural topography, of culture, society and landscape as a unitary entity, which I have claimed Clare is trying to express, and much of Barrell's argument holds good for my purposes.

If we return briefly to 'Rural Morning', we can discern this sort of process taking place in it. Clare as it were sets the agenda for the poem by beginning in the 'Thomsonian' manner. Such a style presupposes a lofty detachment of the poet's persona from his subject-matter - he must be able to 'command' the view,

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[12] Note lines 6 and 7 of 'Rural Morning', where the alliteration and the intrusion of dialect go hand in hand with a complete disruption of the smooth progression of the pentameter.

[13] In *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1972) and in *Poetry, Language and Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), ch. 4, pp. 100-137.

remain outside it so as to be able to pass judgement on it, as Clare attempts to do at the end of the passage I have quoted. The significance of the description of the process of oral transmission as 'wild remembrance' thus becomes clearer. This is a process that Clare himself knew well, yet here, having adopted this 'objective' poetic stance, he has to represent it as being untamed, out of control - as indeed it must appear when seen from this viewpoint. It also explains the curiously detached tone of the previous line - 'The whole of music which his village knows': again Clare is writing from the point of view of an outsider, one who can look down on this little village and calmly weigh up the extent of its cultural shortcomings. In this way, we can see the Thomsonian conventions operating in exactly the same way as those of antiquarianism, forcing Clare to adopt a distanced, 'differentiated' identity which is an artificial construct[14] and insufficient for him to express the distinctive sense he actually has of his material.

David Vincent has expressed the nature of the double-bind in which Clare thus found himself in his attempts to write about popular culture as one in which a working-class writer (Hogg, in the case of Vincent's'discussion) would experience 'unprecedented problems [in] finding a voice in which to express himself'[15]. This is certainly true as far as it goes, but it suggests a somewhat essentialised notion of voice - that a poet has one 'true' voice and no other - which oversimplifies the matter. The problem, while it undoubtedly had deep ramifications for Clare on a personal level, can nevertheless be more usefully framed for my purposes as one of poetic craft, as we have no unmediated access to Clare's psyche[16], only to the poetry, and it is in the texture of that poetry that these problems are worked out. Clare had access to these two traditions of poetic utterance - one vernacular and popular in origin and one stemming from the traditions of polite literature - and wished to retain the distinctive virtues of each of them. However, as we

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[14] Obviously, all 'authorial standpoints' are in some sense artificial constructs, but my point is that this one is to some extent unwilling, determined by the conventions which Clare is operating under to a degree which causes him to misrepresent his subject-matter.

[15] David Vincent, 'The Decline of the Oral Tradition in Popular Culture' in Robert D. Storch ed., *Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth-Century England* (London and Canberra: Croom Helm, 1982), p. 39.

[16] As I have shown in my first chapter, even the autobiographical prose, which might be thought to come closest to providing such access, cannot by any means be taken at face value as a transparent medium.

have seen, in much of his earlier work he seems unable to fuse them so that they work together, tending to adopt only one style for a particular poem (thus sacrificing the virtues of the other), or else (as we saw in 'Rural Morning') to juxtapose them in such a way that they pull in different directions. This, of course, is not merely a question of 'style' considered as in some way distinct from the 'subject matter' of the poetry. Rather, what is involved is a complex and shifting pattern of identification and differentiation, representation and self-representation, in which what is at stake is Clare's very identity as a poet. If, in his representation of popular culture, he speaks only in the voice and idioms of that culture, he runs the risk of appearing to his readers to be so closely bound up with it as to be effectively undifferentiated from it, in a way analogous to that undifferentiated relation of self to nature of which John Barrell has remarked that

> [it[was conceived of, by those who had no interest in sharing it, as a primitive relation. ... Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, the notion that the lowest members of rural society exhibited a kind of primitive state of mind by virtue of their failure to differentiate themselves as subjects from the raw data of experience had been an important element in accounts of pastoral poetry in particular, and of language in general.
>
> (*Poetry, Language and Politics*, p. 129)

On the other hand, though, if he adopts the idiom and the concomitant distanced view-point of the more conventional 'Thomsonian' manner of pastoral poetry, he will be unable to do justice to that sense of the local particularity of Helpston's life and landscape which was so important to him[17]. His task, then, was to find a way of combining the distinctive strengths of each style, whilst charting a course between the opposing poles of apparent vulgarity and diffuse and over-general 'objectivity'. In my next section I will give a reading of *The Shepherd's Calendar* as constituting the work in which Clare most successfully achieves this fusion.

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[17] See for instance my discussion in chapter 2 of the separation between narrator and Lubin which is engendered by Clare's use of the Spenserian stanza in 'The Village Minstrel'.

2: THE SHEPHERD'S CALENDAR AS SYNTHESIS

The first point to be made with regard to The Shepherd's Calendar centres on its textual status. The edition published by Oxford University Press under the editorship of Robinson, Powell and Summerfield[18], which I will be using in my discussion, is quite different from the book as published in Clare's lifetime. The modern editors choose to concentrate on the eponymous cycle of seasonal poems which constitute the bulk of the original volume, and omit the narrative pieces with which it was originally surrounded. Whatever the merits or otherwise of this policy, it at least has the virtue of focusing attention on what was always the most important feature of the book, and allows it to be seen for the minor masterpiece it is. For this reason I use the modern text, and I will avoid discussion of what is one of the most tangled and complicated editorial histories of any of Clare's works[19], as most of the variant texts of parts of the poem do not significantly affect the points I wish to make.

The poem draws together many of Clare's concerns - it is simultaneously an attempt at welding together description of the realities of rural life, landscape and nature into a totality that would form his 'idea of the true pastoral'[20]; an attempt at fusing his vernacular and literary influences into a cohesive and adaptable voice; and an attempt at creating a sort of verse almanac[21] of the customs and traditions of Helpston. The poem is obviously capable of investigation from a wide variety of points of view, and my discussion of it will be far from exhaustive. What I want to concentrate on is the way in which the poem fuses its representations of nature, society and popular culture into a 'holistic' unity which is in a sense the

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[18] Robinson, Eric, Summerfield, Geoffrey, and Powell, David, *John Clare: The Shepherd's Calendar* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Referenced as *Shepherd's Calendar*.

[19] For a history of the conception and writing of the poem see Mark Storey, *The Poetry of John Clare: a Critical Introduction* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1974), ch. 3, pp. 50-114. Tim Chilcott, in *A Publisher and his Circle: The Life and Work of John Taylor, Keats' s Publisher* (London and Boston: Routledge Kegan & Paul, 1972), pp. 103-125, gives an account of the poem's editing which does justice to the difficulties faced by Taylor.

[20] Storey, *The Poetry of John Clare*, p. 25.

[21] See Eric Robinson's introduction to *Shepherd's Calendar*, pp. xii-xiii.

culmination of that sense of 'locality' and cultural topography which I have been discussing in my previous chapters.

It is clear that the representation of the popular culture and customs of a village which may as well be identified with Helpston[22] is a strong focus of the poem, and there is a particularly suggestive stanza in 'December' which hints at a quasi-antiquarian motive:

> Old customs O I love the sound
> However simple they may be
> What ere wi time has sanction found
> Is welcome and is dear to me
> Pride grows above simplicity
> And spurns it from her haughty mind
> And soon the poets song will be
> The only refuge they can find[23]

This, with its lamentation of the passing of 'old customs' and the claim that they will soon be found only in the 'poets song', certainly suggests that one of the motives for the poem is the 'antiquarian' desire to record these customs before they pass away and are forgotten. There are many other passages in the poem which echo this sense that old customs are being lost (see e.g. the lament for the loss of May day customs in 'May', pp. 60-62, ll. 427-470; and the longing for the time 'When masters made them merry wi their men' in 'June', pp. 68-69, ll. 155-168). However, if we compare the poem's representations of popular culture with the modes of antiquarian practice which I examined in my third chapter, we will see that it is quite different. If, as David Vincent claims, and as we have seen in the case of William Hone, 'The study of popular culture and its oral traditions was a means of bringing the classes together on ground emptied of conflict'[24], then The

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[22] Obviously the pastoral format of the work as a whole enjoins due caution about applying any sort of realistic criteria to it, but there are a handful of references throughout *The Shepherd's Calendar* which suggest that a particular locality is being described (e.g. 'whittleseas reed wooded mere' in 'January: a Cottage Evening', l. 147, p. 6; and the mention of the 'river Nen' in 'March', l. 93, p. 32), and given the overall tenor of Clare's work there seems little point in denying that it is Helpston (albeit in a refracted and artistically re-configured sense) that is the locus of the poem.

[23] 'December', ll. 41-48, p. 126.

[24] David Vincent, 'The Decline of the Oral Tradition in Popular Culture', p. 35.

Shepherd's Calendar deviates from this study. This is not to say that it is a particularly 'conflictual' poem (by no means as conflictual as the angry and often incoherent satire of *The Parish*, for example), but equally the ground it surveys is not entirely free from traces of social and political conflict. There is no sense that the customs which the poem records exist in a vacuum: they are instead constantly presented as important features of a way of life, elements in a complex whole which each serve specific social functions in the life of the community. When Clare laments their passing, it is not merely regret that a quaint, picturesque spectacle for the entertainment of the middle-classes has disappeared, but rather that a real change in the village's way of life and moral economy has been effected. For instance, when he is describing the customs that used to accompany the shearing, the point is not so much that the customs themselves have gone, it is that the social relations and structures they embodied have gone -

> All this is past - and soon may pass away
> The time torn remnant of the holiday
> As proud distinction makes a wider space
> Between the genteel and the vulgar race
> Then must they fade as pride oer custom showers
> Its blighting mildew on her feeble flowers
> ('June', p. 69, ll. 163-168)

We have, then, an awareness that customs are not independent of, nor isolated from, the wider processes of social change, and this is borne out by other occasions in the poem where Clare deals with the passing of 'old customs'. I have already briefly mentioned the passage at the end of 'May' where the loss of the traditional May Day celebrations is explicitly linked to enclosure - '... where enclosure has its birth / It spreads a mildew oer her mirth' ('May', p. 61, ll. 459-460) - in a way that verges on the openly political. Even the stanza from 'December' which I quoted above is not quite as innocent of social realities as it might appear in isolation. Its use of the word 'pride' to refer to the forces opposed to 'old customs' picks up on its use in the lines from 'June' I have just referred to, and the passage as a whole stresses their social function - 'Friends meet their christmas cheer to share / And pass it in a harmless way' ('December', p. 126, ll. 39-40) -

as a means of bringing the community together during the hardships of winter, as much as it does their sentimental, picturesque value.

The picture of rural customary culture built up by *The Shepherd's Calendar*, then, is very different to that of contemporary antiquarianism, with its anaesthetising, comforting representations of popular culture of which David Vincent complained. It does so, not so much by being overtly radical in its tone, as by its manner of representing the customs and the way of life it deals with. They are given their meaning not as survivals from a mysterious pagan and Roman Catholic antiquity, but rather as functioning elements in a complex and threatened way of life, transactions in a moral economy that validated and to some extent ameliorated the life of the rural poor. E. P. Thompson has claimed that 'We do not have to ask for other evidence to support John Clare, since his poems *are* the evidence of a tormented customary consciousness' (*Customs in Common*, p. 181), and while this is true, it appears to underestimate the difficulties which dogged Clare in his attempts to render that customary consciousness in his poetry.

Part of the reason for the success of *The Shepherd's Calendar* in this regard is what I have earlier referred to as its 'holistic' vision. As I have just shown, the customs and festivals of the village are explicitly situated in a social and cultural context which gives them their meaning, and something similar holds for the relationship between the whole life and work of the village and its surrounding natural context. Throughout the poem, Clare presents the two as being inextricably bound up with each other, into what it hardly seems anachronistic to call an ecological unity[25]. Whereas in 'The Village Minstrel' Lubin had fled to the solitude of nature as an escape from the social world of the village, throughout *The Shepherd's Calendar* we are given a complex vision of the interactions of humanity and nature, particularly in the presentation of the villagers at work (it is a pastoral, but it is by no means sentimental: it is hard-nosed and unflinching in its portrayal of the suffering and hardship involved in the life of an agricultural labourer).

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[25] See James C. McKusick, '"A Language that is ever Green": The Ecological Vision of John Clare', *U T Q*, Vol 61, No2, (Winter 1991/2), pp. 226-249, and, for further reflections on this theme, Jonathan Bate, T*he Song of the Earth* (London, Basingstoke and Oxford: Picador, 2000), Chapter 6, 'Nests, Shells, Landmarks', pp. 153-175.

This sense of complexity and interconnection is achieved through the texture of the poem's language, and it is herein that its greatness lies. The first poem – 'January: a Winter's Day'[26] - is as good an example as any of what I want to draw out. Almost immediately we are presented with what could be seen as an image of popular culture, in the form of the 'corners guest' in the tavern reading *Old Moore's Almanac*. The narrative voice here does begin to set up an implicit difference between itself and the farmer - 'Ne'er doubting once of what he reads / All wonders are wi faith supplyd' (ll. 19-20). The tone of this is surely affectionate in its gentle mockery, but it nonetheless establishes a separation of viewpoint between the ignorant and credulous farmer and the more knowing narrator (and thus, by implication, reader), which sits slightly uncomfortably with the genuine warmth inherent in the preceding lines -

> ... old moores anual prophecys
> That many a theme for talk supplys
> Whose almanacks thumbd pages swarm
> Wi frost and snow and many a storm
> And wisdom gossipd from the stars
> Of politics and bloody wars
>
> (ll. 13-18)

However, this slight clash of tone is the exception and the poem rarely condescends to its subjects in this manner. What is more striking is the way in which the narrative voice builds up the effect of 'ecological' unity between individual, society and nature. It does so by refusing to settle for any one, objective, focus, but rather flits rapidly from point to point. The poem begins with one 'objective' line, but then from lines 2-6 we share the viewpoint of 'confort', a strikingly personified abstraction. It then reverts to an 'objective' omniscience of tone for lines 7-32, albeit one that is intimate with the farmer, 'labour' (another personification) and the thresher. The changes then begin to come thick and fast as the reader is wheeled from one point of view to another, first that of the owlet (ll. 33-36), then the 'foddering boys' (ll. 37-48), the shepherd and his dog (ll. 49-56), the horses in the yard (ll. 57-62) and so on, in an unstoppable flowing sequence of startling yet subtle elisions of viewpoint which continues throughout the rest of the poem. The

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[26] *Shepherd's Calendar*, pp. 1-9. For economy's sake I will give line references only in my discussion of this

sense of unity and simultaneity thus built up (aided by the frequent use of present participles - 'scaring', 'watching', 'shuffling', 'rubbing and lunging' etc.) is like that sense of 'undifferentiated identity' which I earlier identified as representing a danger to Clare. It is not so, however - it is rather built up out of series of minute discriminations, by the accumulation of a vast variety of different (human and inhuman) individual viewpoints, working together to provide a gloriously interlinked wholeness of vision.

We can see better how this effect is brought off if we look at a particular passage towards the end of 'January: A Winter's Day' which presents human and non-human life as existing in a complex tension

> The robin that wi nimble eye
> Glegs round a danger to espy
> Now pops from out the opend door
> From crumbs half left upon the floor
> Nor wipes his bill on perching chair
> Nor stays to clean a feather there
> Scard at the cat that sliveth in
> A chance from evenings glooms to win
> To jump on chairs or tables nigh
> Seeking what plunder may supply
> The childerns litterd scraps to thieve
> Or aught that negligence may leave
> Creeping when huswives cease to watch
> Or dairey doors are off the latch
> On cheese or butter to regale
> Or new milk reeking in the pale
>
> (ll. 193-208)

There is a tremendous sense of dynamism here, as the robin, the cat, the children and the housewife are all defined by their relations to each other, their involvement in an uneasy web of mutual dependence, and this is typical of the more highly charged passages throughout the entire poem. What is perhaps most remarkable about this passage, and about *The Shepherd's Calendar* as a whole, is the texture of the language - the way in which it manages to merge the two voices which we earlier saw struggling against each other in 'Rural Morning'. It is written in that archetypically eighteenth-century form, the octosyllabic couplet (as are many of the sections of *The Shepherd's Calendar*), managed with great dexterity and fluency, and yet the verbal

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section of the poem.

texture varies from the formal, almost mock-heroic 'Seeking what plunder may supply', to the thoroughly vernacular. A measure of Clare's artistry can be taken from the use of the two dialect words ('glegs' and 'sliveth') in the passage: each is introduced very early in the description of the robin and the cat, and each is immediately and utterly evocative of the two animals' very different sorts of movement. This sort of shift between the two idioms, which, rather than working against each other, instead strike sparks off each other and fuse to create a more complex and flexible medium than could otherwise have been achieved, is typical of the poem as a whole

The forms of the individual poems are predominantly Augustan - octosyllabic or decasyllabic couplets - and, as Donald Davie remarked, 'Clare can use the personification ... with Augustan aplomb and wit'[27]. He was referring to the line about 'eccho' in 'October' (p. 112, l. 34), but there are numerous examples throughout the poem. Notwithstanding this urbane mastery of literary forms and techniques though, the poem is notable for the frequency and the precision with which it uses dialect words, and the tone is quite capable of modulating from the literary to the vernacular, as in the 'gossip tale' which occurs towards the end of 'March' (ll. 201-217, p. 36) and the account of superstitions, fairy stories and local tales which forms the substance of 'January: a Cottage Evening'. This section is reminiscent of 'The Lodge House' in its loving recounting of the tales, but is quite different in its ability to reflect simultaneously on the passing of childhood's naive wonder, and to create the ingenious and witty image of 'reason' in lines 270-271 as a stern housewife who 'turneth [stories] like gossip from the door'.

The 'holistic' vision, uniting humanity, culture, landscape and nature, which is the primary achievement of *The Shepherd's Calendar*, and which is the greatest fruition of the sense of cultural topography which I discussed in my previous chapters, is thus ultimately traceable to the minutiae of linguistic texture and poetic register and Clare's achieved fusion of the different 'voices' available to him. In this work Clare found a means of uniting his disparate concerns - the truthful and unsentimental representation of rural life, close natural description, and celebration of the virtues and resources of popular culture - and fusing them

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[27] *Critical Heritage*, p. 442.

into a synoptic vision which does justice to each strand and displays them in their interconnection. It is no accident that this synthesis is achieved at the same time that he achieves a synthesis between the polite and the popular, the literary and the vernacular elements of his poetic repertoire - the thematic synthesis is dependent on the stylistic and linguistic synthesis.

This is a real achievement, but a precarious one. My praise for the achieved vision of *The Shepherd's Calendar* should not be taken to imply that it is 'truer' than those works of Clare which do not share, or fail to achieve the same vision. There is 'truth' in the work, but no more than there is in, say, *The Parish*, which does not in any way share the same celebratory focus. It is not for its truth that *The Shepherd's Calendar* should be praised, but rather for its achievement in holding together the conflicting social, ideological and discursive forces which I have been tracking throughout my thesis through the medium of Clare's representations of popular culture, and it should be seen not as a solid, marmoreal totality but rather as an enacted, dynamic balance of opposing forces, unstable but ultimately successful.

3: CONCLUSION

It was, of course, always going to be a precarious balance, and it is highly ironic that a struggle that had so much to do with finding a voice which would be acceptable both to Clare and to his middle-class readers, should be so nearly resolved in a work that was hardly read at all - Tim Chilcott[28] reports that *The Shepherd's Calendar* had not even sold half of the 1,000 copies printed by 1829, two years after its publication. Indeed, although with hindsight the book seems one of the crowning successes of Clare's career, reviewers at the time were by no means so sure. Although Josiah Conder recognised that the volume

[28] *A Publisher and his Circle*, p.123.

'exhibit[ed] very unequivocal signs of poetic growth, an improved taste, and an enriched mind'[29], the *London Weekly Review* was not so impressed -

> Wretched taste, poverty of thought, and unintelligible phraseology, for some time appeared its only characteristics. There was nothing, perhaps, which more provoked our spleen than the want of a glossary; for, without such an assistance, how could we perceive the fitness and beauty of such words as - *crizzling - sliveth - whinneys - greening - tootles ... &c. &c.*
>
> (*Critical Heritage*, pp. 206-207)

The savagery of this, and in particular its emphasis on Clare's use of dialect words, suggests that Clare, in taking the poetic course he did, could never have hoped to satisfy a large contemporary audience, and that this was in large part due to the social contradictions between his background and his aspirations as a poet - what he had to say could simply not be heard by contemporary readers.

It has been my purpose in this thesis to trace the effects these contradictions had on Clare's work, by examining his representations of popular culture as a site in which they are played out. My first two chapters explored the ways in which popular culture played a destabilising role in his attempts to construct a poetic genealogy for himself in the autobiographical prose and 'The Village Minstrel'. I then placed his attempts to record popular customs within the mediatory traditions of antiquarianism, and showed how Clare's social status rendered him unable to conform to these conventions, that his attempts to write in that vein entailed a falsification of his relationship to his material. Having thus established some of the constraints within which he was operating in his writing about popular culture, I then turned to his song 'collection' and the 'gossip tales', arguing that they formed complementary features of a project to turn the popular culture of his village to artistic use, and this discussion lead into the consideration of *The Shepherd's Calendar* which formed the first part of this conclusion. However, as we have seen, both projects met with limited success - the songs were never published in his lifetime, the tales met with little interest and some outright hostility, and *The Shepherd's Calendar* was a financial disaster.

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[29] From *Eclectic Review*, reprinted in *Critical Heritage*, p. 205.

What I hope to have achieved in this thesis is to shed some new light on Clare's work, which has never been systematically considered in this light before. If nothing else, I hope to have shown that the frequently-iterated belief that Clare is a writer 'with strong roots in popular culture' cannot be taken at face value. He is that, certainly, but it does not show up in his work in any simple manner. It rather forms part of a complex pattern of mediation and conflicting social pressures, in which it is possible to trace many of Clare's own anxieties regarding his 'right to song', as well as the anxieties of the dominant culture about working-class incursions into the field of poetry.

Ultimately, we can perhaps see Clare's descent into the asylum as inevitable from the start. Quite apart from any more medical factors, the strains inherent in his attempts to be a professional poet were enough to break the strongest will. He accepted, as he had little choice but to do, the poisoned chalice that was the role of the 'peasant poet', and by writing more or less exclusively about rural scenes and manners he played that part of his role to perfection. He was unwilling, though, to accept the constraints that went with the role - the incessant moral and social policing by reviewers and would-be benefactors, the need to conform in every respect to the idealised image of the 'natural' genius - and in being himself mediated as a specimen of popular culture, he became unable to write about that culture from a perspective which both made sense to him and was accessible to the reading public. Thus his writings about the culture of his birth inevitably display the fractures and contradictions which ultimately broke him, and ended his career, although as I hope to have shown throughout my thesis, they provide a fascinating if refracted picture of that culture, and one that no other English poet comes close to matching.

I would like to end this thesis with one of Clare's final poems, written in Northampton General Lunatic Asylum, a sonnet in the form of a letter (to his son, or to himself as a child?) in which, the traumas and aspirations of his youth having fallen away and distinctions between high and low literature having fallen with them, he returns to his original simple delight in the act of reading -

TO JOHN CLARE

Well honest John, how fare you now at home?
The spring is come and birds are building nests
The old cock-robin to the stye is come
With olive feathers and its ruddy breast
And the old cock with wattles and red comb
Struts with the hens and seems to like some best
Then crows and looks about for little crumbs
Swept out by little folks an hour ago
The pigs sleep in the sty the bookman comes
The little boy lets home-close-nesting go
And pockets tops and tawes where daiseys bloom
To look at the new number just laid down
With lots of pictures and good stories too
And Jack the jiant-killer's high renown[30]

[30] Geoffrey Summerfield, ed., *John Clare: Selected Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p. 361.

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