John Clare and the Tyranny of Grammar

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JOHN CLARE HAS TRADITIONALLY BEEN REGARDED, rather pa­
tonizingly, as an uneducated Peasant Poet, exhibiting remarkable tal­
et in minor poetic genres, but remaining something of a naif in matters
of linguistic scholarship. Certainly it is true that Clare had little formal
schooling and was almost completely without knowledge of Latin or
Greek, the “learned languages” that still constituted the distinctive badge
of an educated gentleman in his day. Even his command of English was
distinctly provincial and marked by frequent departures from the normative
standard of educated Londoners. Clare’s first biographer, Frederick Martin,
alleged that “he entirely failed in learning grammar and spelling, remaining
ignorant of the sister arts to the end of his days.”1 This traditional view of
Clare was first promulgated by John Taylor, the editor and publisher of his
first volume of poet­
ry, Poems Descriptive of Rural Life (London 1820) “by
John Clare, a Northamptonshire Peasant.” In his Introduction to this
volume, Taylor describes Clare as “a day-labourer in husbandry, who has
had no advantages of education beyond others of his class” and draws a
somber portrait of Clare’s humble living conditions and acute poverty.2
Although Clare’s circumstances were indeed desperate, Taylor’s depiction
is partly a marketing strategy intended to attract the interest of a sentimental
reading public. Primarily, however, Taylor’s Introduction serves to justify
Clare’s abilities as a poet, to account for “his evident ignorance of grammar”
and to celebrate his use of dialect, what Taylor calls “the unwritten
language of England” (Critical Heritage 47–48). Taylor concludes that Clare “is most
thoroughly the Poet as well as the Child of Nature”; and this view of Clare
as an ignorant Peasant Poet, thoughtlessly warbling his woodnotes wild,
has conditioned many subsequent critical responses.

1. Frederick Martin, The Life of John Clare (London: Macmillan, 1865; reprinted with an
introduction and notes by Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield, London: Frank Cass
& Co., 1964) 40.
43.
Taylor edited Clare's first volume with a heavy hand, correcting grammar and spelling, supplying punctuation, and removing most of Clare's dialect words; the few nonstandard words that remained were defined in a glossary at the end of the book. Taylor's editing of Clare's two subsequent volumes of poetry, *The Village Minstrel* (1821) and *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1827), was even more intrusive, entailing not only the rigorous standardization of Clare's language, but also the ruthless cutting of passages or entire poems deemed tiresome, repetitious, hopelessly ungrammatical, or offensive to good taste. (All modern editions of Clare's poems, until 1964, continued Taylor's policy of normalization, with even less excuse.) Taylor's editorial interventions may perhaps be justified in historical retrospect, since the largely urban readership of Clare's poetry was unacquainted with his regional dialect and often quite scathing in its criticism of any nonstandard English words or phrases that slipped through the net of Taylor's editing. A contemporary review of *Poems Descriptive* in the *New Monthly Magazine* (March 1820) scornfully describes several of Clare's dialect words, such as bangs, chaps, eggs on, fex, flops, snifting and snufiting, as "mere vulgarisms, and may as well be excluded from the poetical lexicon, as they have long since been banished from the dictionary of polite conversation" (*Critical Heritage* 71). An even harsher review of *The Village Minstrel* appeared in the *Monthly Magazine* (November 1821), sneering at something more than homeliness, approximating to vulgarity, in many of his themes. . . . We must likewise mark our strong disapprobation of the innovating style introduced in many parts of these volumes, by the employment of unauthorised contractions, and the use of words that have hitherto been strangers alike to our prose and poetry. (*Critical Heritage* 152–54)

This review is unusually explicit in stating the rationale for its objection to Clare's dialect; after citing several "specimens" of nonstandard English, including the contractions of's, and's, well's, and the dialect words soodling, tootling, and shoold', the review concludes:

We leave it to the sober judgment of our readers, to decide, whether these, though indisputable, are desirable additions to our language. We may perhaps be told, that a Glossary is annexed to the book; but this does not alter our view of the subject. If the example of Burns, Ramsay, Ferguson, or other Scottish poets be pleaded, we answer, that they employed a dialect in general use through an entire country, and not the mere *patois* of a small district. If the peculiar phraseology of the Northamptonshire rustics is to be licensed in poetry, we see no reason why that of Lancashire, Somersetshire, and other counties should not be allowed an equal currency; and thus our language would
be surprisingly enriched, by the legitimization of all the varieties of speech in use among the canaille throughout the kingdom. (154)

Faced with such stern criticism of Clare’s language, it is hardly surprising, though perhaps regrettable, that Taylor became even more rigorous in his editing of The Shepherd’s Calendar, excluding dialect words wherever possible and omitting a glossary even for the few dialect words that remained. Evidently the glossaries that were included in Poems Descriptive and The Village Minstrel, intended to make the volumes more accessible to urban readers, had only attracted hostile criticism by highlighting Clare’s nonstandard vocabulary.

These reviews, though unusually explicit in their objections to Clare’s language, seem fairly typical of the unfavorable responses occasioned by the prevailing attitudes toward provincial dialect. Clearly there was a distinction, at least in the minds of the London reviewers, between the dialect of Scotland, supposedly characteristic of the entire country, and the dialect of Northamptonshire, local to “a small district.” The threat of “legitimization” posed by the publication of Clare’s local dialect is stated in overtly political terms: it is threat of the canaille (or “rabble”) entering the discursive arena hitherto restricted to those who have mastered the standard language of educated gentlemen, the social class that comprises the literary elite of London. By using the French terms patois and canaille, the reviewer seeks to awaken memories of the French Revolution, when the canaille demolished the Bastille, marched on Versailles, and ultimately legitimized a new political patois that replaced all honorific forms of address with the simple appellative citoyen. Although modern readers may find it ludicrous to suppose that Clare’s use of such words as soodling and tootling could pose any kind of political threat, it is nevertheless apparent that his more conservative contemporaries responded to his poetry in precisely these terms, perceiving a dire threat to the established order in Clare’s use of dialect, regardless of Taylor’s increasingly cautious editing. It is the locality of Clare’s dialect that irritates his critics; the Scottish dialect, having a distinct national character, poses no threat to England’s national identity. But if the “rustics” of Northamptonshire, Lancashire, and Somersetshire are allowed to publish their local dialects, the cultural and linguistic hegemony of London will be exposed and eventually destabilized.\(^3\) These are some of the latent political issues at stake in Taylor’s editing of Clare’s poetry.

The politics of publishing were rendered even more exasperating, in

\(^3\) Political hegemony, in Antonio Gramsci’s sense of the term, is normally accompanied by cultural hegemony, which typically includes the imposition of a standard language and the eradication of local customs and dialects. On this topic, see Walter L. Adamson, Hegemony and Revolution: A Study of Antonio Gramsci’s Political and Cultural Theory (Berkeley: U of California P, 1980).
Clare's case, by the politics of patronage. Clare received financial support from such wealthy patrons as Lord Milton and Lord Radstock, and he was expected to show due humility and correct political opinions in return. Lord Radstock was appalled to find a denunciation of "accursed Wealth" in the poem "Helpstone," in Poems Descriptive. "This is radical slang," retorted Lord Radstock in the margin of this passage, revealing the conflation of political and linguistic criteria in his judgment of Clare's poetry. Incensed by Clare's poignant account of the devastation and misery caused by wealthy landowners through the process of parliamentary enclosure, Radstock issued an ominous warning to Eliza Emmerson, another of Clare's patrons:

You must tell him—to expunge certain highly objectionable passages in his 1st Volume—before the 3rd Edition appears—passages, wherein, his then depressed state hurried him not only into error, but into the most flagrant acts of injustice; by accusing those of pride, cruelty, vices, and ill-directed passions—who, are the very persons, by whose truly generous and noble exertions he has been raised from misery and despondency. . . . Tell Clare if he has still a recollection of what I have done, and am still doing for him, he must give me unquestionable proofs of being that man I would have him to be—he must expunge! (Critical Heritage 61)

In a letter of May 1820 to John Taylor, Clare responded to this demand by Radstock, as well as to various other complaints by his patrons:

Being much botherd latley I must trouble you to leave out the 8 lines in 'helpstone' beginning 'Accursed wealth' . . . leave it out & put ***** to fill up the blank this will let em see I do it as negligent as possible d—n that canting way of being forced to please I say—I cant abide it & one day I will show my Independance more stron[g]ly than ever (Letters 69)

Being an editor of staunch liberal principles, Taylor initially resisted any political censorship of Clare's poetry; but eventually the required cuts were made in the fourth edition of Poems Descriptive. This episode illustrates the pervasiveness of the political constraints exercised by Clare's patrons, and the severe limitations that they imposed upon his expression of controversial opinions, even when these were shared by his publisher. Although Clare never again faced such direct censorship by his patrons, the reason may be that he and Taylor had both learned the harsh necessity of self-censorship, or, more insidiously, had unconsciously internalized the very

repression they sought to oppose.\footnote{Johanne Clare makes a similar point in John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 1987) 76: “Perhaps the greatest difficulty he had to surmount in his early years was that he had himself internalized some of the values of cultural hegemony.”} Never again would Clare’s published poetry express radical political views, and in his manuscript autobiography, “Sketches in the Life of John Clare” (circa 1821), intended for the eyes of his patrons, he voices reassuringly submissive sentiments:

I believe the reading a small pamphlet on the Murder of the French King many years ago with other inhuman butcheries cured me very early of thinking favourably of radicalism the words ‘revolution and reform’ so much in fashion with sneering arch infidels thrills me with terror when ever I see them . . . may the foes of my country ever find their hopes blasted by disappointments and the silent prayers of the honest man to a power that governs with justice for their destruction meet always with success\footnote{John Clare’s Autobiographical Writings, ed. Eric Robinson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986) 26; see also vii, on dating the “Sketches,” and xiii, on Clare’s intended audience.}

Since Clare elsewhere consistently advocates the necessity of reform (although he often criticizes the reckless violence of reformers), it seems likely that his revulsion against radicalism is exaggerated here in order to present himself as a meek, inoffensive candidate for patronage.

While Clare seemed willing, on occasion, to compromise the expression of his political principles, he was always reluctant to compromise the integrity of his local dialect. In a manuscript note of circa 1819 he boldly defended his use of “vulgar” expressions, seeking at the same time to reappropriate the term “vulgar” to a positive, democratic connotation:

Bad spelling may be altered by the Amanuensis but no word is to be altered

“Eggs on” in the “Address to a Lark”—whether provincial or not I cannot tell but it is common with the vulgar (I am of that class) & I heartily desire no word of mine to be altered

The word “twit-a-twit” (if a word it can be called) you will undoubtedly smile at but I wish you to print it as it is for it is the Language of Nature & that can never be disgusting\footnote{J. W. & Anne Tibble, John Clare: A Life (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield, 1972) 112; partially reprinted in The Early Poems of John Clare 1804–1822, ed. Eric Robinson & David Powell (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 1: 100, citing Pforzheimer MS A3.}

Clare’s fidelity to what he calls the “Language of Nature” and his resistance to substantive editorial alterations frequently recur throughout his editorial correspondence, indicating his enduring allegiance to a defiantly “vulgar”
conception of language. In a letter of July 1820 to Taylor’s partner, James Hessey, Clare expresses his outrage at deletions made in the third edition of *Poems Descriptive* for the sake of “delicacy”:

I have seen the third Edition & am cursed mad about it the judgment of T[aylor] is a button hole lower in my opinion—it is good—but too subject to be tainted by medlars false delicasy damn it I hate it beyond every thing those primpt up misses brought up in those seminaries of mysterious wickedness (Boarding Schools) what will please em? why we well know—but while their heart & soul loves to extravagance (what we dare not mention) false delicasy’s seriousness muscles [i.e. muzzles] up the mouth & condemns it ... I think to please all & offend all we shoud put out 215 pages of blank leaves & call it ‘Clare in fashion’ *(Letters 83–84)*

Seeking to justify the earthy expression of sexual matters in such poems as “Dolly’s Mistake,” Clare denounces the hypocrisy of those squeamish “bluestockings” who attempt to bowdlerize his poems while secretly relishing their salacious language. His most outspoken resistance to grammatical correction occurs in a letter of February 1822, resisting some editorial changes by Taylor:

> I may alter but I cannot mend grammer in learning is like Tyranny in government—confound the bitch Ill never be her slave & have a vast good mind not to alter the verse in question—by g-d Ive tryd an hour & cannot do a syllable so do your best or let it pass *(Letters 231)*

This stubborn attitude became quite emphatic during the composition of *The Shepherd’s Calendar*, when Clare took up a directly adversarial stance toward Taylor. It continued even after Clare’s confinement in the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum (in 1841); his keeper, W. F. Knight, testified that Clare “in no instance has ever rewritten a single line—whenever I have wished him to correct a single line he has ever shown the greatest disinclination to take in hand what to him seems a great task” (Tibble 379).

Despite his overt resistance to Taylor’s alterations, Clare recognized their shared responsibility to produce a marketable volume, and in most cases

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he grudgingly accepted Taylor's revisions, especially in the early part of his career when he was still struggling to master the literary language of his poetic precursors. On several occasions during the composition of his first volume, he instructed Taylor to do whatever he liked with the manuscripts; and he actually invited editorial correction in a letter of 1823: "If there is any bad grammar in the rhymes tell me . . . I shall give my reasons as a critical Bard (not as a critical wolf who mangles to murder) to attempt correction" (Letters 267). The extent of Taylor's revisions to Clare's poetry can be determined by comparing the published versions with Clare's original manuscript versions, which have a much higher incidence of dialect words, nonstandard grammar, and idiosyncratic spelling, as well as an almost total absence of punctuation.\(^\text{10}\) The necessity of a completely literal transcription of Clare's manuscripts was first recognized by Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield, and their pioneering editions of Clare's poetry in 1964, 1966, and 1967 still serve as models for the more complete Oxford edition now in progress. Unlike all previous editors of Clare, who found it expedient to tidy up his text, Robinson and Summerfield insisted on an absolute fidelity to Clare's original manuscripts, arguing that "once the business of correction is begun there is no end."\(^\text{11}\) It is largely thanks to Robinson and Summerfield that modern readers have gained access to Clare's poems in the full panoply of their jubilantly transgressive individuality.

In these manuscript versions, Clare's unstopped lines provide multiple branching pathways of possible meaning, thereby challenging the tyranny of grammar and its prescriptive requirement of unambiguous expression. Throughout his poetic career, Clare likewise resisted the political process of "inclosure" (as he normally spelled the word, thereby literalizing its etymology), especially its tendency to obliterate the complex network of grassy footpaths that formerly meandered across the landscape, often replacing these with stark, rectilinear turnpikes. As several recent critics have pointed out, Clare's conception of language and his conception of landscape seem closely related; he regards both as ideally constituting an unrestricted communal zone, open to local browsing and free from the linearity, exclusivity, and standardization imposed by outside authorities.\(^\text{12}\) Clare's

\(^{10}\) A facsimile reprint of the four volumes published during Clare's lifetime would be very desirable, since the original editions are now rare and often inaccessible. Despite Taylor's heavy-handed editing of Clare's verse, these published volumes are of great historical interest: they show how Clare's contemporaries knew him, and, in a sense, how he came to know himself.


\(^{12}\) On the relation between Clare's conception of landscape and his resistance to linguistic
distinct preference for his own regional vernacular, with all of its homely quirks and idiosyncrasies, over the homogenized national standard of discourse, clearly goes beyond a mere inability or refusal to master the conventions of correct expression. If this were the case, all of Clare’s poetry would be composed in roughly the same kind of language, with dialect words and grammatical irregularities scattered randomly throughout. But in fact Clare’s poetic language falls into several discrete discursive modes, varying from such comic vernacular poems as “Dolly’s Mistake” to more serious reflective poems, such as “What is Life?” or “The Setting Sun,” that conform fairly closely to the prevailing standards of lexical and grammatical correctness. Like Burns, a poet whom he admired and occasionally imitated, Clare is not simply a dialect poet, but a poet who employs dialect for deliberate effect. Clare adopts a nonstandard lexicon only when it suits his poetic purpose, and he is fully capable of producing an “educated” sociolect when treating abstract or elevated topics.

Quite early in his career, Clare states a principle of linguistic decorum that reflects his intense awareness of stylistic and lexical norms. In a letter of 1819, discussing William Shenstone’s Pastorals, Clare complains that “Putting the Correct Language of the Gentleman into the mouth of a Simple Shepherd or Vulgar Ploughman is far from Natural” (Letters 12). Rustic speakers must speak like rustics. Yet the following sentence praises Alexander Pope for his “Harmony of Numbers,” suggesting that Clare does not object to “the Correct Language of the Gentleman” per se, but only when such an idiom is thrust into incongruous contexts. Clare’s poetic development consists largely of his learning to manipulate a variety of discursive modes and stylistic models while remaining true to his vernacular roots. Far from being ignorant of grammar and spelling, Clare possessed a fairly good knowledge of the standard authorities and could conform to their prescribed usage when it suited him. Despite his knowledge of these authorities, however, his poetic language actually became less conventional over the course of his career, while he became more stubbornly resistant to the attempts of Taylor and others to correct his poems. Far from being a naïf in matters of grammatical theory, Clare was surprisingly well read in contemporary linguistics, possessing several standard works on the subject.


13. All three of these poems appeared in Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery (1820). “Dolly’s Mistake” was deleted from the third edition (see above, note 8). “The Setting Sun” was previously published in Clare’s Prospectus of 1818 (see Critical Heritage 30).
Ultimately, however, he rejected the prevailing linguistic norm, with its emphasis upon the standards of written language, in favor of a more radical tradition of linguistic theory that advocated the expressive potential of local vernacular speech.

Clare evidently encountered the forces of linguistic standardization at an early stage in his career. It is not known precisely how he acquired the rudiments of reading and writing during his elementary education; he had no access to a grammar-book, "nor do I believe my [school]master knew any more about the matter" (Autobiographical Writings 28). Presumably he was subjected to a crudely prescriptive approach to grammar, and while he quickly mastered the basic skills involved, he also acquired an enduring hostility to cultural authority figures. The remainder of his education was obtained through desultory reading of whatever books happened to be available, and like many self-educated people, Clare exhibited astonishing gaps in his knowledge, coupled with an equally astonishing wealth of information on particular subjects. In his autobiography, Clare recounts how, at age 13, he purchased his first book of poetry, an edition of James Thomson's *Seasons* (1730), and eagerly devoured its contents (Autobiographical Writings 9). He eventually acquired quite a substantial collection of eighteenth-century poets, and he undoubtedly derived a great deal of his literary skill from attentive reading and precise imitation of these favored models. Along with various books and anthologies of poetry, Clare acquired several books on linguistic topics; one of the earliest of these was an elementary spelling-book that gave Clare great annoyance:

I had hardly hard the name of grammer while at school—but as I had an itch for trying at every thing I got hold of I determined to try grammer, and for that purpose, by the advice of a friend, bought the 'Universal Spelling Book' as the most easy assistant for my starting out, but finding a jumble of words classd under this name and that name and this such a fi gure of speech and that another hard worded figure I turned from further notice of it in instant disgust (Autobiographical Writings 15)14

14. The exact title of the spelling-book consulted by Clare is uncertain; it might be Daniel Fenning's *Universal Spelling-Book* (London 1756) as Eric Robinson suggests (Autobiographical Writings 167 n. 23); or it might be Solomon Lowe's *Critical Spelling-Book* (London 1755) as Frederick Martin claims (38–40). Both of these books are rigidly prescriptive in tone, and both include a standard grammar. Lowe's book also includes a list of figures of speech (147–49); Fenning's does not. Lowe's titlepage declares that his book is "designed for a standard of the language," and he further states that he has modeled his rules upon the usage of "the better sort of people at London" (12). Fenning's book matches Clare's title, but Lowe's book more fully exemplifies his description of jawbreaker terminology; Martin gives an amusing but probably embellished account of Clare's bewildered response to Lowe's lists of
Far from undermining his self-confidence, however, Clare’s “disgust” with this relentlessly taxonomic spelling-book actually renewed his intuitive sense of literary vocation:

for as I knew I coud talk to be understood I thought by the same method my writing might be made out as easy and proper, so in the teeth of grammer I pursued my literary journey warm as usual, working hard all day and scribbling at night or any leisure hour in any hole or corner I could shove in unseen (Autobiographical Writings 15)

This episode indicates the origin of Clare’s skeptical attitude toward prescriptive linguistics and provides a clue to the rationale behind it. Clare’s self-confidence derives from a rather sophisticated insight into the nature of language: like the modern generative grammarians, he realizes that the ability to construct well-formed sentences has very little to do with the traditional rules of grammar, and depends much more on early childhood development of linguistic competence through normal conversation. Speech, not writing, provides Clare with a fundamental paradigm of linguistic performance, and despite the exhortations of his genteel friends and patrons he will continue to articulate his local vernacular “in the teeth of grammer.”

In April 1820, shortly after the publication of Poems Descriptive, Lord Milton presented Clare with a copy of Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary of the English Language . . . Abstracted from the Folio Edition 15 This was not the massive folio edition of 1755, but the abridged octavo edition first published in 1756 and frequently reprinted thereafter. This abridged edition omits all of the quotations that lend Johnson’s Dictionary its unique character; moreover, many of the definitions are shortened, and Johnson states that “many barbarous terms and phrases by which other dictionaries may vitiate the style are rejected from this.” 16 This edition includes Johnson’s “Grammar of the English Tongue” but omits his history of the English

“oxytones,” “penacutes,” “ternacutes,” “quartacutes,” and “quintacutes.” Since Martin implies that he has actually seen Clare’s copy of Lowe’s book, I am inclined to accept his identification. Clare might have misremembered the title, or perhaps he consulted both of these spelling-books.


language. Also omitted is Johnson’s famous Preface, with its melancholy reflections on the mutability of language; in its place is a shorter and more cheerful preface, also by Johnson, reassuring readers that this abridgement will satisfy their basic reference needs. This brief preface is quite condescending in tone, assuming that readers of “lower characters” are incapable of sustained intellectual engagement with literature:

Works of that kind [i.e. the folio Dictionary] are by no means necessary to the greater number of readers, who, seldom intending to write or presuming to judge, turn over books only to amuse their leisure, and to gain degrees of knowledge suitable to lower characters, or necessary to the common business of life: these know not any other use of a dictionary than that of adjusting orthography, and explaining terms of science or words of infrequent occurrence, or remote derivation. (Johnson, preface to Dictionary [1756])

In thus describing the intended readership for his abridgement, Johnson’s preface provides a clue to Lord Milton’s intentions in presenting it to Clare: he may have wished that Clare would use it to improve his poetic language by conforming to established standards of spelling and usage. While Johnson certainly was the leading authority in these areas, his abridged dictionary, with its condescending preface and starkly prescriptive definitions, was unlikely to appeal to Clare, and there is no evidence that he ever consulted it. Clare might have enjoyed browsing through the rich trove of quotations in the folio Dictionary, but he could hardly be expected to relish the dry bones of the abridgement. Ironically, however, Johnson’s Dictionary provided the standard by which Taylor measured Clare’s departures from normal poetic diction; in his preface to Poems Descriptive Taylor states that the glossary includes “all such [words] as are not to be found in Johnson’s Dictionary” (Critical Heritage 48). As we have seen, this glossary provided lethal ammunition to Clare’s critics, who used it as a ready-made list of deviations from lexical propriety. Taylor himself sometimes used Johnson’s Dictionary as a stick to beat Clare; in a pencilled note on the manuscript of “The Village Minstrel” next to the word swail, Taylor wrote: “I can find no such word in Dicy / why not Vale?” This evocative dialect word was accordingly deleted from the published version of that poem.17

Despite their evident lack of success in reforming Clare’s poetic style, his patrons and admirers continued to inundate him with books by the leading linguistic authorities. In about 1820 he received a copy of Hugh

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17. Early Poems of John Clare 2: 123n. Oddly enough, the word swail was allowed to remain in two other poems published in The Village Minstrel, “The Snowdrop” (line 7) and “Recollections after a Ramble” (line 254), and it was defined as “shade” in the glossary to that volume. (Line numbers refer to Early Poems 2: 317 and 2: 196.)
Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), a compendium of information on stylistic refinement and other aspects of polite literature.\(^{18}\) In June 1824 he received a copy of William Allen's *Elements of English Grammar* (1813), presented by the author.\(^ {19}\) This was followed in November 1825 by Robert Lowth's *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762), presented by Eliza Emmerson.\(^ {20}\) Clare was also familiar with Lindley Murray's *English Grammar* (1795), since he expressed his opinion of it to Charles Lamb during an 1824 visit to London. None of these books would have altered Clare's dim view of prescriptive grammarians. Lowth's work, the first comprehensive English grammar, uses Latin as a model for correct English usage, often at the expense of normal speech. One can imagine Clare's bemusement at such rules as: "Hypothetical, Conditional, Concessive, and Exceptional Conjunctions seem to require properly the Subjunctive Mode after them."\(^ {21}\) Lindley Murray, whose *Grammar* sold millions of copies during Clare's lifetime, was even more rigidly prescriptive and moralistic than Lowth; his grammatical exercises include such obsequious apothegms as: "Patriotism, morality, every public and private consideration, demand our submission to lawful government."\(^ {22}\) While Clare may have browsed through these grammar books, there is no evidence that he sought to apply their principles to his own writing. His sardonic response to traditional grammar is reported by Thomas Hood: "[Clare] vehemently denounces all Philology as nothing but a sort of man-trap for authors, and heartily 'dals' [i.e. damns] Lindley Murray for 'inventing it.'"\(^ {23}\)

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that Clare used nothing but his intuitive knowledge of Northamptonshire dialect to withstand the formidable apparatus of the traditional grammarians. In his lifelong resistance to the tyranny of grammar, he possessed the aid and comfort of an alternative tradition of linguistic scholarship, one that emphasized the validity of vernacular speech and sought to uphold local idioms against the encroachment of standardization. Clare became aware of this alternative tradition quite early in his career, and he continued to explore its ramifications.

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18. Clare's copy of Blair's *Lectures* (1819 edition) was possibly presented by Lord Radstock in February 1820 along with a copy of Blair's *Sermons* (1819 edition); see *Northampton Catalogue* 24, items #116–17.


tions throughout the course of his poetic development. In 1813 he acquired a copy of Nathan Bailey’s *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (thirteenth edition, 1749), a work whose formative influence on Clare’s conception of language has not previously been recognized. First published in 1721, this was the most popular eighteenth-century dictionary before Johnson, and it continued to flourish even after the publication of Johnson’s *Dictionary*, going through thirty editions by 1802. Johnson consulted Bailey in constructing the wordlist for his own dictionary, but the two works are nevertheless quite dissimilar in their fundamental structure and purpose.

Johnson’s avowed intention is to establish an enduring standard of English usage, and to that end he excludes most archaic, dialect, and slang expressions from his dictionary. Johnson’s classicism is apparent in his etymologies, which systematically ignore native, barbaric, and “vulgar” English and Germanic roots in favor of more remote, yet more refined Latin or Greek analogues. Johnson often imposes class distinctions upon acceptable usage, dismissing the vocabulary of the “laborious and mercantile parts of the people” as mere “fugitive cant” (Preface to folio ed. [1755]). His dictionary enshrines a conservative ideology in its definitions of such words as “equal,” “rights,” and “liberty.” Johnson’s political ideology is intimately bound up with his concept of refined usage; both seek to exclude the uneducated masses from participation in the political process.

Bailey’s *Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, by contrast, incorporates a great variety of nonstandard words and seems little concerned with the determination of “correct” usage. Bailey’s definitions are less precise than those of Johnson, but his etymologies are far more attentive to the native roots of English words, and despite his faulty knowledge of Anglo-Saxon, Bailey seeks to authenticate the legitimacy of local origins. Moreover, Bailey’s dictionary is especially rich in English dialect words, proclaiming on its title page that it includes “the Dialects of our different Counties,” a feature that doubtless appealed to Clare. De Witt Starnes and Gertrude Noyes have shown that Bailey derived most of his dialect words from

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26. Approximately 5300 (or 12%) of the 42,500 lexical entries in the thirteenth edition of Bailey’s dictionary are dialect words; these were later published separately as *English Dialect Words of the Eighteenth Century as shown in the Universal Etymological Dictionary of Nathaniel Bailey*, ed. William E. A. Axon (London: English Dialect Society, 1883). Axon cites the thirteenth edition as his primary source (xvi). Johnson’s *Dictionary*, by contrast, intentionally excludes most dialect words; the few that remain are tagged with such notations as “a low word” or “not in elegant use.”
previous lexicographers, such as John Kersey (1708), Elisha Coles (1676), and John Ray (1674); his great merit lies not in his originality but in his catholic inclusiveness, drawing upon all available sources to compile the eighteenth century’s most comprehensive treatment of English dialect. In addition, Bailey included a large vocabulary of obsolete words, mostly compiled from published glossaries to the works of Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakespeare. Bailey’s hoard of archaic and provincial words was a potential goldmine for poets in quest of an alternative to the established Neoclassical poetic diction; Starnes and Noyes point out that “it was mainly from this rich collection of obsolete words that Chatterton constructed his poetic language for the Rowley poems.”

As we shall see, Bailey’s dictionary assumed a similar importance for Clare, not so much as a source of obsolete words (though he may have derived some poetic archaisms from it), but primarily as a means of defending the legitimacy of his “provincialisms” against critical disparagement.

Nathan Bailey was a schoolmaster, lexicographer, and compiler of classical textbooks. He belonged to a marginal sect of Seventh Day Baptists who observed Saturday as the Sabbath, and his own sectarian views are reflected in his dictionary definitions of “Sabbath” and “Sabbatarian.”

As a Dissenter he was excluded from the elite circles of English society; and his bitter experience of exclusion may have motivated his lexicographic principle of inclusion. The Introduction to his *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* reveals a distinct political agenda: it traces the history of the English language in a way that stresses the survival of local vernaculars despite the repeated invasion of foreign conquerors. Neither the Romans, nor the Danes, nor the Normans were able to suppress the elegance and descriptive intensity of the ancient British tongue. Bailey describes the failed linguistic imperialism of the Romans:

> The Roman Legions residing in Britain for the Space of above 200 Years, undoubtedly disseminated the Latin tongue; and the People being also governed by Laws written in the Latin, must necessarily make a Mixture of Languages. This seems to have been the first


28. Barbara Strang examines Clare’s use of poetic archaisms in “John Clare’s Language,” in *The Rural Muse* (Northumberland: Mid Northumberland Arts Group, 1982) 163–64. Many of these archaic words occur in Bailey’s *Dictionary.*

29. Axon, *English Dialect Words* xiv–xv. This is my main source of biographical information on Bailey.
Mutation the Language of Britain suffered: however so tenacious were our Forefathers of their Native Language, that it overgrew the Roman.  

After recounting the incursions of the Saxons and the Danes, Bailey describes the Norman Conquest:

Then about the Year 1067 William Duke of Normandy, commonly call'd William the Conqueror, came over to Britain; and having vanquish'd Canutus the Danish King, made an entire Conquest of Britain: and as a Monument of their Conquest, the Normans endeavoured to yoak the English under their Tongue, as they had under their Command, by compelling them to teach their Children in their Schools nothing but the French, by publishing their Laws in French, and by enforcing them most rigorously to plead and be impleaded in that Tongue, for the Space of about 350 Years; by which means the Language of Britain became a Dialect of the English Saxon, and Norman French, which now are the Groundwork or Fundamentals of the Present Language of Great Britain.

Bailey laments the linguistic tyranny of the Normans and their wholesale destruction of the Old English language:

Before I proceed to account for the Alteration of the English Saxon, by the two other Causes, I shall mention something relating to the Saxon Tongue, of a great Part of which the Normans despoil'd us, giving a worse for a better. "Great verily (says Camden) was the Glory of our Tongue, before the Norman Conquest, in this, that the Old English could express most aptly all the Conceptions of the Mind in their own Tongue, without borrowing from any."

Bailey provides several examples of the concision and vividness of the Anglo-Saxon, such as *Inwit* for conscience and *Eorões-Wele* for fertility. He concludes:

By these Instances it does appear that the English Saxon Language of which the Normans despoiled us in great Part, had its Beauties, was Significant and Emphatical, and preferable to what they imposed upon us.


Bailey’s predilection for Old English is apparent in his etymologies, which trace Anglo-Saxon roots wherever possible. For Clare, the political implications of Bailey’s Introduction would have been quite apparent. If local vernaculars represent the survival of the ancient English language, then any attempt to impose standardization merely reflects the dominance of foreign paradigms. The old words must be cultivated and preserved in order to assure the cultural survival and the political autonomy of England’s indigenous people.32

Throughout his life, Clare devoted himself wholeheartedly to the preservation of his native language and culture. The Village Minstrel is virtually an archive of village customs, games, and stories; he later submitted a prose account of local traditions to William Hone’s Every-Day Book (1826–1827); and during his asylum period he contributed numerous dialect words to Anne Elizabeth Baker’s Glossary of Northamptonshire Words and Phrases (1854). Clare’s most enduring legacy, however, is the rough-hewn linguistic texture of his poetry; and his resistance to the standardization of his local voice received significant encouragement at a crucial moment from Bailey’s dictionary. Taylor, as we have seen, compiled the glossary to Poems Descriptive, and also presumably to The Village Minstrel, as a list of words not authorized by Johnson’s dictionary.33 In some cases the meaning of a dialect word was obvious to Taylor from its context; in other cases he sent queries to Clare, or simply guessed at the meaning. (Sometimes he guessed wrong, as in the definitions for shoo and soodles.34) But in several cases Taylor consulted dictionaries other than Johnson’s; in the glossary to Poems Descriptive, Taylor likewise laments the linguistic tyranny of the Norman invaders in The Rights of Man, part 1 (1791): “Submission is wholly a vassalage term, repugnant to the idea of freedom, and an echo of the language used at the Conquest.” For further discussion see Smith, Politics of Language 51. Clare may have derived some of his understanding of radical politics from this enormously popular book; Eric Robinson states that Clare read Paine, on the basis of manuscript evidence (Autobiographical Writings xiv). In a journal entry for 17 March 1825, Clare denies that he ever read Paine (Grainger, Natural History Writings 230). If Clare did read Paine, he certainly did not advertise the fact.

32. Thomas Paine likewise laments the linguistic tyranny of the Norman invaders in The Rights of Man, part 1 (1791): “Submission is wholly a vassalage term, repugnant to the idea of freedom, and an echo of the language used at the Conquest.” For further discussion see Smith, Politics of Language 51. Clare may have derived some of his understanding of radical politics from this enormously popular book; Eric Robinson states that Clare read Paine, on the basis of manuscript evidence (Autobiographical Writings xiv). In a journal entry for 17 March 1825, Clare denies that he ever read Paine (Grainger, Natural History Writings 230). If Clare did read Paine, he certainly did not advertise the fact.

33. Critical Heritage 48. Taylor wanted Clare to correct proofs of the glossary to Poems Descriptive, but it is doubtful he actually did so, since the published glossary includes errors that Clare would certainly have corrected if he had seen them (see following note). Margaret Grainger, Natural History Writings (366) cites Taylor’s letter to Edward Drury, 28 December 1819: “Let Clare look over the Glossary and correct the Explanations . . . Pray let Clare give his own meanings to all doubtful words.” See also Taylor to Clare in Letters 150 (10 February 1821): “Your Explanation of the Provincialisms suits me Capitally for the glossary. I have a general but not a true Sense of their Meaning—so I think I shall get you to interpret a few more—’Grains’ for instance I had quite mistaken.”

34. Shoo is defined in the glossary to Poems Descriptive as “to carry for a pretence,” apparently Taylor’s guess based on the context of “Summer Evening,” line 168; but the word actually means “to shuffle or saunter.” Soodles is defined as “goes unwillingly,” based on line 175 of “Summer Evening”; but the word actually means “to saunter.” Both of these words were correctly defined in the glossary to The Village Minstrel, suggesting either that Clare
scriptive he cites Bailey's dictionary for the word *swaliest*, and he cites the 1775 dictionary of John Ash (another reliable authority on regional dialect) for the words *dithering, slitve, spinney*, and *witchen*. Taylor possibly derived some other definitions from Bailey; the words *dammed, goss, hob, nappy*, and *siled* do not occur in Johnson, and Taylor's definitions closely resemble those in Bailey.35 Taylor's public recognition of the authority of Ash and Bailey for Clare's dialect must have bolstered Clare's confidence in the legitimacy of such words and confirmed his allegiance to the vernacular tradition of linguistic scholarship.

Several years later, Clare finally discovered a grammar-book that he could admire; it was by William Cobbett, a self-educated radical pamphleteer whose lower-class origins conditioned his sense of linguistic identity. In a letter of circa 1831–32, Clare asks his friend Marianne Marsh for her opinion of “the best part of Cobbets Gramer,” and in a letter of January 1832 to the same correspondent he praises Cobbett as “one of the most powerful prose writers of the age” (Letters 556, 560). Clare refers here to Cobbett's *Grammar of the English Language, in a Series of Letters: Intended for the Use of Schools and of Young Persons in general; but more especially for the Use of Soldiers, Sailors, Apprentices, and Plough-boys* (1818). Cobbett regards genteel language as an instrument of fraud and political oppression; he writes with particular vehemence against classical learning, since “a knowledge of the Latin and Greek Languages does not prevent men from writing bad English.”36 Clare shares Cobbett's contempt for classical learning and his linguistic ideology, based on the norms of spoken vernacular and attentive to regional varieties of usage. In a prose fragment of circa 1832, Clare attacks the “pedantic garrison” of the established grammarians while praising Cobbett's theory of grammar:

Those who have made grammar up into a system and cut it into classes and orders as the student does the animal or vegetable creation may be a recreation for schools but it becomes of no use towards making any one so far acquainted with it as to find it useful—it will only serve to puzzle and mislead to awe and intimidate instead of aiding and encouraging him therefore it pays nothing for the study . . .

provided corrections or that Taylor's familiarity with Clare's dialect was improving. (Line numbers refer to *Early Poems of John Clare* I: 11.)

35. Ash's dictionary cites Bailey's definition of *sile*, “to sink or fall to the bottom.” Neither Johnson nor Ash could have provided Taylor with the relevant definitions of *dammed* (“starved with Hunger”—Bailey), *goss* (“Gors or Goss . . . a shrub, called Furz”—Bailey), or *hob* (“the Back of a Chimney”—Bailey). The relevant definition of *nappy*, “pleasant and strong ale,” occurs only in Bailey; Johnson and Ash list it as an adjective meaning “frothy.”

And such a one as Cobbet who has come boldly forward and not only assailed the outworks of such a pedantic garrison but like a skilful general laid open its weakness to all deserves more praise for the use of his labour than all the rest of the castle building grammarians put together for he plainly comes to this conclusion—that what ever is intellig[i]ble to others is grammar and whatever is commonsense is not far from correctness.  

This is a fairly accurate description of Cobbett’s Grammar, which seeks to demolish the pretensions of the traditional grammarians, especially Lowth and Murray, by pointing out instances where they break their own rules. Cobbett is delightfully iconoclastic in his choice of quotations to illustrate bad grammar, citing the works of such classically educated authors as Milton, Addison, and Johnson, along with excerpts from parliamentary debates and a speech by the Prince Regent. Grammar for Cobbett is the ultimate leveller, allowing ordinary citizens to penetrate the obscurity and deception of political discourse. Although Cobbett himself does not always avoid the pitfalls of prescriptivism, his advocacy of plain vernacular speech and his satirical exposure of established linguistic authorities evidently appealed to Clare. Indeed, Clare goes much farther than Cobbett in challenging the norms of “educated” language and cultivating his own peculiar modes of expression.

Clare’s discovery of his mature poetic voice occurred through a long struggle against the pressures exerted by editors, patrons, and reviewers; he found himself poised unevenly between the fashionable models of his poetic apprenticeship and the rude authenticity of his own native dialect. His earliest poems employ a poetic style that seems at times slavishly derivative of eighteenth-century models, notably the loco-descriptive poetry of Thomson, Cowper, and Gray. This uneasy tension between imitation and originality is especially apparent in his first volume, Poems Descriptive, and continues to impede the full range of his poetic voice in his second volume, The Village Minstrel. The uneven quality of Clare’s early poetry is especially apparent in his sonnets, which present the challenge of innovation within a form constrained by an overbearing weight of historical tradition. His most derivative sonnets are written in fairly standard “educated” language on abstract meditative themes, such as “On Death,” “Peace,” “Hope,” “Expression,” and “To Time”; he is much more successful when

37. John Clare, Oxford Authors, ed. Eric Robinson & David Powell (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984) 481; variatim in Grainger, Natural History Writings liv, citing Pforzheimer Misc. MS 197. For “Lectures” Grainger reads “treatises.” My conjectural dating of this prose fragment is based on the inference that Clare had recently discovered Cobbett’s Grammar when he wrote the letters mentioning the book.

using the sonnet to encapsulate vignettes of life in the Northamptonshire countryside, although even here the temptation to imitation and abstraction tends to vitiate the specificity of his description. Clare’s early sonnet “Winter” exemplifies this unfortunate tendency to undercut his vivid, earthy dialect by introducing awkward personifications of abstract entities:

The small wind whispers thro the leafless hedge
Most sharp & chill while the light snowey flakes
Rests on each twig & spike of witherd sedge
Resembling scattered feathers—vainly breaks
The pale split sunbeams thro the frowning cloud
On winters frowns below—from day to day
Unmelted still he spreads his hoary shroud
In dithering pride on the pale travellers way
Who croodling hastens from the storm behind
Fast gathering deep & black—again to find
His cottage fire & corners sheltering bounds
Where haply such uncomfortable days
Makes muscial the woodsaps fizzling sounds
& hoarse loud bellows puffing up the blaze

(Early Poems of John Clare 2: 492)

The personification of Winter as a “frowning” old man spreading his “hoary shroud” across the landscape is certainly a derivative feature of this poem, along with its conventional poetic diction (“haply”) and the generic, unspecified loco-descriptive “traveller.” But this poem shows considerable promise in its robust regional vocabulary (“dithering,” “croodling,” “fizzling”) and its refusal—typical of Clare—to abide by a standard rhyme-scheme or to follow strict rules of grammar. Thus for no apparent reason except individual eccentricity, Clare introduces a rhyming couplet (behind/find) in the middle of the sonnet, and he follows his own “vulgar” usage in matters of verb agreement, spelling, and punctuation. When this poem was published in The Village Minstrel, however, John Taylor normalized its grammar, punctuation, and spelling, reducing its quirky freshness to the prevailing norms of “correct” English.

Taylor’s self-appointed role as “Corrector” of Clare’s verse was undertaken with Clare’s full knowledge and tacit consent, but despite Taylor’s good intentions and reasonably competent editing, Clare became increasingly restive under the enforced normalization of his poetic language. As Clare developed a distinctive poetic voice, he became less willing to conform to “correct” linguistic usage and more boldly deviant from lexical

39. John Taylor calls himself the “Corrector” of Clare’s “bad Grammar” in a letter of February 1822; see Letters 224n.
and prosodic norms. The poetry of his middle period—including *The Shepherd’s Calendar* (1827) and *The Rural Muse* (1835)—explores the rich expressive possibilities of his own regional dialect, using a wide range of dialect terms while returning to the prosodic and rhetorical models of his local culture, especially the folk ballads and lively doggerel verses derived from the oral tradition of his family and neighbors in Helpston.\(^{40}\) His poetry thus evolves away from what Bakhtin terms a “prim but moribund aristocratic language”\(^{41}\) toward a vernacular discourse of stubborn locality, synthesizing a variety of repressed or marginalized elements of Northamptonshire dialect.

A characteristic example of Clare’s linguistic practice in this middle period may be found in his sonnet, “Winter Fields,” which forms part of the manuscript collection assembled by Clare about 1832 under the title *The Midsummer Cushion*. This poem begins with what appears to be another old-fashioned personification of an abstract entity, “rich mirth,” but it soon becomes apparent that this abstraction is itself the target of ideological critique. Mirth is the possession of the idle rich who have money and leisure to spend on books,\(^{42}\) at the expense of the starving underclass described with telling concreteness in the rest of the poem:

\begin{verbatim}
O for a pleasant book to cheat the sway
Of winter—where rich mirth with hearty laugh
Listens & rubs his legs on corner seat
For fields are mire & sludge—& badly off
Are those who on their pudgy paths delay
There striding shepherd seeking driest way
Fearing nights wetshod feet & hacking cough
That keeps him waken till the peep of day
Goes shouldering onward & with ready hook
Progs off to ford the sloughs that nearly meet
Accross the lands—croodling & thin to view
His loath dog follows—stops & quakes & looks
For better roads—till whistled to pursue
Then on with frequent jumps he hirkles through\(^{43}\)
\end{verbatim}

\(^{40}\) On this topic see George Deacon, *John Clare and the Folk Tradition* (London: Sinclair Browne, 1983).


\(^{42}\) Clare criticizes Crabbe for his pampered and sentimental detachment from the real life of the peasant class: “Whats he know of the distresses of the poor . . . musing over a snug coal fire in his parsonage box” (*Letters* 137–38).

The highly conventional, almost parodic opening scene of this poem gives way to a vividly realized description of the shepherd and his dog striding through muddy fields, seeking a home that is never found and maintaining an affectionate loyalty to each other even in the midst of their suffering. Clare implicitly contrasts the narcissistic individualism of the literate class with the communal solidarity of the laboring class, here again expressed in robust dialect words such as “hirkles,” which in this context refers to the jerky, uneven motion of the dog as it jumps from side to side. “Hirkles” would also be a good word to describe the rhyme scheme of this sonnet, which follows no traditional pattern but jumps randomly from one rhyme to the next until it reaches the high ground of the final couplet. This innovative use of the sonnet form is triumphant in its very amateurishness, as Clare swerves against the burden of literary tradition to discover an appropriate form to express his stubborn resistance to the ideology of linguistic propriety. Paradoxically, however, this sonnet bears witness to Clare’s increasing sense of alienation from his own social class, since the very act of acquiring literacy and publishing books of poetry aligns him with the idle rich, most notably his wealthy patrons, and against the very class whose interests he seeks to advocate.  

Clare’s struggle to maintain a sense of personal and class identity through a gradually disintegrating literary career, economic hardship, dislocation from his birthplace, and a sense of betrayal and abandonment by friends, patrons, and even his family, cast him into deep depression and eventually resulted in his incarceration in the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum (1841). Despite his imprisonment in what he called the “English Bastille” and his isolation from his former literary mentors, Clare carried on his poetic vocation with enormous strength, dignity, and sense of purpose. His late poems, written in the asylum, go far beyond his published work in their deviation from established norms of linguistic and prosodic form. Critics of Clare’s asylum poetry have tended either to patronize “poor Clare” in their sympathy for his sufferings, or to celebrate his visionary power while failing to recognize the latent ideological basis of his formal innovations. The stubbornly unconventional quality of Clare’s asylum poetry is apparent in the poem “Winter,” written sometime after 1842 and existing only in a transcript prepared by his keeper, W. F. Knight. This poem might be described as the dried, withered husk of a sonnet; it begins with a full-fledged iambic pentameter line, but it dwindles down to shorter and shorter lines, rhyming erratically, and it reaches a final couplet after only eleven lines.  

In this pared-down, minimal prosodic form, the poem

44. In December 1820, Clare complains that “the society of farmers respecting books &c is little preferable to Goths & vandals” (Letters 113).

45. Clare never regarded the sonnet as having an absolutely fixed number of lines. In his exuberant early period, he sometimes wrote “sonnets” of 16 or 18 lines, such as “Morning
describes a desolate winter scene that suggests an existential analogue to Clare’s own sense of isolation and despair:

How blasted nature is, the scene is winter
The Autumn withered every branch
Leaves drop, and turn to colourless soil
Ice shoots i’ splinters at the river Bridge
And by and bye all stop—
White shines the snow upon the far hill top
Nature’s all withered to the root, her printer
To decay that neer comes back
Winds burst, then drop
Flowers, leaves and colours, nothing’s left to hint her
Spring, Summer, Autumn’s, withered into winter

There is a provisional, makeshift quality to the texture of this verse, gesturing in the direction of the sonnet form but reducing it to just a ghost of its former self. The incongruously rich rhymes of “winter/printer/hint her” are counterpointed by the haphazard or nonexistent rhymes of the other lines. This formal innovation hints at the poem’s meditation of scarcity, the poverty of language in the presence of a “withered” landscape. The syntactic structure of the poem is remarkably impoverished, lacking essential verbs and conjunctions, so that crucial lines and images remain enigmatic, disconnected. For instance, in the penultimate line, it is unclear whether “Flowers, leaves and colours” are the object of the verb “drop,” or an appositive construction to “nothing”—or perhaps both. And in line 7 the phrase “her printer” dangles mysteriously.

As in the earlier sonnets on winter, this poem contains an abstract personification, Nature, who is almost entirely shorn of her traditional attributes. Nature is “blasted” by the unseen force of winter, a force that is emphatically not personified, since in this poem “winter” occurs consistently in lowercase while the other seasons are capitalized. Winter is not so much a season as the absence of all season, the passing of all colors into colorlessness, the passing of being itself into sheer nothingness. Like Shelley’s West Wind, or Demogorgon in Prometheus Unbound, winter is an apocalyptic force that threatens the annihilation of all things, yet it also

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hints at the possibility that within this desolation are hidden the seeds of future growth. Even though Nature is “withered to the root,” this root still abides in the earth, linked paratactically to “her printer.” But who is nature’s printer? Who can this “printer” be but the poet himself, John Clare, who has striven to publish his poems even beyond the “decay” of his public career? By humbly inscribing himself as Nature’s printer, Clare acknowledges that his incarceration has robbed him of a public voice. He can no longer carry on his chosen career as a singer of songs and a teller of tales, but he can still pursue his poetic vocation in the silent medium of print. “Poets love nature,” says Clare in another asylum poem, “They are her very scriptures upon earth” (Later Poems 1: 313). Clare accentuates the written medium of poetry during his asylum period, and his belated acknowledgment of textuality tends to displace his previous emphasis upon spoken language as a paradigm for poetic discourse.

This conception of Clare’s late poetry as essentially written, rather than spoken or sung, is likely to raise doubts among those who regard Clare as primarily an oral poet. Certainly it is true that Clare is the beneficiary of a rich folk tradition of oral poetry, and I would not seek to minimize the importance of that tradition to him. Throughout his career, Clare was capable of composing verses modeled upon traditional folksongs and popular ballads with a seemingly effortless grace. But with the gradual loss of his readership, his growing sense of alienation, and his involuntary confinement, Clare seems to have lost the sense of immediacy that is essential to all oral forms of literature. Lacking listeners, his poems must perforce be written, either as letters to loved ones or as memoranda to himself. His longest asylum poem, “Child Harold,” is subtitled “Prison Amusements,” indicating his sense of its self-directedness. Within this sense of language as a textual medium, however, lie the seeds of Clare’s astonishing poetic development during the asylum period. Free from constraints imposed by outsiders, he was able to explore the most radical possibilities of poetic language. Clare’s linguistic and prosodic experiments during his asylum period represent the final stage of his quest for a mode of poetic discourse free from the tyranny of grammar and adequate to the expression of his tragic struggle for personal and regional identity.

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47. On the topos of “decay” see especially “Decay A Ballad,” published by Clare in The Rural Muse (1835); manuscript version in Midsummer Cushion 359.
48. The subtitle “Prison Amusements” is noted by Geoffrey Summerfield, John Clare: Selected Poems 209.