

“Finding a Tongue”: Natural Language, Imprinting and Sublimity
in John Clare’s *The Shepherd’s Calendar*

by

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Loud is the Summer's busy song,
The smallest breeze can find a tongue,
While insects of each tiny size
Grow teasing with their melodies,
Till noon burns with its blistering breath
Around, and day dies still as death.
The busy noise of man and brute
Is on a sudden lost and mute ... ("July," 91-99)¹

In John Clare's *The Shepherd's Calendar*, everything—man, flower, insect, beast, bird, earth and air—can “find a tongue,” feel within itself and locate the capacity and desire to sing. Yet, the poet veritably erases linguistic communication by humans. Few direct quotations issue from his human characters, and the number that appear are matched by direct quotation of birdsong. Still, we see humans in concert with each other and with nature over the course of the twelve poems, using a natural language that is independent of human words, whether spoken or written, and of linguistic preoccupation. How does Clare create so full a scene of interactions between animals, people, plants, weather and the earth while relying on non-linguistic semiotics? In exploring this answer, we come to realize how we as humans can communicate with nature, and how in our increasingly urban life and increasingly linguistic preoccupation we are losing our fluency in that natural language.

In this essay, I will first examine the poetic tropes Clare uses to establish a clear pattern of non-linguistic signs, one that levels the status between man and nature. Clare uses personification, synaesthesia and onomatopoeia when describing a packed retinue of flowers, fields, birds, mammals, insects, winds and water, in combination with his efforts to create a dumb show of the human characters. With linguistic communication among humans out of the way, the combined impact of this system reveals how natural language

is always at work throughout this cast, including humans, even when they are oblivious to its power and impact. We find that many of the curiosities of Clare's writing—the dialecticisms, the catalogs of names, the repetition of everyday scenes—that charmed but bedeviled his editors in the long process of preparing *The Shepherd's Calendar*, ultimately serve our purposes now in understanding the underpinnings of a natural language.

Next, I will explore how these tropes turn into a system of communication that mirrors the imprinting of birdsong. As ethologists have found, baby birds rely on a full sensory environment as well as a good tutor to learn their songs. Birds that are not only deafened but also blinded or segregated from their full habitat suffer during a crucial period of song development. In *The Shepherd's Calendar*, Clare's poetic system works to open our eyes as well as our ears and tutor us to the full song of our natural environment and natural language.

Finally, since poetry is linguistic, I will explore how poetry corresponds with this natural language, consequently opening the question of Clare's concept of sublimity and his warnings that it is under threat. In continuing the analogy between Clare's natural language and the imprinting of birds, I will examine when and how birds learn to sing. We can find a correlation between Clare's idealizing of the child's love of story and sensory experience in *The Shepherd's Calendar* and the sensitive period in which young birds are open to a particular kind of learning that combines their mental ability to learn and remember with their innate, physical ability to sing. In the poetic environment that Clare has created in *The Shepherd's Calendar*, he can study the child as the ethologist studies the baby bird. Clare, noting that children "ached to hear" ("March" 126) the

fullest songs and stories, locates a sense of sublimity *in the process of learning* natural language during a sensitive period of childhood when potential is greatest. An innate and intellectual awareness of that potential produces an anxious joy in the children that mirrors Edmund Burke's synthesis of pleasure in terror with a fleeting physical sense of staggering potential and limitation. Finally, we find the poet, our tutor bird, mourning the threats to the dissemination of the natural language and its song, and along with that threat, a curtailing of our experience of sublimity.

In introducing his edition of *The Shepherd's Calendar*, editor Tim Chilcott described the tone of the poems as both "celebratory and elegiac" and claimed Clare differentiates between a dying sense of "the dispassionate securities of natural time" and the "passionate uncertainties of human time." My reading allows us to fold into this differentiation between celebration and elegy further differentiation between natural and human languages. Natural language and the sublimity located in the initiatory thrill of learning this language are then endangered of becoming components of what Chilcott found in *The Shepherd's Calendar* and described as a "vanished Eden."²

Part I: Non-linguistic signs

Personification

Critics have praised Clare's ability to create a work that demonstrates the non-anthropocentric view of nature that ecocriticism invites. Yet, Clare's ability to level the status of man and nature does not hinge solely on his descriptions, syntax or subject matter of his poems, as critics such as John Barrell and James McKusick have explored³. Clare also employs a strategy of poetic tropes centering on sound that simultaneously blurs the linguistic clarity of human speech while sharpening the focus on sentience in

animals, plants, geographical features and even the weather. Through the traditional poetic tools of personification, synaesthesia, and onomatopoeia as well as the repetition of anthropo-neutral verbs and the use of dumb show, Clare forces the reader to listen to as well as hear the world of nature as it “finds a tongue.”

In isolating the verbs of personification Clare uses for plants, animals, weather, and geographical features, we can see Clare creating complex but distinct personalities for each category. In the end we find man to be a noisy, dithering (a favorite word of Clare’s) creature, often failing to truly hear/see the deeper sentience of animals and plants. The weather acts as an erratic, emotional, almost selfish and manic force that overwhelms man’s consciousness and distracts us from these competing “tongues;” tragically so, because, as we’ll explore, Clare seems to impart deeper and deeper sentience and emotion to flora and fauna that are smaller and more silent.

Critics have hailed the innovation and ecologically progressive message of Clare’s “The Lament of Swordy Well,” in which he uses prosopopeia, letting the land itself speak. James McKusick writes in *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* that the voice of Swordy Well fully revealed Clare’s environmental advocacy, in which “he does not merely pontificate on abstract moral issues, but lends his voice to the powerless victims of human violence and wanton environmental destruction.”⁴ The land is also constantly speaking and feeling throughout *The Shepherd’s Calendar*, and doing so in a way that is truer to its own language. The land becomes a reactive stage that empathizes with the plants, humans and animals, even when it is unheard, and works as a wise and patient counterpart to the weather. In “July,” the fields and plains “hum” “their summer songs” (128) as the actors on their surfaces do. They come “alive with sultry noise” in

“August” during the toiling of the harvest and yet “seem happy to be free” (139) when left alone again at the end of the day and the harvesting season. Meanwhile, the uninhabited woods “moan” in “September” (133), “sleep” in “October” (75), and even “shriek” (“January,” 128) depending on the weather and human activity within. Even the stars are reactive and “gossip” (“January,” 17) about what they see below. Physical and geographical features such as these seem to work as synecdoches for all living creatures and at the same time keep their independent nature. They are almost sympathizing with humans, reacting to human activity but seldom catching the ear of human attention and causing human reaction, even when they seem to call out in unison such as when they hum summer songs and come alive with sultry noise.

The converse holds true for the weather, which acts in indifferent opposition to all other natural activity and commands the most attention. For one thing, when personifying the weather, Clare uses violently physical and emotional verbs that mimic human behavior at its most unreasonable. In “January,” the storms “howl and beat” (5), and in “February,” the icicles “fret” (118). Winter returns in “October” “surly” and “biting” (85), after it “broods” (65). In “November,” the wind “wakes loud” (29) and then turns into an “uproar” that “sobs” (38). In “December,” the wind even “steals” (189) the music of church bells (38). In the summer, the heat “swoons” (131) and then “twitters” (131) as if in a fever. At best, the weather “slumbers” (177), the showers “hum” (159), and the clouds chase one another as if at play (167 and 175). All told, the weather—perhaps the antagonist of this tale about a shepherd’s year—is like a fitful child that the rest of the ensemble (the animals, the plants, the land, the people, the shepherd himself) must deal with pragmatically. Its winter roars underscore the telling of tales, even the giant’s roar in

the beanstalk tale told on a January evening. Its heat pulses into the white noise of work in “June,” causing a whiteout of silence and stillness that reminds the poet of winter in “August.” And the weather’s moderation in spring and fall, when like tots the clouds chase one another, allows all the other characters a chance to play, too. Silence from the earth comes when the weather is at its loudest or most demanding. Sound from the earth buzzes with “toil’s unwearied call” when the weather is cooperative enough to allow work to be done and sustenance to be secured. The earth elicits song in the borders of time, such as in “April” and “October,” between weather’s cooperation and its all-out roar.

Animals, for Clare, offer more agency than the land and more reasonability than the weather. They are both active and reactive in a very similar fashion to humans. Here, Clare continues to imbue sentience. Animals work and play at the same intervals as the weather allows humans. They grow silent in the same intervals. We see that animals, like humans, measure their environment and consider their work: Geese are “silent and sad” when faced with an icy pond (“January” 91 of Clare’s manuscript version); birds prudently “delay to build and sing” despite the eagerness of children in February’s thaw (24); the nightingale vigilantly “keeps night awake” (“April” 88); an ass “turns his wishes” and attentively listens (“June” 23-24) to the mowers and the falling swaths (turning the traditional roles of man as listening and animal as noisy on its head); a bee is “determined” to land on the lip of one sweet maiden during an August respite (97); and the mastiff “forbears to bark” on an August night (114), as if he were choosing to be polite during his watch. In due time, animals play, too: beetles revel and crows “quawk” (73 and 81) during the milder playtime of “October.” More importantly, they

intentionally play, or with as much intention as humans play. We see this as the lambs of May “tempt” the school boy from his path to school (51) and as the magpies in the February thaw prove “*as* jocund” as the milkmaids (28, emphasis mine). In personifying insects, mammals and birds as conscientious in their work and conscious of their play, Clare reveals the visual and aural cues of their communication. We know what that gleam in a lamb’s eye means: an invitation. We learn when the quawk of a crow comes because the sun feels nice or when the “hoarse jay screams” because an owlet is threatening its survival in “November” (21). These distinctions will become more important in Part II, when I piece together the complex answer to the question of how communication flows through all of nature.

If animals have more agency than the earth and more reason than the weather, then plants move along the gradients of agency and sound toward the earth’s pole and away from the weather’s pole. They have less agency than animals, and are still more reasonable, becoming more sentient, silent and profoundly emotional. While Clare spends more time personifying the other members of his cast, he reserves deeper consciousness for plants and flowers, personifying them in almost reverent terms. In “May,” the trees don’t simply feel, they can “mourn” (104); the lilies of the valley “love” (92); and the forget-me-nots’ “lowly joys” (144) seem at once low to the earth and ascetic like the rapture of religious hermits. Interestingly, flowers, an Edenic image, “tempt” (72) the milkmaid in “April” just as the lamb, a Pascal symbol, tempts the schoolboy from his route to school in “May.” More strikingly, Clare shows that while plants are silent, they visually imply they *wish* they could speak. We see this in the June flowers “agape” (10), at once thirsting for rain and mutely calling out. Coincidence or not, the word “agape” is

a visual reminder of the word for reverent ecstasy, also meaning “wide open.” This seems terribly fitting as the verbs Clare uses to personify plants work on a loftier register. We see the desire to break silence again in the weeds that “had no tongue to tell” (“March” 132) of the cries of a raped and murdered woman. Just as the badger’s cries mimic that of the victim, so does the silence of the weeds mimic that of Philomela. In Clare’s personification of plants, we not only find sentience and feeling on their part, but also a more spiritual quality, whether reverent like the open-mouthed flowers or sinful like the tempting flowers. In either case, Clare heightens the power of the plants’ visual cues, representing them in spiritual posturing, to raise their discourse to the level of the animals and humans.

Dumb show

Critic John Barrell attempts in *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* to explain the lack of “character” and “reality” of the people who populate Clare’s poetry. He argues, “There is a certain undeniable truth about this charge: in *The Shepherd’s Calendar* Clare certainly makes no attempt to present ploughmen or threshers or shepherds as individuals, with strongly marked character-traits of their own.”⁵ Barrell muses that perhaps this deficiency in Clare’s characters might owe itself to a “post-feudal” anachronistic reading of Clare’s rural world. I would argue, however, that the apparent shallowness of Clare’s characters was integral to his aim to level the playing field, so to speak, between humans and the rest of nature, including the fields themselves. Barrell notes that Clare’s “images in their particularity seem to insist on being treated equally.”⁶ Aside from the syntactical reasons

Barrell highlights, another reason the images *seem* to insist on equality is because Clare has calibrated them.

One tactic in this strategy is to contrast the sharpened clarity of nature's sentience and "tongue" with the blurred focus on human communication. To do this, Clare exaggerates human facial expressions and body language while erasing linguistic content. There are few direct quotations of humans in *The Shepherd's Calendar*, and just as many direct quotations of bird calls. This is not to say there isn't sound coming from humans. For the most part, the human cast acts in a sort of dumb show punctuated with non-linguistic sounds. In addition, we watch people speak without hearing them, as well as watch people *listen*.

The human characters of *The Shepherd's Calendar* almost anticipate silent movies or recall Renaissance masques. They pull faces. We see the "laughing faces" of children shining in the fire irons ("January," 151). In "August," we *watch* but do not hear a tired, scratched toddler complaining while his disbelieving mother smiles (46) until as she "sees his grief" (48). His linguistic communication—that he did not want to work in the harvest, presumably—did not matter to her initially, but further visual evidence of his pain leads her to pity him. In this, we see her trusting a visual cue more than a linguistic one. Later, we see his friend's face convey a "sullen, silent mood" (157) while wishing for a sweet. At the same time, human bodily gestures are exaggerated to compensate for the lack of their voices. The farmer "shakes his head" (19) at the January newspaper, revealing his off-season mood. Clare's lens closes tightly as the sullen, silent boy of August feels his "fingers itch" (160), indicating to us that he wants to steal a sweet. Then he sees the "stocks in terror shine" (161), and all is understood by both the child and the

reader. Maidens in the warmth of late March “slyly steal” (152) from the “scolding dames” (153), as if in a scene from a pantomime.

We still hear the humans, but as if from afar. From a very specific distance, Clare is able to erase the linguistic communication of humans, but still reveal their oral attempts to convey moods, intentions and needs. On the one hand, they seem entirely reasonable—we can mentally fill in the dialogue naturally. On the other hand, humans are slightly defamiliarized to the point of seeming animalistic. We best see this in the driving boy who “oft burst loud in fits of song” (“May,” 37). The pleasant weather has stimulated the boy into song—but in fits. We often see humans sing “scraps” of song or tell “scraps” of tales. Clare highlights the instinctual need to sing, the varying volume of human utterance, and a lack of complete meaning. The weather conditions also affect the manner in which the January tale is told—“in starts and fits” (154) that mimic the winds. In “December,” the clown “storms” (46) the stage with the Christmas actors. Humans often indicate their moods and intentions by *muttering*, *whistling*, *laughing*, *cheering*, or *giggling*. The audience gleans the pitch, the volume, the tone and the mood. We hear humans as animals would. Take, for example, the dog in “January” who responds to “welcome tones” (139), knowing by heart the notes but not the words that tell him to fetch bones. The children learn to hear in a similar way, as when they repeat the January tale while in bed and later when they mimic the “ding-dong” of church bells in “August” (138), one of very few direct quotations in the poems.

Sometimes, however, we watch people speak without ever hearing their pitch, volume or mood. In effect, there are a few staged dumb shows within the overall dumb show. First, of course, is the January bedtime tale of fairies who, like the people in *The*

Shepherd's Calendar, must learn to cope with nature in light of their fragility. "A Cottage Evening," a subsection of "January," is less concerned with the plots of the fairy tales as with the telling of the tale. Equal attention is paid to how the mother tells the story and how the children receive it, focusing on their dumb show reactions as they gape between their father's legs. The narrator of "January," at the end, mourns that he can no longer react in fear to the tale the way the children do. Yet, in "March," we watch the shepherd grow frightened at the sound of a badger, a reminder of another dumb show within a dumb show, the harrowing tale of a rape-murder in the woods. Here the adult marvels that as a child he "ached to hear" (126) the gruesome story. As with the fairy tale, the murder story is paraphrased and therefore appears in the reader's mind as the same strain of pantomime the humans of *The Shepherd's Calendar* enact. We see the January fairies galloping on mice-drawn chariots, never hearing their words, only their "pop" through key holes (209). In the March woods, the crime is best conveyed when a "terror-frowning eye/ told its dread errand" (137-8). In these tales, as it is throughout the poems, the characters speak in facial gestures, body language and nonlinguistic sound. Were words—such as the unspoken content of the parson's sermon in "August"—to appear, they would almost blast upon the reader's ear, which has been trained to hear only certain qualities of nonlinguistic utterance while the sense of seeing has been heightened.

Finally, we *watch* people *listen*. Often, Clare will arrest his human characters in action as they "hark" or "mark" some noise on the landscape. Before the March shepherd hears the badger's cry and recalls the murder tale, a boy walking home "trembles into fear" (111) as he freezes still, noting the bark of a fox. An apple-thieving boy in "August" strikes the same pose but hastens to escape an owl (121). Like the children hearing the

January tale—or the flowers “agape” in “June”—humans while listening become “wide open.” Fear is not the only condition in which we watch people listen. The mother in “January”—“his listning wifes desire” (211 of the manuscript version)—enjoys the sounds of the door’s creak when the shepherd returns home and then the kindling of the fire. Seeing, hearing, reading text and contemplating all beautifully intermingle when the shepherd boy of “March” hears geese gabble overhead and looks up to watch them make letters “which his memory knows” (80). By showing us people in the act of listening, Clare achieves several purposes. First, we, the readers, sympathize with these human characters, because we too are struggling to read beyond the limiting linguistic text provided by the narrator. Second, Clare compensates for the blurring of human speech, giving us some sense of sentience on the part of people. Next, Clare shows how intertwined sight, speech and movement are in the process of communication. And most importantly, Clare, through these characters, shows us how humans already are able to enter into communication with nature and the landscape.

Synaesthesia

In balancing man with nature, and in order to enhance this connection between sight and sound in the communication between man and nature, Clare relies on synaesthesia, and often paradoxical synaesthesia, to blur the line between the senses and force us to simultaneously feel, hear and/or see “chilly stars” (“February” 120), “toiling song” (“May” 64), “blistering breath” (“July” 95), “restless heat” (“July” 120), “sultry strife” (“September” 111), “hollow winds” (“September” 131), “hoarse jay screams” (“November” 21), “humming rage” (“November” 46), and clouds that boil (“November” 50). Communication becomes more of a full-body experience. Sound and the lack of

sound are always sought and assessed by the senses. This priority—searching for sound—is best understood in the beautiful mistake Clare makes in “November” when the words “orison” and “horizon” are swapped between manuscript (orison, line 77) and the edited text (horizon, line 32). The moment foreshadows Clare’s famous line in “Sighing for Retirement,” not published until 1984, when he claims, “I found the poems in the fields/ And only wrote them down.”⁷ Based upon this line, McKusick argues that Clare’s volumes of poetry work as “a microcosm or miniature version of the surrounding ecosystem.”⁸ The sky line—what we see—to Clare is a song to be heard, walked toward and scrutinized.

Synaesthesia in *The Shepherd’s Calendar* does not only heighten our proprioception of the poem’s meaning but also makes us aware of proprioception itself. We are divorced further from the Cartesian view of reality as predominantly intellectual and delve deeper into the primacy of the body, which helps the poetry develop its non-anthropocentrism. Synaesthesia is a means as well as an end in the poems, showing us the constant and inevitable state of communication our bodies have entered into with nature, regardless of our mind’s preoccupation with linguistic meaning. Hearing is leveled and integrated with the other senses. Just as Clare places humans and the rest of nature on equal footing, so he does with the senses.

Clare twice uses the phrase “laughing eye” in *The Shepherd’s Calendar*. In “February”, children greet the sunbeams through the windows with “laughing eye” (10). In “September,” harvesters—the synecdoche for “a crowd/ of merry voices”(79-80)—drain bottles under sheltering shocks with “leisure’s laughing eye” (81) during a “September” rain shower. The synaesthesia of a laughing eye works to reinforce Clare’s

view of communication as equally visual as aural or verbal. We can instantly imagine eyes wincing into the crescent shapes they form when the face smiles or laughs. We don't necessarily know if the mouth is laughing. In a sense, it doesn't matter. The laughing of the eyes occurs in the delicate, instinctual moment before the mouth follows suit. In a sense, the laughter of the eyes betrays more genuine mirth. Interestingly, we see Clare blurring the quality of sound in a similar fashion and its significance when describing sleep in "July" and using one of "sound's" other definitions, deep or undisturbed. The word's meaning circles back upon itself as the narrator notes that the bubbling brook grew turgid and "sinks in sounder sleep" (102) while the "landscape sleeps without a sound" (106). To sleep soundly (deeply) is to sleep without a sound (noise), illustrating not only that the question of *which* sound is insignificant, but also that the text is unreliable while the senses are not.

For the most part, Clare uses synaesthesia to tie our other senses to hearing and then to give meaning to silence, which seems to be an anomaly in his world. There is a no empty silence. Noise is the norm, and silence is an aberration that either stems from or causes joy or anguish. As already noted, in the height of winter, the steady blowing of winds and raging of storms tends to match the telling of tales by the fireside and the mumming of players at Christmas. In the summer months, noise rises to a din that matches the haze of the heat that we see and feel. It becomes so constant, that we can fail to hear it: "busy noise" is "lost and mute" ("July," 97 and 98). Meanwhile, silence is remarkable. We hear "quiet peace" on an August morning (143) as well as "quiet rapture" as it "fills the eye" (112) during a February thaw. Yet, quiet could also be the plundering of armies as recollected by the narrator in "August" as he observes the homes

deserted by villagers who are in the fields. We feel the proprioceptive clench of fight or flight as the narrator wonders if “Fear /Had whisper’d terrors into Quiet’s ear” (11-12). What do terrors sound like? Our bodies tell us. Just as we saw Clare elevate the register of sentience when personifying silent plants and flowers, he does so again when personifying quiet itself, using synaesthesia to connect silence with physical rapture or terror, temporary states.

Every poet has favorite words, and one of Clare’s is “peep,” a word that embodies this trend of synaesthesia and one that applies to the entire cast on the horizon. Peep can mean a small sound, a glance through a small opening, an emerging, a sunrise, and a freckle on a flower. Clare uses the word to the full extent of its meanings, which canvas sight, sound, movement, and stasis. The word appears in nine of the poems in *The Shepherd’s Calendar*. Children peep at their faces in the warming pan in “January” (150). The sun peeps at children through a window-pane in “February” (9) and then at unfolding flowers in “March,” including a cows-lip peep (17 and 21). Already, we begin to see reciprocity between the characters, which will be explored more in Part II of this paper. We also see the leveling Clare consistently strives to effect. Tiny children, giant stars, and frail, still flowers are all capable of “peeping.”

Peep is ambiguously aural and visual in “April” when the narrator asks “whats so sweet” as seeing “peeping flowers” (59). Do we see flowers emerging, watching us, or cheeping like chicks? We ask the question again in the manuscript for “November” when the narrator describes chicks emerging from their mother’s wing to peep “one bye one” (162). In “August,” steeples seem to peep “here and there” (133), but one could question if the verb is actually being applied to the bells that ring from the steeples (132), making

a lullaby for the landscape. In “October,” however, we lose the aural meaning of “peep” and nearly lose the visual as the narrator describes the smoke of a gypsy campfire “puffing, and peeping up” (37), implying breath and movement. For Clare, the entire retinue peeps—animals (a squirrel in “July”), plants, people, geographical features, manmade objects and vapor itself.

Clare uses a set of similar verbs to pair with the entire cast of characters: gossip, muse, chatter, cheer, whisper, and hum all impart visual and aural meanings. These verbs work to level the discourse between man and nature for Clare. When we apply them to humans, we tend to *see* the verb. They create dumb show and characterize humans in a more animalistic nature. When applied to plants, nature, animals and other abstractions and inanimate objects, we tend to *hear* them. In turn, these verbs seem to imbue the non-human with sentience. Parents “cheer” their son to school in “May” (45), almost like a mammal might nudge its pup, while birds in “April” “each morning’s glory cheer” (13-4), appealing to the psychology of the personified infancy of April. Clare uses cheer as a transitive verb between humans, between characters of nature, and between nature and man. He is also careful to juxtapose these shared verbs strategically. In “July,” we watch a shepherd “lolling in a musing mood/ on the mounds where Saxon castles stood” (23-4). Soon after, we hear the hum of insects and hear them “musing” “as if they felt and knew/ The pleasant scenes they wandered through” (49-50). Our musing shepherd almost seems like a grazing cow; our musing insects are tourists “journeying.” Clare, notice, is careful to say the insects “felt and knew,” keeping the body and mind tied together even for these creatures. This effect appears throughout the poems. Magpies and the shepherd “chatter” in “February;” young girls “whisper things of love” (151) while trees mourn with

“waking whispers” (103) in “May.” Sometimes Clare uses these verbs to gather the entire cast of characters, humans and non-humans, into one collective sound. The word “hum,” can apply to people alone: “Childhood’s humming joys” become part of the list of noises that make music in “May” (11). Nature can hum on its own, and often does: in “June,” “Nature’s hum/ is never silent” (1-2). The weather hums: March comes in “threatening hums” (2). Insects hum: In “July,” flies “forget to hum” (104) and in “October,” black beetles “in the dull evening hum their heavy drone” (82). Again, both examples emphasize sentience. And the earth itself hums: “the chequer’d field and grassy plain/hum” at the end of a July day (127-8). But in particular, “hum” works best when Clare blends the non-linguistic speech of humans with the sentient utterance of non-humans. For example, the livestock and laborers of the harvest become the “glad sounds” that hum in “September” (86) and “toil’s rude uproar hums” on the farms and in the barns in “November” (46). Everything is capable of this multi-sensory, ambiguous form of communication. Everything can make and receive signals, sometimes in unison, and tiny, subtle signals can be quite powerful.

Onomatopoeia and Naming

In discussing synaesthetic words such as “peep,” “muse” and “chatter,” it’s worth exploring the use of onomatopoeia in Clare’s work and its link to his local dialect. Enough recent scholarship has been done to prove Clare’s breadth of reading and agency in his career (see Paul Chirico and Alan Vardy)⁹. We no longer need question his range of vocabulary as originally deemed “scanty” and impoverished by the critics of his time.¹⁰ The image of “Poor Clare” has been fairly discounted. Thanks to current research and scholarship, it is now safe to restore to these words their place in Clare’s poems as

onomatopoeia. Yes, these dialecticisms establish local mood, they create place, and they impart his alternative political, literary and spiritual viewpoint. *In addition*, these words work on the most fundamental level as aural tropes to heighten our sensory reception of the poem's meaning and they deserve to be studied as such.

The main reason it is important to remember these words as onomatopoeic is that the trope itself blurs the line between spoken and written signifiers. Clare is already using a great number of non-dialect onomatopoeic words, such as “gabbling,” “pit-patting,” “plunge,” “cranking,” “totter,” “twitter,” and “crackle” as well as his pet words “peep,” “bawl,” and “tootle.” But examples of less familiar onomatopoeia, within his local dialect, add extra richness to the device. In some cases, the words' meanings are quickly guessable. Clare could have used the more familiar “toddles” rather than describing the “ruddy child” of the August harvest as one who “poddles” (23). His choice blends toddles with the mental image of the pudginess of the toddler, freeing Clare to better match this child's weight and gait, blending the visual and the aural. However, in choosing poddles over toddles, Clare favors the primacy of sound over arbitrary linguistic meaning. Other guessable dialecticisms such as “crumping,” “crizzling,” and “scratting” work to show there's room for more text to be written by the landscape.

In the case of particularly foreign examples, such as “slive” and “gleg,” the connection to meaning takes a little more time—a split second perhaps—but the difference matters. To understand the “gleg” of a robin “wi nimble eye” (“January” manuscript, 189-190) or the “sliving” of a maiden sneaking off to meet a lover in the March thaw (155) requires the mind to not only match the sound to the actions but also to

fill in a visual picture, generally relying on what we already know of robins and young women. This forces us to get in touch with a memory store of non-linguistic signs.

Poet Seamus Heaney writes that Clare used dialecticisms, what he called “hearth speech,” “as naturally as he breathed.”¹¹ To Heaney, these words keep the poem in the “here-and-nowness” of the poem, rather than translating “from the land of the unselfconsciousness to the suburbs of the *mot juste*.”¹² I agree with Heaney’s assertion that these words anchor the reader in the moment, but I would add they also anchor the reader within his or her body as the dialecticisms Clare tends to choose are so sensory. And still, these words work further beyond mere proprioception. Onomatopoeic dialect allows the aural effect of the entities on the landscape to be *named* by themselves, not by man. Onomatopoeia, therefore, reinforces Clare’s effort toward non-anthropocentrism. The reader is goaded to return to the basis of communication, which is non-linguistic, multi-sensory stimulus and response. The consistent use of onomatopoeia, while allowing nature to name itself, trains the reader to hear it naming itself, helping readers begin to bridge the natural and written systems of signifiers and recall how the two work together.

Naming is of great importance in bridging natural and written language, as well. We see nature inventing the very linguistic text we thought was absent in the landscape. This nascent form of language and Clare’s own allusions to naming in the poems forces us to recall Adam’s initial dominion over nature in Eden. He was given the power to name the plants, animals, birds, fish, stars, etc. Clare works to erase this ability. In Eden, God first names before giving man that power/responsibility (which is actually a need). In a sense, naming here is a tautology. For example, Genesis 1:10, “God called the dry land earth,” forces us to realize the tautology (and hegemony) of naming. Did God first

name the land “earth”? Or did the narrator of Genesis first name it “dry land” as this semantically comes before “earth” in the verse? Or does the dry quality of the earth name itself? Of course, then we have to consider the previous verse, 9, which states God said “Let the water under the heavens be gathered into one place, so that dry land may appear.” Does dry land already exist in its own right? The confusion over naming threatens the very credibility of the Creation. And Clare is aware of this problem. As he wrote in his journal on Sept. 12, 1824:

I have read the first chapter of Genesis the beginning of which is very fine but the sacred historian took a great deal upon credit for this world when he imagines that god created the sun moon & stars those mysterious hosts of heaven for not other purpose then its use ‘the greater light to rule the day & the lesser light to rule the night’ ‘& the stars also to give light upon the earth’—it is a harmless & universal propensity to magnify consequences that appertain to ourselves & woud be a foolish thing to try to test the scriptures upon these groundless assertions—for it contains the best Poetry & the best morality in the world.¹³

Clare points out the human tendency to mistakenly assume our purposes come first, just as settlers to the New World renamed lands they thought had no names.

In *The Shepherd’s Calendar*, none of the humans have names, only labels, like categories of species. We meet the shepherd, the wife (or the dame), the maiden, youngers, the woodman, the milkmaid, the pastor, the gossip, the neighbors. Naming works in similar fashion in *The Shepherd’s Calendar* to personification, dumb show and other tropes, leveling man with nature. Clare even calls attention to his own discounting of human names in “May” when he describes boys running through the graveyard and notes the gravestones’ “claims/in time’s bad memory have no names”(93-94). The roles of younger, woodman and pastor are more timeless than any Christian names.

In “June,” Clare juxtaposes the dumb show of the swain and the milkmaid’s courtship next to a roll-call of domestic flowers. While the maid gathers her “clipping posies”—for her a generic collective term—the narrator is preoccupied with introducing and describing a huge retinue of flowers. The maid blushes and the villagers laugh while the narrator rambles on about the specific qualities of cabbage-roses, pansies, larkheels, woodbine, London tufts, pale pink pea, monkshood, gilliflowers, columbines, marjoram knots, sweetbrier, ribbon-grass, lavender, lad’s love – “all familiar names” (93). The flowers serve a purpose for the maiden as she trades them for a kiss. Meanwhile, the maiden’s story serves a purpose for the poet to introduce the flowers in great detail. Clare highlights here competing languages and purposes, a duality easily overlooked.

A month earlier, in “May,” as the flowers emerge, we return to a more Edenic situation. Clare not only tells us the names of the flowers, but he delves into the reason they are named such. We meet the corn-poppies, nicknamed “Head-achs” (110). Here we have a choice of a non-Linnaean label (corn-poppy) and even less Linnaean label (head-ach), moving closer to the sensory meaning (albeit a human-oriented one). We meet the lily of the valley who “loves” shades and dews, so naturally the lily should be named for the valley. The flower’s desire led man to the name he thought he had ascribed. And we meet Pimpernel—introduced with no article so personified by its name, in an almost foppish way. But we receive two alternative names for Pimpernel. The shepherd assigns a use-oriented name, “The Shepherd’s Weather-glass” (123) But the playing boys half-acknowledge the name the flower makes for itself: “John that goes to bed at noon” (130). The flower’s disposition makes it close its petals at any sign of storm. Again, Clare calls our attention to how purpose and behavior can create competing names.

Ultimately, through Clare's use of naming, the specificity of humans becomes blurred while for animals, plants and other forms of nature, details are sharpened. We are forced to ask the question, "Are all humans alike?" or "Is each plant, each 'John that goes to bed at noon,' specific and unique?" Clare prompts the reader to wonder if people are as similar as we have assumed animals to be, or to face a complex reality of individuality among plants, animals and all other facets of nature. To preserve our own identity and individuality, we must accept the value of each other entity, even the non-human.

Part II: Reading Non-linguistic Signs

The Shepherd's Calendar begins and ends with images of humans reading text. At the start of "January," a farmer "with elbow idly press'd" (9) reads the news in the corner of a tavern, after musing over the changing scene of the weather. At the end of "December," the "cotter oft with quiet zeal" muses over his Bible. We are restored at the year's end back to the world of the written word, but the circularity of the book's context and the use of the word "muse" deliver us into a world altered. By this point, we should be capable of reading both linguistic and non-linguistic signs. In some cases, we've been taught to hear, but for the most part, we've been taught to remember what we already should know naturally, or could know. Were we simply to reopen the book and start over, our reading would be altered in two ways: we'd be better attuned to read nature, but we would also take certain points in the book for granted, having already seen them and now expecting them. Clare explores these problems of reading – reading the non-linguistic world – in his own text.

Having explored how Clare attunes the reader to non-linguistic semiotics and puts us back into our bodies and out of our thoughts in the first part of this essay, let us now explore how we connect those signs together. How do we read and respond? In the first place, and sometimes the best case scenarios, we—both man and nature—read each other instinctively, subconsciously. All of the cast of characters can rely to some degree on stimulus and response to provide a wholesome chain of communication that leads to mutually beneficial interactions in the natural world. Clare shows us how our senses should be trusted. However, he also shows us how routine messages are turned into rote memory—imprinting, much like that of birdsong.

Here is where these chains begin to breakdown. Too much reliance on memory and not on the senses can lead to man *misreading* nature, and nature misreading man. Missed sensory cues can lead to troubling (or disastrous) situations. Beyond misreading, Clare sometimes exposes the acts of *ignoring* signals. He also delves into how competing senses ultimately lead to *forgetting*, which seems to the narrator more dangerous terrain than ignorance.

Ultimately, Clare is pointing out to us how we are no longer imprinting properly as a species. Our instincts still seem to work properly, but we are out of our natural habitat. Therefore, imprinting cannot possibly take place correctly. Imprinting is the fascinating melding of instinct and learning whereby we learn how to use what we already possess, when we “find a tongue.” The songbird must hear its parents’ song before it is able to use its biological ability and innate desire to sing. The same holds true for man. What are our instincts in nature? We see it clearly in these pages: to sing, to play, and to survive. How do we do that? This is where Clare likens the poet to a

surrogate tutor bird, helping us to hear a song and to find within ourselves our own tongues. Sensing, attending and remembering add up to the mission of the poet, as we'll see in part three.

Stimulus and Response

An ideal example of how personification, dumb show, synaesthesia and onomatopoeia add up to an organic and holistic chain of communication between man and nature occurs at the end of "October":

Wild shines each hedge in autumn's gay parade;
And, where the eldern trees to autumn fade,
The glossy berry picturesquely cleaves
Its swarthy bunches 'mid the yellow leaves,
On which the tootling robin feeds at will,
And coy hedge-sparrow stains its little bill.
The village dames, as they get ripe and fine,
Gather the bunches for their "eldern wine;"
Which, bottled up, becomes a rousing charm,
To kindle winter's icy bosom warm. (48-58)

The passage illustrates how reliance on a simple chain of stimulus and response benefits all. The hedge shines wild – imparting a sense of signaling, a synaesthetic noisy sight.

The leaves fade as if to push the glossy berries—cleaving picturesquely, almost striking a seductive pose—into a frame. The frame draws the robin, whose tootle draws the "coy" hedge-sparrow. The sight of this shy bird with a stain on his bill broadcasts to the dame—whether initially cued to this scene by the wild shining or the tootling—that these are tasty berries. And thus the winter's icy breast is warmed. With the scent of a gypsy's campfire still lingering in our minds from a few lines earlier, all of the senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch—are conjured and interrelated.

As mentioned earlier, October is a month of play. The weather is not warm enough for industry in the fields but still mild enough for some human interaction with

nature. Here, as in the early months of spring, the animals, plants and people are freed from their preoccupation with the weather and survival, and we see how they naturally interact. The use of personification here makes the dame's rummaging in the bushes for the berries seem to be natural and good. The coy sparrow and the tootling robin almost invite her there. The plants themselves hang in a way that they seek attention. We don't even see the dame spot the bush or hear her consider its use. She simply comes there following a sequence of heightened senses. Some critics have questioned the synchronicity of moments like this in Clare's poems. Is he superimposing events on top of one another to imply the full experience of the landscape? Barrell claims Clare aims to create a manifold of sensation, creating a multiplicity that verges on chaos:

The desire to describe things as particular, therefore, he understood as a tendency towards disorder because a thing could make itself felt to be particular in an eighteenth century landscape only at the expense of composition, or the rule of order. The desire to represent the multiplicity of things in a landscape he understood also as a tendency towards disorder; and out of these two desires he developed a whole aesthetic of disorder¹⁴

McKusick concurs, saying that "Clare tends to present these details in a rambling anecdotal fashion that undercuts the expectation of narrative development, effacing indications of chronology or causality in favor of a synchronic moment that reflects the daily and seasonal patterns of agricultural activity and biological experience."¹⁵ I would argue, however, that Clare does offer some form of causality and order, and not one concerned with matching or opposing the 18th century views of the picturesque, but one guided by the laws of life itself. He built his sequencing on sensory cues. Because Clare is seeking to level the sentience and instinctive behavior of humans and animals, etc., he does not imbue these moments with any sense of deliberation or conscious choice. The

“October” dame gathering berries almost acts on impulse; the only deliberation on her part is her delay in choosing the berries after they “get ripe and fine.” Both “ripe” and “fine” seem more abstract than the other sensory words of the passage, like “glossy,” “stain,” and “swarthy bunches,” which initiate her deliberation and action.

Animals find food by similar circumstances in complementary examples. Take, for example, in “March,” the scene of a sower and driving boy:

The ploughmen now along the doughy sloughs
Will often stop their songs, to clean their ploughs
From teasing twitch, that in the spongy soil
Clings round the coulter, interrupting toil.
The sower o’er his heavy hopper leans,
Strewing with swinging arms the pattering beans,
Which, soon as April’s milder weather gleams,
Will shoot up green between the furrow’d seams.
The driving boy, glad when his steps can trace
The swelling headland as a resting-place,
Flings from his clotted shoes the dirt aground,
And fain would rest him on the solid ground.
Not far behind them struts the nauntly crow,
And daw, whose head seems powder’d o’er with snow,
Seeking the worms: the rook, a noisy guest,
That on the wind-rock’d elms prepares her nest,
On the fresh furrow often drops, to pull
The twitching roots, or gather sticks and wool...(45-58)

Here, the ploughmen take the place of the trees and birds in doing the signaling. We hear their song and the pattering of the beans, we smell the spongy earth, and we see the dirt thrown around and the windmill of the sower’s arm. All of our senses are engaged, and they seem to signal to the birds to come forward, just as the dame was drawn by the golden leaves, shining berries and tootling robin. In following their senses, they are rewarded with worms and the makings for a nest. In these chains of stimulus and response, everyone seems to benefit (except, perhaps, the worms).

We see similar chains of stimulus and response throughout *The Shepherd's Calendar*. Humans, without much expressed thought, pick up on the signals issuing from throughout nature and respond in what seem to be mutually beneficial ways that support our instincts to either play or survive. In two sequential poems, Clare plays with the scene of a woman at work at her spinning wheel who is tempted to stop and take a moment's respite. In "February," the mutter of a mavis thrush (onomatopoeia and personification) encourages the dame to stop her wheel. In that stillness, she hears a robin's note as it pecks meal by sweet-briar hips. Clare takes the chain of events further in "March": A sparkling ray of a sunbeam casts diamonds across the room in which the dame stops her wheel. In this moment, she not only feels the "gleam" of the sun on her face, but she also notices an early butterfly that seems to pause its flight to gaze on the same sparkling lights. This moment of communion with the butterfly makes her "glad" and she totters to the door to take in the visual cues of the trees and flowers "swelling into leaves"—again almost tempting her to come take them. She then culls them "perking out their heads" to place on her window sill. The dame, our human, has been in a monotonous dumb show of work and then instinctually listens and responds to the stimuli of her environment.

The pattern continues throughout the book—sometimes in very quick, concise examples: Boys in "January" are lured to skate on the "bright glib ice" (39). In "March," the warmth of the thaw (and the loose syntax) allows both a love-sick maiden and a spring-sick bee to share "honey dreams," showing a circular effect upon the two of them (167). The personified infant of "April" is said to take "bolder steps" after "finer days" cause birds to make "louder songs" (second stanza). In "September," the chain almost follows the plot of "The Old Woman Who Swallowed a Fly": a cat in a barn-hole

watches to see thirsty a rat drink moisture from the eaves, while a red-breast, spotting the cat, forgoes flying to catch a spider writhing in a spider's nest (41-47). Sometimes, as with the stillness of the red-breast in the "September" example, Clare shows us what happens when there is a definite lack of stimulation, sometimes simply a lack of human-generated stimuli. In the beginning of "September," we see the butterfly, bees, flies and sparrows enjoying a sunny morning while all the boys, who normally prod and tease them, are down in the harvest. In the height of "July," when the heat and work rise into a blinding hum and everything stops, we watch the spider's threads grow still, the moorhen feathers hold steadfast on stagnant pools, and weeds standing unruffled. As we can see, in some of these examples humans initiate the chains of stimulus and reaction; in others, they simply respond to stimuli from the rest of nature. More often the chains are so intricate and the initiation tucked so deeply into the poems, that it is hard to know—or care—what set the dominos of sensation in motion.

Why should this matter? Clare is here revealing his plan for tutoring his urban audience on how to hear and behave within its lost natural environment. In a sense, he's attempting to re-imprint upon us how to use our natural instincts. In these poems, he teaches the city dweller how to read the countryside in the absence of both linguistic understanding and a personal history with the landscape.

Imprinting

At a critical stage in a bird's life, early on, it hears its parent sing the full song of its species, and this moment unlocks its inborn desire and ability to sing. As ethologist Jeffrey Cynx explains,

There are upwards of ten thousand species of birds, and at least half of these, the oscines or songbirds, learn their species-appropriate song.... The

learning of song is effective only during this sensitive period. All songbirds *need to see and hear* an adult tutor, and to hear themselves practice, to learn their song. When isolated from tutors or deafened during development, they produce abnormal songs as adults. (Emphasis mine.)¹⁶

Each bird that progresses through the critical stage successfully will be able to sing the full song, and even add some unique variations and dialects, for the rest of its life, generally never deviating or learning other species' songs. While Clare could not have called this process "imprinting," and he certainly wouldn't have known its ethological underpinnings, he does seem to recognize the process and he applies it to humans as well. This comparison seems appropriate, to a degree, as humans and birds are two of the few species that can imitate and "acquire new sounds from the environment," according to ethologist Fernando Nottebohm¹⁷.

Aside from the famous "The Progress of Rhyme" in *The Midsummer Cushion*, in which the narrator learns to imitate the sounds of birds and weaves them phonetically into his work, Clare shows us children being imprinted throughout *The Shepherd's Calendar*. The most obvious example of children learning to hear their parents' song comes at the very beginning of the collection. In "January," the mother tells her fireside tales as if they were part of the work she does not stop doing. In fact, the narrator cites the "use" of these tales: "And tells her tales in starts and fits. Not willing to lose time or toil,/ She knits or sews, and talks the while/ Something, that may be warnings found/To the young listeners gaping round" (154-158). Clare clearly renders the family like a nest of birds with the mother, literally nesting, and telling her tale in "starts and fits," as birds sing. Her children "gape" like chicks and take in the tale that seems to be on automatic pilot. Also like baby birds, they rely on sound as well as sight as they watch their mother recite. After the tales are told, they startle at the sight of their own shadows on the wall "while

they the tales recall” (277). The mother speaks of Cinderella, “told the winter through” (350), as if she would tell this tale regardless of the brood before her. The time of year, not the presence of chicks, has elicited the song, which “from her memory oft repeats” (187). Memory, of course, plays a crucial role as imprinted memory, which is long-term, differs from transient memory, which is more easily displaced. And though the children are startled by her story, they yearn to hear it. Already, we see it imprinting on their minds when they climb into bed and continue to hear the tales: “While yet to fancy’s sleepless eye,/ Witches on sheep-trays gallop by” (297-298).

A less-straightforward, more complex example of imprinting occurs in “March” as the imprinting takes place between land, nature and man. In the woodside tale of the raped and murdered woman, “the dread spot” “owns its sad tale” (123 & 125). The land, affected by people, imparts its story to animals, plants and people. Here we can see the connection between Clare’s chains of stimulus and response (predicated on the tropes described in Part I) and imprinting. Though not expressed sequentially, we can piece together the causes and effects. The “red hour of sun-set” (152) during the March thaw has inspired the “love-teazed” maidens to “slive” away from the “scolding dames” to meet their swains in the orchards to talk about the approach of spring. The sun clearly triggers in the maidens an innate need, a mating ritual that even involves a song of sorts, the song of returning spring. But this scene is juxtaposed just after the tale of rape-murder. We must piece together for ourselves that the woman killed was perhaps “love-teazed” by the red sun. In the woods, the “terror-frowning eye/told its dread errand” (137-8), which, of course, makes the maiden scream. But nature and shepherds are listening. They hear this tale of a dread errand, and it imprints upon their memories. The song

remains indelibly printed on the memories of the crying badger, the weeds “that had no tongue to tell” (132), the twittering birds, and the boys who “ached to hear” (126) the story. Not only is Clare showing us that imprinting works in humans, but it works between species. In this example, the imprinting works to perhaps remind “love-teazed maidens” not to meet their swains in the woods (the only other benefit being that of robins finding worms on her burial mound). In other cases of imprinting between man and nature, the connection is shorter and more clearly beneficial. For example, in the middle of “May,” “childhood’s memory” helps a maiden stay her hook and not weed the forget-me-nots (143-150).

Ignoring and forgetting

As Cynx notes, however, imprinting successfully requires various factors: the availability of a proper tutor during the sensitive post-hatching period before novelty becomes a distraction. Birds then must remain capable of hearing to use the song within their memory and become successful singers. In a 1970 summary of contemporary studies of bird song, Fernando Nottebohm explained what happens when the imprinting process is altered or incomplete. First, in his explanation of ethologist Peter Marler’s famous study of juncos, we learn that birds isolated with their own species could develop the full range of their species song, but those raised in a “rich auditory environment” (where they could hear their own species and others) “had more song types...derived not from imitations but presumably from unspecific stimulation to ‘improvise’.”¹⁸ In a study of chaffinches, birds “exposed to wild-type song and deafened at these various stages of vocal ontogeny” could not fully progress through the stages of subsong (the nascent pieces of song, or bird babble), plastic song (song that shows evidence of imitating tutor

birds and individual variation but is not yet stable) and then full song (the adult bird's stable repertoire that includes its individual variations). Nottebohm states, "The more limited this experience, the more rudimentary the song developed" to the point when birds deafened earliest resort to simple screeches.¹⁹ Nottebohm drew several conclusions that apply here:

- Birds that did not progress through the full imprinting cycle sang only bits and pieces of their species' song.
- During the sensitive period of imprinting, birds need a capable tutor, the ability to hear their tutor, and transient memory for "auditory playback."
- After the sensitive period, birds need the ability to hear themselves practice their song and access to the part of their brain in which the permanent memory of the song would then remain.
- Birds in a natural environment that had successfully imprinted knew not only the full species song, but personalized and embellished their songs.

Of course, Clare would certainly not know any of this, and it is not possible to suggest he did. Yet, there is an identifiable motif of both failed and highly successful imprinting in *The Shepherd's Calendar*.

The first factor that precludes proper imprinting is faulty sensory perception. Our senses fail us from time to time due to sensory overload, misreading based on a bias toward the intellect, or some internal or external disabling force. For the characters of *The Shepherd's Calendar*, life is a constant struggle to read the world and read it right. We see this preoccupation in the young boy in "May" who has been "cheered" by his parents

to go to school. However, on his way between cottage and church steeple, multiple signs seem to compete, offering another purpose for his day. The lambs bleat and look at him seductively, the birds chirp “for his company” and even the fields “so sweetly smile.” The boy assumes from all these competing signs that the rest of the world seems “keeping holiday, but him” (60). The story ends unresolved, but we can suppose that the boy went to school also feeling unresolved.

Also in “May,” we watch lovelorn girls try to read signs from nature pointing in the direction of love. Their intellects guide their senses, and therefore, they misread nature. After they create “love-knots” (153) of flowers and tuck them into their bosoms, they, like the school-going boy, assume the weather to be turning lovely and a holiday, a good omen for their love prognosticating. But the signs they use—a high blue bird skimming wheat and the lonely “wet my foot” (180) chirp of a quail—are actually signs of rain, the narrator tells us. What’s ironic here is that this cue is one of the few direct quotations in the book. “Wet my foot” means what it sounds like. Nature is actually using human linguistic signs here, and still we miss it. These examples work to show what happens when we are capable of perceiving, but perceive incorrectly due to intellectual interference. What happens if our senses are dulled or altered?

In “November,” mists and storms roll in so thickly that none of the cast can see or hear correctly. The consequences are deadly. The hare loses fear, the colt merely stares and the crows don’t fly off. Yet predators are about: the owl flies out, scaring the jay and small birds. The sobbing ebbs of wind scare the raven and stock-doves, which should really be afraid of the blue hawk above them. On the human front, the foresters fail to hear the hunter’s gun. Everyone is at risk. These signs carry the hint of nature in chaos

seen in *Macbeth*. One is forced to wonder about crimes and injustice at play. In “November,” the culprit seems to vacillate between the weather and the hunter. However, Clare has introduced the ideas of crimes against nature much earlier in the volume.

The story of the fairies in “January” serves the purpose of showing us how fragile our senses can be and what disasters may follow their failure. While the fairies’ story seems to mirror the story of man’s struggle to be resourceful and survive in nature that runs throughout *The Shepherd’s Calendar*, it also forces us to consider man’s ravaging of nature while others fail to perceive its execution and effects. Clare uses the vocabulary of crime in the dame’s fairy tales. The fairies “cheat” the “housewife’s eye” (206) as they break into the home and “plunder” the environment of the kitchen. The language of *Macbeth* is also here: “And foul, or fair, or dark the night,/ their wild-fire lamps are burning bright” (230). No matter how egregiously the fairies act, we fail to perceive them. Immediately thereafter, they commence their ecological crimes. A cadaverous glow-worm “found in lanes remote/is murder’d for its shining coat”(234). This image resonates between two other examples of murder found in the volume: the story of the rape-murder in the secluded March woods and the anecdotes of the trees and flowers killed in “May.” Here Clare uses a similar vocabulary. The “May” woodmen “deprive” (81) the green woodpecker of a home. Clare seems to explain that the crime would not have occurred if man had perceived more keenly. Because the woodpecker bored his hole in “early spring” “far from the sight of troubling man” (83-84) and is now sleeping, the bird is not making either the visual or auditory cues to communicate its needs to man. Nor, in his sleep, is he capable of sensing man’s approach in time. The lilies of the valley face a worse fate, though. Clare portrays their murder almost like an inadvertent

sacrificing of virgins. Their love of shade “with broad hood-leaves above their heads,/ like white-robed maids” (94-95) conjures images of virgins or nuns in cloister. The failure of the woodmen to see them results in their having to “perish in their blooming beds”(98) under the woodmen’s feet. The series of crimes intensifies as the woodmen—with full intention—chop down trees. Yet their failure afterward to hear the whispered mourning of the trees again indicates that had the men better hearing, the crime might not have taken place or might not recur. Finally, the series concludes with weeders obliviously killing flowers while cutting thistle from wheat. The passage culminates with one dame awakening to her full senses. She stops “robbing them of their lowly joys” (144) as her childhood memory forces her to recall her pleasure and communion among flowers (the scene juxtaposed after is of girls making love-knots). We realize that when we can fully perceive, and if we have the proper memories imprinted within, we will not act in criminal ways against nature.

Equally tragic to Clare is the forgetting of nature’s tales, or the incomplete imprinting of its language upon us. Clare threads *The Shepherd’s Calendar* with references to half-complete songs and stories, recalling the studied chaffinches that sang increasingly diminished songs based on compromised hearing levels and improper access to a tutor birdsong. Even the dame who tells her children the fairy tales in “January” tells “half-told tales” (285) in which “half-hid mystery” (345) lurks. Ironically, she struggles with failing memory to tell the stories of warnings about failing memory. One terrifying episode revolves around a farmer’s shepherd returning from market who gets distracted and “forgot that he had woods to pass” (168). The lapse in memory meant his being robbed and killed by a highwayman. What was forgotten by the shepherd led to a crime

half-imprinted upon the story-telling dame and the landscape. We skip over the prosecution of the highwayman and are left with the fragmentary image of the gibbet, “though now decayed, ‘tis not forgot” (185). Proper memory, just like a full set of working senses, keeps one safe, we learn.

In addition to safety, however, knowing the full song leads to a fuller experience of life and greater happiness. The shepherd, who in “June” cheers the laborers in the clipping pen and the old man in their presence, tells “scraps of songs” (43). It is not the shepherd’s fault that he doesn’t know the full song, but the collective fault of man’s intellect as the narrator explains, “fashion’s haughty frown hath thrown aside/half the old forms simplicity supplied” (67-8). What was natural has been diminished or supplanted by human striving toward complexity or novelty (the very distractions that can impede the imprinting of birdsong, coincidentally). The old man alone “bewails” the ancient ways, and may possibly know the whole song (61). The next month, the milkmaid of July sings “scraps of ballad” (137) to herself (like a bird needing to hear itself as it attempts its song), and these keep her “rosy cheeks of happy bloom” (138). The merry children sing “scraps of carols o’er by heart” (72) in “December.” One is forced to wonder how much happier, how much better off all would be if they could remember the complete stories and songs. Clare’s running motif of “half” song underscores a warning about our deteriorating memory of how nature works and why that memory is so important.

In fact, for Clare, the joy of proper memory becomes the substitute for the joy of being imprinted upon. Remembering and memorizing are separate and distinct states of mind that provide their own pleasures and use. Clare indicates to us that the former is not nearly as satisfying as the latter, but both surpass the alternative of forgetting. Forgetting,

in *The Shepherd's Calendar*, normally happens under moments of duress. The weather particularly forces the loss of song or memory, such as in "February," when the return of cold weather after a thaw makes the landscape grow "sad and dumb" and the "foddering-boy forgets his song" (122 and 125); or in "July" when the blinding, buzzing heat forces the flies to "forget to hum" (104). For a maiden in "August," the cruel sight of a "rude boy" as he "spreads an instant murder" (76) on the creatures aroused by the harvest forces her to "forget her song" (80). But in these moments of forgetfulness, we still assume that the songs will return and be sung as if automatically. Remembering therefore is not simply the absence of forgetting.

Remembering is the state of awareness of the imprinting process itself, the self-knowledge that memorizing had taken place. In "January," there's a stark contrast between the state of the dame, who "from memory oft repeats" (187), the children, who go to bed with her tales' images in their dreams, and the narrator, who mourns the "things that in childhood's memory dwell" (255). The dame is not only tutoring her children, but she is passing the time for herself, filling the hours before bed with her song on automatic pilot. She doesn't seem to look up to acknowledge her act. The children are building memories as they recall them while startling at their shadows on the wall. The shadows, like the stories, are perceptions that aren't fully understood and have an impact on the unformed mind. Yet, the narrator, who seems practically at the window of the cottage or ghostly hovering above the scene, takes this level of memory to yet another level by remembering his own mother telling the same tales and the effect they had on him. He is at once, the storyteller and the child. He shows his preference: "Memory may yet the themes repeat,/ But Childhood's heart hath ceased to beat" (337-8). He tries to read

books—human linguistic communication—to find joys, but cannot, “For Poesy hath its youth forgot” (321-322). A similar distinction comes in “December,” when the narrator notes the different pleasure an adult has at Christmas as opposed to a gift-receiving child:

Tho’ manhood bids such raptures die,
And throws such toys aside as vain,
Yet memory loves to turn her eye,
And count past pleasures o’er again. (109-112)

Note the synaesthesia, not to mention personification, in the image of memory turning her eye. We can see that memory is equally imprinted by the visual as the aural.

Interestingly, though, the image becomes aural again moments later when the narrator cries, “Old Customs! Oh, I love the sound” (121). Imprinting is interplay of the senses, and remembering is conjured by any of the senses.

Thus, we begin to see that most of our actions are built both upon finely tuned communication between our senses and the senses of the world around us and upon the imprinted memories we learned via this fuller sensory communication at an early stage. Life is full of the most potential when we are still open, sensing and learning. Later, when we remember, we are forced into awareness of memory and the realization that we are living on long-since imprinted information. Our senses can no longer work with our minds in the same potent ways. Beyond the stages of memorization and imprinting, we will learn no new songs, which bring no new ways of acting. And if we have only learned half-songs, perhaps we may be living diminished, even destructive, lives.

Part III: Full Song and Poetry

With everything—the swains, the plains, the bees and bells—singing in *The Shepherd’s Calendar*, often, these songs inter-imprint, tutoring one another’s young to

recognize different songs that add up to a fuller, more natural language. Take, for example, the shepherd in “May” who hears the weeder’s song and the “short note of the changing thrush” (64-65). The shepherd is affected by the weeder and the bird, which, we can tell by its short note, may also be in the imprinting phase and thus affected by the weeder. Even the deafened baby chaffinch of Nottebohm’s study emitted a screech, and so it is in Clare’s world: no matter how poorly imprinted a creature may be, it will produce noise and as Clare tells us, “there is music in the noise” (“May” 12).

The poet’s song is just another species of song, one that through the text we realize is full and individualized. It provides us all, ideally, with a tutor song. We can clearly see how our poet/narrator becomes imprinted so successfully throughout *The Shepherd’s Calendar*. Recall that the superior junco song in Marler’s study resulted when birds were fully capable of hearing, provided with a good tutor bird, and were raised in a “rich auditory environment” where “they could hear each other’s vocalizations as well as the sounds of other species.” Clare is such a “bird.”

In “October”—the one poem in *The Shepherd’s Calendar* preoccupied with the topic of poetry itself—we see the narrator taking in the full environment:

Nature now spreads around, in dreary hue,
A pall to cover all that summer knew;
Yet in the poet’s solitary way,
Some pleasing objects for his praise delay;
Something that will make him pause and turn again,
As every trifle will his eye detain ... (1-6)

We started in “January” with the narrator’s account of his mother’s tales. He then shows us the songs of all the other characters—whether swains, maidens, threshers and dames or crickets, badgers, robins and the earth itself. But in “October,” the majority of the human cast moves indoors, where they will only hear their own species’ song, much like

the studied junco. But Clare stays out of doors and is affected by the horse galloping free in a pasture, the sheep wandering cleared fields, and the few bawling boys searching for wild fruit. The other humans still about also seem to be developing fuller songs, such as the gypsy whose “wild wood music” fills the dell.

The poet, though, is concerned with “trifles” (83), as if his senses were keener than the rest of his kind. As “October” progresses, the details he observes dwindle from the animals in the field and the few humans still at work and play, to the tinier items of birds and berries, to the amorphous clouds, down to the beetles’ hum and finally to “nought” (88). The poet has outlasted every last creature in the landscape, even sound itself, absorbing it with his eyes and ears. In this poem, Clare also uses simile more often. While Clare seems to love the auditory tropes of poetry and sprinkles them throughout the poems, it’s rare that he will write a grand and extended comparison such as we find when he compares October’s nature to:

fair woman in decay,
whom pale consumption hourly wastes away—
upon her waning features, winter chill,
wears dreams of beauty that seem lovely still. (41-44)

The human evacuation of the landscape and the lingering of other stimulation seem to have already opened up the poet’s ability to move beyond the plastic song into full song, song that becomes cemented in the bird’s repertoire and includes its traits of individual expression. The more imitations acquired in the plastic stage, the fuller the completed song.

In comparing Clare’s poet/narrator’s song to a plastic and full birdsong, we can actually view Clare’s predilection for dialect in an enlightening way. Dialect is found in three birds, according to Nottebohm: the chaffinch, the white-crowned sparrow, and a

specific species of parrot. Rather than seen as a “poverty” of utterance—as Clare’s dialecticisms were deemed in his own time—dialect is seen in these birds as a microevolutionary advancement. Nottebohm explained, “Neighboring populations established on habitats with different climatic, edaphic, and vegetational characteristics sing in a different manner.”²⁰ While ethologists were still trying to determine why these dialects formed and why they did not isolate and extinguish these species, Nottebohm surmised: “In an environment of habitat mosaics subject to temporal and spatial fluctuation, it might be advantageous for any one population to avoid irreversible separation from its neighbors.”²¹ By extending the analogy to Clare, what we can conclude is that Clare’s dialecticisms demonstrate an embellishment of language that again arises from highly successful imprinting. If Nottebohm is correct in linking dialect to the mosaic of habitat and the desire to stay close to the species, then Clare’s use of dialect works well within his political view. Dialect works as a more natural way of discerning differences within the environment than the forced and artificial means of land enclosure, and one that keeps the species tied together and imprinting successfully.

And so the narrator’s song becomes individualized. The junco raised in a full auditory environment tended to develop a song that was, according to Nottebohm, “more elaborate” and “derived not from imitations but presumably from unspecific stimulation to ‘improvise.’”²² If the recounting of the year in *The Shepherd’s Calendar* is the full song of man in nature, then the moments when the narrator intrudes and discusses the process of learning and remembering song are the moments when our tutor bird is individualizing his tale. In discussing Clare’s distaste for poetic affectation and his struggle to “come as close as possible to the thing itself,” Alan Vardy claims that for

Clare “the poet, of necessity, must disappear in order for the landscape to emerge ‘unsullied’.”²³ There is indeed a certain aspect of Keats’ “poetical character” that Clare applies to nature in his poems – not only in removing himself, but in erasing from the text all the other human characters as well. But the narrator does indeed intrude briefly in half the poems of *The Shepherd’s Calendar*, usually at the end of poems and often to return to a particular cause for mourning. In “April,” the narrator links his own infancy with the infancy of April--“I waked me with the rising sun” (97). As “April”—a poem that focuses on the emergence of the spring song—becomes “louder,” we presume the poet is imprinting his own song.

Yet in “January” and “December,” the narrator’s intrusions are longer and take on a much more elegiac tone. Recall from Part II that in these months the poet laments that he is no longer capable of experiencing songs, tales and holidays in the way he did as a child. “Oh!” the poet cries in “January”:

spirit of the days gone by—
Sweet childhood’s fearful ecstasy!
The witching spells of winter nights
Where are they fled with their delights? (303-6)

He seems to hope that he can instill his own poetry with that ecstasy, but immediately doubts so, “Ah, where is page of poesy/ so sweet as this was wont to be?” (313-314). The ambiguity of “this” leaves the reader wondering if the narrator is referring to the memory of childhood ecstasy or to the page of poesy in front of them. “January” concludes on a despondent note, asking, “Those fears are dead!—What will not die/ In fading life’s mortality?” (385-6). Clare sets out to teach us the full song with the embellishments, but he does not know what potency his song will have. His logic is looped and pessimistic. In “December,” he reiterates the elegy of losing the true ecstasy of learning in youth:

Thou day of happy sound and mirth,
That long with childish memory stays,
how blest around the cottage hearth
I met thee in my younger days! (89-92)

But here he concludes that poetry will be the only vestige of songs and tales of custom
(imprinting):

Pride grows above simplicity
And spurns them from her haughty mind,
And soon the poet's song will be
The only refuge they can find! (125-128)

Clare seems to know that the printed, linguistic transference of the song is less likely to imprint upon the minds, but in an increasingly linguistic, enclosed world, poetry is the best option he has for finding a listening crowd upon which to imprint. He is a tutor bird with a full and plastic song, but he finds no chicks before him.

This mourning serves two purposes. First, his lament reveals to us the poet's view of sublimity as a full sensory experience of learning that is both innate and intellectual and found in an exciting, fleeting moment of childhood. Second, it serves to warn us of threats to our access to full song and thus that sense of sublimity that occurs in learning the full song. He is calling out to warn us of the damage our songs will suffer with increasing enclosures that segregate species and diminish the full auditory environment for all species to experience and develop song.

In considering how mourning alerts us to a missed sense of sublimity, we must spot where sublimity resides in Clare's *Shepherd's Calendar* poems. It's easy to see the experience lurking in the children's reactions to the "January" story – the fearful ecstasy they feel in hearing stories is as close to the sensations one feels on a mountaintop as we can find in *The Shepherd's Calendar*. Within their gaping—the openness of their mouths,

eyes and minds, we see the terror of possibility, that is reminiscent of Burke's enquiry into sublimity:

The mind in reality can hardly ever attend diligently to one thing at a time; if this thing be little, the effect is little, and a number of other little objects cannot engage the attention; the mind is bounded by the bounds of the object; and what is not attended to, and what does not exist, are much the same in the effect; but the eye or the mind (for in this case there is no difference) in great uniform objects does not readily arrive at their bounds; it has no rest, whilst it contemplates them; the image is much the same everywhere. So that every thing great by its quantity must necessarily be, one, simple and entire. (263-4)²⁴

Reason and rationality are what preclude the adult from feeling such sublimity, Clare believes: "But Reason, like a winter's day,/ nipp'd childhood's visions all away" ("January" 333-4). Clare seems to link reason with fashion and affectation. Fashion was the culprit eroding the clipping pen tales of "June," and affectation destroys the customs of "December." So when considering Clare's ideas on sublimity and the poetic imagination, we clearly are not going to find them parallel with the opinions of Wordsworth, as critics used to assume. So often, since Harold Bloom imprisoned Clare in the shadow of Wordsworth, Clare's ideas or perceived lack of ideas on the poetic imagination have been bullied or rationalized away. Contemporary critics have found a difference in the two poets' sense of nostalgia and nature and how they tie into sublimity. While Wordsworth, in "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," is:

well pleased to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being. (107-111)²⁵

Clare digs a layer deeper into the dirty process of learning that "language of the sense."

McKusick explains: "Rather than merely loving 'Nature' in the abstract as Wordsworth is

prone to do, Clare eagerly participates in the natural process that unfolds around him in the teeming forests, fields, and fens of Northamptonshire.”²⁶ McKusick summarizes that Clare “idealizes his own childhood, not in the trite sentimental way that became fashionable in much post-Wordsworthian poetry, but as a means of intensifying the qualities of perception and playful spontaneity that make possible an unselfconscious love for the local environment.”²⁷ It is in this participation with nature that Clare more fully identifies not only what a natural language is and how it works, but how it is learned. The learning process becomes the key to understanding the links between nature, nostalgia and sublimity. I, therefore, would add to McKusick’s observation that Clare not only finds childhood a time ripe for sublimity, but the *only time* ripe for sublimity. Children have not yet completed imprinting the full song of natural language. They are still open to receiving the song, have yet to become distracted with novelty (like birds), have not experienced brain lateralization (the segregation of different functions to either side of the brain), and therefore are still capable of imprinting. They also possess less of the reason or affectation that can quickly recuperate the thrilling experience of imprinting.

The poet’s mourning also alerts us to the threats upon imprinting, and thus sublimity. Enclosure poses a threat to sublimity just in terms of semiotics. How can “fearful ecstasy” of unlimited possibility and a lack of reason reconcile within the parameters of enclosure? In terms of imprinting, whether birdsong or the poet’s song, and enclosure, there is a strange dichotomy. Enclosure oddly homogenizes the land, separating species so that they don’t inter-imprint and learn full songs. The use of dialect becomes further isolated and does indeed threaten to isolate and extinguish the species

and erode the ability to cross boundaries. Song is limited, and therefore threatened and diminished. With it, the experience of imprinting is necessarily shortened, and therefore the experience of sublimity also is under attack.

My reading of Clare's preoccupation with the diminishing of song with human removal from the landscape here dovetails with Paul Chirico's study of Clare's preoccupation with antiquity, ruins and fashion. Chirico's examination of ruins, graves, and ghosts in Clare's poems countered the view that Clare lived exclusively in the moment. Chirico posited, "Clare's interest in literary posterity and in alternative cultural history prompts a fascination with the signs of half-forgotten civilization concealed in the earth which he worked."²⁸ A "half-forgotten civilization" seems simultaneously to mirror the half-songs sprinkled throughout *The Shepherd's Calendar*, and to imbue the entire work with doubt about its own staying power. Will the written form of the shepherd's song—a concession toward linguistic society and an attempt to lure the urban back to its natural habitat—work? Can it work as well as a song sung in person, at just the right moment? Chirico sides with the oral, stating that "this assessment of the vulnerability of the material objects over time suggest the reliability of oral compared to written culture."²⁹ If so, *The Shepherd's Calendar* begins to read almost like a suicide note. Indeed, if we look to contemporary warnings about the environmental threats to songbirds and birdsong (see *Silence of the Songbird* by Bridget Stuchbury), not to mention so many other species of the humming pastoral world such as honeybees, we can see how prescient Clare was about the importance of learning to speak nature's language, of growing up in a "rich auditory environment," and of acknowledging symbiosis and symbiotic imprinting. The warning becomes even more dire when we consider Clare's

views on sublimity. What we risk is not only full song, or habitats, but the utter joy and fullness of life felt in the imprinting process.

¹ John Clare, *The Shepherd's Calendar*, ed. Tim Chilcott (Carcanet: 2006).

² Chilcott xxvii-xxviii.

³ John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge University: 1972), and James McKusick, *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (Palgrave MacMillan: 2000).

⁴ McKusick 85.

⁵ Barrell 172.

⁶ Barrell 155.

⁷ John Clare, *The Later Poems of John Clare, 1837-1864*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford University Press: 1984).

⁸ McKusick 88.

⁹ Paul Chirico, *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader* (Palgrave MacMillan: 2007) and Alan Vardy, *John Clare, Politics and Poetry* (Palgrave MacMillan: 2003).

¹⁰ Chirico 13.

¹¹ Seamus Heaney, "John Clare's Prog," *The Redress of Poetry* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 1995) 65.

¹² Heaney 63.

¹³ John Clare, *The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare*, ed. Margaret Grainger (Clarendon Press, 1983).

¹⁴ Barrell 152.

¹⁵ McKusick 81.

¹⁶ Added emphasis mine. Jeffrey Cynx, "Neuroethological Studies on How Birds Discriminate Song," *Neuroethological Studies of Cognitive and Perceptual Processes*, ed. Cynthia F. Moss and Sara J. Shettleworth (Westview Press: 1996) 64.

¹⁷ Fernando Nottebohm, "Ontogeny of Bird Song," *Science* 167 (1970): 950.

¹⁸ Nottebohm 951.

¹⁹ Nottebohm 950.

²⁰ Nottebohm 954.

²¹ Nottebohm 955.

²² Nottebohm 951.

²³ Vardy 16.

²⁴ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (R. and J. Dodsley: 1761).

²⁵ William Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey." *Selected Poetry of William Wordsworth*, ed. Mark Van Doren (Modern Library: 2002) 102.

²⁶ McKusick 81.

²⁷ McKusick 79.

²⁸ Chirico 79.

²⁹ Chirico 103.