Decolonized Pastoral: Perambulatory Perception and the Locus of Loss

Dr Thomas Bristow
Durham University/University of London
Department of English Studies, Hallgarth House, 77 Hallgarth Street, Durham, DH1 3AY, England
thomas.bristow@durham.ac.uk

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Note on Contributor
Tom Bristow was admitted to the degree of PhD at the University of Edinburgh in 2008. He has published *The Anthropocene Lyric* (2015), co-edited *The Cultural History of Climate Change* (2016), and completed a fellowship at the ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions, University of Melbourne (2014–2017). Tom is currently Junior Research Fellow in English Studies, University of Durham (2017–2019), Research Fellow in the Institute of English Studies, University of London (2018–2021), Editor-in-Chief of *Philosophy Activism Nature*, Series Editor for Environmental Literature, Media and Culture (Routledge), and Honorary Fellow at the University of Western Australia.

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Abstract
John Clare engages with, repeats and extends pastoral motifs and generic markers in his poems of openness. The enduring song of a contingent, unfolding and fragile world consistently mediates pastoral for the occasions in which Clare finds himself while out walking. John Ashbery enlarges upon Clare's instinctual and affective sense of place as he lays bare writerly influences that erase an inherited politics of loco-description. This combination in itself does not constitute the broad sense of decolonization that I seek to explore in this study; however, Clare and Ashbery foreground a modality of emotions that reveals a wider lacuna: a frame for positioning oneself in the world that is radically independent from dominant and less generous conceptions of selfhood. This embodied habitus, or ontopoetics—referred to as "becoming-with"—is socially and regionally portable. In its undoing of dominant humanist frames, such decolonization orients us toward more-than-human worlds reverberating through affective experiences of landscapes, and sets a new stage for the analysis of loss in cultural studies.

Keywords
becoming-with; John Ashbery; John Clare; loss; pastoral

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Ground Zero: Inspiration

John Clare's (1793-1864) perambulatory perception that is central to his poetics of openness gifts a song of a contingent and unfolding world. Clare's insights translate and mediate pastoral for the very unplanned occasions in which he finds himself while walking. John Ashbery (1927-2017) enlarges upon Clare's instinctual and affective sense of place as he lays bare influences that erase an inherited politics of transatlantic loco-description. Clare and Ashbery foreground a modality of emotions that reveals a wider lacuna: a frame for positioning oneself in the world that is radically independent from dominant and less generous conceptions of selfhood. This modality brings into relief a new stage for loss, its many dimensions, and its analysis.

In his critique of cultural change and its continuities, Raymond Williams turns to Clare as the significant writer of this period, whose "central work is a change in sensibility" (Williams in Clare 1986, 15). Clare and Wordsworth bequeath life "in a new sense, the 'green pastoral landscape'" (Williams 1973, 119). Of these, it is Clare who is "the last of England's peasant poets" (Williams in Clare 1986, 15); Clare who "marks the end of pastoral poetry, in the very shock of its collision with actual country experience" (Williams 1973, 141).[1] The loss of peasant poetry, the loss of home, and the concomitant loss of cultural practices embedded in the landscape—from the material subjectivities of rural labor to the imaginaries of folksong—collide in Clare's poems to bequeath a literacy for defeat, bereavement, deficit, and damage, which Ashbery draws from. His engagement with Clare's elegiac sensibility exemplifies the ongoing reconfiguring of traditional codes of mourning in poetry across the centuries. As Stephen Regan notes, "among poets themselves there has been a consoling sense of shared endeavor, a kind of salvic consciousness that poetry bestows upon its makers" (2017, 200).

Literary analysis of the modes in which loss exists, is experienced, or expressed, promises that cultural studies can invite us to unsettle the colonization of periodization while redefining pastoral elegy (and its continuities and discontinuities) for our age. Perhaps, when literary history begins to flex its muscles in less juridical mode, promoting and exploring both the production of space and the practices of life within environments—including the practice of writing—marginalized aspects of life can outrun the cultural enclosure of subdisciplinary confinement. As a first step towards a new cultural study of loss, this article articulates how the environmental humanities can clarify when this creative exploration modulates into part of the description of lived realities that generate practices, in poetry and criticism alike.

Mediating John Clare

> *About the time* the sun begins to cut laterally across
> The western hemisphere with its *shadows*, its carnival *echoes*,
> *The fugitive lands crowd under separate names*
> It is the blankness that succeeds gaiety, and Everyman must depart
> Out there into stranded night, for his destiny
> Is to return *unfruitful* out of the lightness
> That passing time evokes. (It was only
> Cloud-castles, adept to seize the past
> And *possess* it, *through hurting*.) And the way is clear
> Now for linear acting into that time

In whose *corrosive mass* he first discovered how to breathe.

Just *look* at the *filth* you've made,
See what you've done.
Yet if these are regrets they stir only lightly
The children playing after supper,
Promise of the pillow and *so much in the night to come.*
I plan to stay here a little while
For these are moments only, moments of insight,
And there are reaches to be attained,
A last level of *anxiety that melts*
In becoming, like miles under the pilgrim's feet.

(Ashbery 1996, 13; "The Task," lines 4–24; my emphases)

A gentle landscape aesthetic slowly becomes toxic, then jumps into outrage. The affective turn is amplified by the stanzaic break unravelling a world of "regrets" and "anxiety" captured in the moment of feeling and expression, restored to an ironic peace through versification. These metaphors for earth anxiety profoundly draw from pacifist despair in the Nuclear Age through the lexical choices of the last line, comparing the dynamic aspect of being ("becoming") to a traveler's enumeration of space ("miles") on the way to a holy place. The theme of the loss of values and a structure for belief is backlit here by an inquiry into the affective, material and spiritual conditions for continued rebirth.

"The Task" is the opening poem to John Ashbery's 1966 collection, *A Double Dream of Spring*, in which the poem "For John Clare" features. "The Task" recalls William Cowper's (1731-1800) repurposed epic (*The Task*, 1785) providing a home to subjects that occur naturally to the poet. The patient openness to the world's provision embodied in Cowper's evasion of convention compares with John Clare's landscape witnessing; his raptures, like Cowper's, "are not conjured up / to serve occasions of poetic pomp, / but genuine" (Ashbery 1996, 13; "The Task," lines 151–153). Authenticity is exemplified in the first line's emphasis on spatio-temporality, clearly positioning landscapes and humans within diurnal rhythms. Emotional transparency underscores the trappings of desire possessing the past while their fictional qualities of the talking cure or narrative crutch belie our true destiny to remain "stranded." Ashbery wishes to remain true to destinies and histories; in "The Task" and "For John Clare," he puts to work his ongoing interest in the possibilities and limitations of mimesis, moving through different affective registers and linguistic modalities, accumulating a context for his theme, namely loss.

Loss is a curious thing. When it informs an always-already mediated form of communication such as writing, the sense of what has been lost (or what remains to be lost if not protected) takes on the burden or responsibility of securing the passage of what is lost from life into the cultural record. Ashbery's protest against loss, and our complicity in the degeneration of life, making "filth," generates "anxiety." Loss, in this sense, is productive. Furthermore, it serves to embolden a discrete sense of accountability that refuses to secure a definition of what we are losing. Ashbery's lyrical protestation is less an assertion or declaration than traditional reckoning would afford; more an affirmation—that might be considered spiritual in its openness—

educating by illustration, and honoring Clare's plea to continue a particular mode of practice.

Structures of Feeling and Communities of Practice

Clare refuses to accept different forms of colonizing—not only as a peasant poet resisting the internal colonization of class politics in literary culture, and in his resistance to enclosure; his ways of writing about experience run philosophically against the grain of (the idea of) settlement. His transformation of pastoral bleeds into avant-garde poetry, which can be read as resisting periodization but also speaking to the larger contemporary debate that parses decolonization to emphasize more-than-human planetary existence (see Monbiot below).

Clare appeals to Ashbery because his work is genuine; it is marked by imprecision and fleetingness. The precise imprecision of the epistemic modality insists on what it cannot be: "about," "begins" and then the affirmative, yet abstract, "laterally" dominate the poem's tonal cues, offering feeling beyond the linguistic medium. This is just one step away from Clare's native precision. However, the "shadows" allude not only to the deep and consuming despair of Clare's "I Am," but to the damaged life that escapes pastoral hues, as with the mediated, darkened pastoral of "An Invite to Eternity." For a moment, we might entertain Ashbery's ending as Clare's unwritten biography—an imagined peacefulness within the "corrosive mass" inflected by Ashbery's melancholic calm of the "reaches" toward which we are nudged in that compelling closure to the incredible outburst that finishes the poem: "A last level of anxiety that melts / In becoming, like miles under the pilgrim's feet." I would prioritize the twentieth-century American context for the ontological dimensions of this poem. However, it might be equally appropriate to remind ourselves of Wordsworthian (in)security, where one's heart enfolded in nature may

> Breathe in the air of fellow-suffering
> Dreadless, as in a kind of fresher breeze
> Of her own native element.
>
> (Wordsworth 1984, 184; "Home at Grasmere," lines 449–451)

Such is the inspiration that oxygenates Clare's detrivializing of the visual field by moving through the moods of Romantic observation to modern lyrical comportment (White 2017).

Ashbery continues to practice Clare's lyricism—to be within the temporary play of things stirred only lightly by the filth, our mess. To breathe or discover how to breathe within this "corrosive mass" is to sing of the mess, but in singing sustain our voice of difficult experience. Ashbery's observation moves from natural elements within "the fugitive lands" to inner feelings—regret, anxiety, registered in the "separate names" speak not of the unity of light, but the disunity of darkness. In Clare, hypersensitivity to the temporal marks the "darkening" of the pastoral vision (Regan 2009); it is moving toward insecurity, "function[ing] in dark and unsettling ways" (246).[2] In Ashbery, we notice an even darker version of a particular strain of ontopoetics, which I suggest can be framed by American, Australian, and Canadian theorists.

The ontopoetics of "becoming-with" (Wright 2014) is best disclosed by new-world analysis and commentary. This environmentalist notion of subjectivity has been articulated in the academy to address a systemic pathology of a species disconnected from the affordances, conditions and materiality of the world. Kate Wright suggests "Becoming-with offers a metaphysics grounded in connection, challenging delusions of separation—the erroneous belief that it is somehow possible to exempt ourselves from Earth's ecological community" (2014, 277).[3] Wright's learning builds on Val Plumwood's articulation (2002) of the ecological crisis of reason, observing ways human relationships with the nonhuman world take the form of colonization. I suggest that, while reading John Clare, it is apposite to bring to mind the neologism of "becoming-with" and its current critical economy. Wright's thoughts on "the poetry of interspecies relations, reverberating through affective responses to environments," not only speaks to current crises in Australia, but directly to colonialism and its forebears, especially agricultural practices and the legacies of British enclosure.

Wright draws from Karan Barad, Mick Smith and Deborah Bird Rose. Barad offers an agential realist ontology, where the world is not composed of discrete "things," but "phemomena-in-their-becoming" that suggest "a radical open relatingness of the world worlding itself" (2012, 46). In concordance, Mick Smith writes that:

> Ecology is a reminder of a multi-species and multi-existent "we" that modern humanism chose to forget, or rather struggled to exempt and/or except the human species from. There is no way to be exempt from this community of different beings each *exposed* to each other in myriad different ways. (2013, 30)

When these ideas are placed alongside each other we begin to understand how our flesh is inscribed with a multispecies history of becoming, or how we might conceive, as Deborah Bird Rose terms it, "embodied knots of multispecies time" (2012, 127). We could turn to any one of Clare's nest poems with this context. Comparatively, Ashbery's gesture toward particularity, signposted then resisted, is set as an objective only within "the moment of insight" as "reaches to be attained" from "blankness" (above); however, rather than to emphasize contingency and interdependency, the poem's literal qualities and emotional depth seem to be there for the reader to discern a voice that rises from, and is speaking about, a determination *to be*.

In his desire to mark John Clare Day, two hundred years after the enclosure of Clare's homeland of Helpston, environmentalist and columnist George Monbiot sought to address an imbalance in the cultural record. He invited us to adjust remarks "on the poverty and injustice of rural labour" by acknowledging "its wealth and fellowship," before contemplating the devastating "loss" to culture through enclosure and the associated environmental collapse and anomie that came to Britain. For Monbiot, Clare is a figure that encapsulates both forms of loss:

> What Clare suffered was the fate of indigenous peoples torn from their land and belonging everywhere. His identity crisis, descent into mental agony and alcohol abuse are familiar blights in reservations and outback shanties the world over. His loss was surely enough to drive almost anyone mad; our loss surely enough to drive us all a little mad. (2018)

And so we enter a nineteenth-century context for our current crisis of labor and a crisis of environmental stewardship. Abrasive, mordant, burning—Clare and Ashbery can be enclosed by this darkness. They can be opened up into the light, too.

Becoming-with

"Shadows," "stranded," "hurting"—we breathe a lexicon of loss to feel out the material echoes of, and a cognitive distance from, deep pain in the distasteful ejaculation of the words "unfruitful" and "filth" in "The Task." Ashbery's contract with the reader enables the poem to blossom into what might at first glance seem like an idealized image of a pilgrim under whose feet—we are prepared to imagine—"anxiety melts into becoming." Walking, for Clare, is a stage of inquiry that always fails to seize life; it is a tonic to the colonizing of the world that seeks to control nature; it neither laments the loss of the world from terrible practice, nor does it fix experience into either memory or a polished poem. Many of Clare's poems simply stop abruptly, turning his mastery into mystery as the moment passes. Such comportment to the world is the heartbeat of Clare's animating perception of a specific English landscape between 1820 and 1835: Helpston, where the rural midlands drop down into the great Fenlands, the low-lying marshy agricultural coastal plain of the east, known locally as the "Holy Land of the English."[4]

I argue that an important characteristic of Clare's perambulatory perception is outwardness, released from within an acute poetic comportment and psychological disposition, which attracts Ashbery. Sometimes this disposition comes from an obscure doubleness:

> The wild flower neath the shepherd's feet
> Looks up and gives him joy.
>
> (Clare 1986, 11; "Pastoral Poesy," lines 11–12)
>
> Kind of empty in the way it sees everything, the earth gets to its feet and salutes the sky. More of a success at it this time than most others it is. The feeling that the sky might be in the back of someone's mind.
>
> (Ashbery 1966, 13; "For John Clare")

The way the Earth sees us in "For John Clare" leads into a plea for a particular form of observation: "a spreading out" that is alert to "the uneasiness in things just now." When this dialogue between human and world places the lyric on pause, I name the effect *elegiac temporality*, born from the experience of literal and figurative enclosure. Situated outside the conventions of elegy, this gift to the deceased poet escapes (while laboring within that which is) its inheritance. Ashbery's use of anger enacts a generative poetics of abduction, drawing out inferences different from familiar types (pastoral motifs, a recognized flower), modulating into an epistemic modality that harnesses the spirit of discovery. In reading through *Double Dream of Spring*, it is clear that Ashbery is aware of the ways in which Clare struggles to make meaning and fix it; how, for Clare, to walk is to be a poet, for one recreates oneself with every step taken.

Raymond Williams understands the fusion of aesthetic sensibility and emotional literacy as something "new" in John Clare, exemplifying "separation that is mediated by a projection of personal feeling into a subjectively particularized and objectively

generalized Nature" (1973, 133–134). Adam White underlines the "subjective and introspective" impulses within Clare's work, casting a version of mind that is "open" to what it receives (2017, 253), while Bryan L. Moore reminds us that this Romantic elevation of mind occurs "even as [poets] also elevated external nature in itself—birds, trees, flowers" (2017, 84). Nicholas Birns (1994) more deftly attunes to Clare's perception that learns from, but steps outside of, the shadows of James Thompson's (1700-1748) symbolic abstraction of the exalted movement of the seasons that appealed to Clare as a young laborer. Birns discovers lyricism and silence, aporia and ellipses laced with temporality—flashes of witnessing, within which whirling seasons are personified and become directly seen birds or trees. Through Birns, we can begin to connect the multispecies dimension of "becoming-with" to the relationship between Clare and Ashbery:

> From dark green clumps away the dripping grain
> The lark with sudden impulse starts and sings
> And mid the smoking rain
> Quivers her russet wings.
>
> (Clare 1986, 52-53; "The Summer Shower," lines 85–88)

Clare uses "russet" to describe clods above which the sky is seen ("The Skylark"), and for "The Nightingale's Nest." This color would have meant a lot to the laborers wearing that color for their work. Such an example of Clare's intricate working of particularity is "opposed to the more characteristic attribution of single identifying qualities" in much of his earlier writing (Williams 1973, 133), which fuses poetic craft and rural labor. Learning from Birns, this intricacy comes from intimate awareness: evading completion, resisting generic schemes and their apparitions (1994, 206-207, 214), in Clare textuality adumbrates any reworking of archetypes.[5]

And this is how the world is for us. For Ashbery and Clare, the vantage point of the poem is double: the view from the ground under the feet, and the view from above. This is not the schizophrenia of introspection versus extrospection, as commonly understood in models of atomic subjectivity that oscillate between the particular and the general. Contrary to this paradigm that seeks to enforce a Cartesian dualism between subject and object, between human and world, Clare's ontopoetics refers to the happening of beings.[6] While alert to temporality, hyper-locality, and the contingency of things, Clare's post-pastoral mode critiques enclosure and laments the loss of life; however, in his world, things that pass away are only fixed and isolated conditions removed from the immediate context of *being there*, which walking out reminds us. Such pedestrian, mobilized affect urges us to simply keep faith with the world we inhabit.[7] His light, cast onto the field of play, includes our species within an otherness: it gives presence to the non-subjective, malleable and contingent quivering wing of a bird in rain, for example.[8] For Clare, this world is joy giving. For Ashbery via Clare, the flower is not only one that we've just trodden on while on the way elsewhere; it is one of many flowers that have occupied the same space over time, connecting our imaginaries to extensive emergences. Rather than photographic slices of time placed side by side for comparison to track change, Ashbery invites us to consider the creative evolution of "the whole history of probabilities" ("For John Clare").[9]

New Historical Materialism

Clare and Ashbery share "a sense of a restless, perplexing and wonderful world" (Weiner 2014, 161). Out walking, you are brought into contact with the ground beneath your feet, which compels you to observe both light and dark corners of life when they present themselves. After Clare, the revealing-concealing grace of sunlight and the barbed warp of the breeze of the scene in view (taken in on foot) snag on the subtleties of life that abound in nature—imperceptible, if not for the diurnal round bringing them into relief to the peripatetic subject. The speaker in "For John Clare" wishes there "to be room for more things, for a spreading out;" for immersion in detail, where "letting [things] come to you for once, and then meeting them halfway would be so much easier." Ashbery desires the contingency evident in Clare's records—it is the cloth from which he wishes to cut his lines of flight. The emphasis on meeting reminds us of the pastoral archetype of strangers meeting in the landscape and passing on their songs of loss and pain. However, in Ashbery and Clare there is an understated poetics of contingency—unplanned and undesired moments of communication manifest in the unfolding of experience, out in the open—that is of the world, a song from within things not about things, and mostly discovering non-human life.[10]

Clare's physical and vexed relationship with pastoral as a rural labourer meets with Ashbery's intellectualized, postcolonial pastoral ideology: both rework contingent interaction between humans so that natural phenomena are elevated to the status of being. Relations between things are respected as much as the things themselves; sometimes, the relations animate the world and its consciousness, particularly when it is preoccupied with nature. In the case of the two poets, an ethical horizontalization (or leveling) negates the innate tendency to either anthropomorphize things, or to demote the dynamic inherence of life within things. Listen to the negation in Clare's fragment "The Elms and the Ashes," Ashbery's talisman poem, which ensures that the reader cannot reduce the process of life to abstract and inert phenomena:

> The elm tree's heavy foliage meets the eye
> Propt in dark masses on the evening sky.
> The lighter ash but half obstructs the view,
> Leaving grey openings where the light looks through.
>
> (Ashbery 2000, 14; lines 1–4)[11]

It is impossible to miss the keywords, "heavy" and "lighter," that betray pastoral pathetic fallacy whereby the attribution of a structure of feeling to inanimate things is reversed. This world looks back on us and projects itself while the lyric places the experience of world beyond the philosophical and geometric coordinates of space and time: weight registers opposition and commonality; gravity, the common rooting of life to earth, is inflected by difference and distinction. The model of extended consciousness forms only "half" of the contract with life—light, or the agency of life, is the other subject of this poem, attracting our eye with coloration while looking in on us, finding our weight, and grounding our moment on the page and on foot.

This poem is one slice of the poetic ground where new things occur beyond our plans. Ashbery has felt this in Clare and seeks to amplify it for his ends: opening up an attitude of expansive spectatorship in which we take part through feeling out the openings in the world. To return to the theme of imprecision, "Grey openings where the

light looks through" is painterly and metaphorical—a real observation and deep insight. Ordinarily, a division between reference and figuration, light and dark, could lead us to mischaracterize the insight from which the poem emerged. However, Ashbery joins his work to Clare's by acknowledging the mood that knowingly veils a specific sense of pain or hunger that grows out of something missed, something lost, within traditional lyrical observation.

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It is useful to turn to Williams's understanding of the ways historical figures can speak to our present. Literary studies' own enclosure of John Clare—an over-investment in Clare as "victim"—fails to live up to the task of cultural studies, namely to focus on his voice and the historical, material conditions from which it arose (Williams in Clare 1986). This resonates profoundly not only with the politics of representation in Clare's own voice, urging us to imagine the patterns and sounds articulating degrees of wildness that he witnesses; it complements the postcolonial move to "engage with connectivity and commitment in a time of crisis and concern" (Rose and Robin 2004, 31). Criticism working from within the spirit of this move can see how Clare's ethics—responsible witnessing that comes from becoming-with (his collaboration with a diversity of species in the locale)—are analogous to Deborah Bird Rose's ethics that come to light on the stillness of Australian country (2004).[12] The Fenlands and the Outback are geographically, geologically and culturally incomparable; however, they share a history of significant damage and loss, respectively elicited in the practices of poetry and dreaming alike.

In order to address this loss, while understanding the "record" in the manner that Williams would welcome, Rose combines the tools of anthropology with cultural studies. Her pioneering work envisions "resilience of both the human subject and the animate landscape that inspires that subject's manifold commitments and so grants human existence a discernible and living shape" (Hatley 2007, 201). To frame Clare as a victim of enclosure is to disengage from his dialogical practice of recording life, which places human experience within the consciousness and cultural practice of this living shape (which I read in Ashbery's closing image in "For John Clare," below). Williams understands that reclaiming Clare's voice from within the models imposed upon him is significantly dependent upon shifting our outlook. I suggest that we might accomplish this vital task by decolonizing pastoral criticism.

The earth is the subject of the opening sentence of "For John Clare," and it seems like a good place to start. It is "Kind of empty in the way it sees everything." Ashbery's anthropomorphic metaphor is geared toward putting our feet on the ground and dispelling ego, as much as it is able to express a welcome of its own: "the earth gets to its feet and salutes the sky." The greeting is an act—a living verb, which must be distinguished from fulfillment in this poem as the emphasis on emptiness delicately moves us toward a precarious situation, "an uneasiness in things just now." The earth is neither invisible nor burdened by qualities; radical temporality portends that the world is a site in which things pass through and are not eaten up/consumed/turned into territory for its wellbeing. The space of the poem, here, stands in for a microcosm of the actual world; Ashbery understands that this world is not a standing reserve for us to move through and use for our species' advantage. It is something Seamus Heaney perceives at the root of Clare's poetics.

While Williams speaks of Clare as a "country poet," "living in" the world, his project turns to save Clare from an enclosing criticism (Williams in Clare 1986, 97); conversely, Heaney celebrates Clare's standing. Lyricism that derives from one's linguistic ground, a language co-extensive with the surrounding world, is a practice at the heart of Heaney's sensibility, and he finds it almost everywhere in Clare. For Heaney, Clare's mediated directness negates the urge to think twice or self-reflect as a writer; rather than giving in, Clare should be read for "digging in" and for his "wilful strength," that constitutes his "foundedness" (1995, 89). The "here and now" in Clare is only ever "there and thereness"—an embedded "unspectacular joy" that is "a totally alert love for the one-thing-after-anotherness of the world" (70). Here, we are close to Ashbery's elegiac temporality that unfolds within a "history of probabilities," and we are thinking through openness once again:

> To be open is to hold one's self available to others: one takes risks and becomes vulnerable. But this is also a fertile stance: one's own ground can become destabilised. In open dialogue one holds one's self available to be surprised, to be challenged, to be changed. (Rose 2004, 22)

With the accuracy of a naturalist's observation, Heaney invites us to consider a "thirst" or "ache" in Clare's approach to the frontier of writing (1995, 92) while the ground of England is undergoing radical destabilization.

Heaney's precise metaphors at this point implicate technology and change while clarifying how Clare masters prescribed styles of writing during this significant moment in literary history. We are instructed that Clare's meter "takes hold on the sprockets of our creatureliness" (Heaney 1995, 96), which is an idea worth exploring a little. Clare's voice, Heaney writes, "moves fluently and adequately but it moves like water that flows over a mill-wheel without turning it" (95)—characteristic of its times, but not using established modes of production. The gentle shift here from sprocket to water (and not to the wheel) demonstrates the emptiness and grace that Ashbery imitates; however, it belies an unfortunate ambiguity in Clare's pastoral fluidity. The very foundedness of Clare's voice, its connected movement through the world, neither takes purchase on the earth nor sets about owning it. It moves 'over' and subsequently does not produce. Yet, such ethical elegance might keep a voice to itself, but it can only reside in a space of its own. Ultimately, in keeping with Williams, isolation and freedom are traded off with one another, exemplifying a poetry less impactful on the world than Clare desires it to be. However, within lyricism, a spirited grace offers a model of how *to be* in the world. Frictionless poetry, as evidenced throughout this article, extends to a lack of purchase within contemporaneous culture, which can either exemplify cultural alternatives that decolonize established power geometries, or it can lead toward the most damaging solipsism.[13]

To Conclude: The Poverty of Criticism

It is curious—in the contexts of practice and heuristics—that, at the end of his introduction to Clare's poetry and prose, Williams misses out on the question of Clare's own labor as a signal to other peasant-poet laborers to carry the torch (Williams in Clare 1986, 18–19).[14] In referring to a neglect of punctuation while emphasizing Clare's combination of literary models and oral song, Williams fails to remark upon the democratic aspect of Clare's voice. There are subtle historical and ontological differences in labor, agency and spirit, which manifest in the conditions of being

occupied (pastoral), and in the occupation of beings (Clare and Ashbery), but Williams feels that there is no need to restate this in his closing comments for it make contradict his thesis on containment.

Williams closes his polemic by citing "Shadows of Taste," a poem in which Clare is clearly tuning his lyric to a pedagogical scale, educating others precisely from the source of balladry to which he keeps close. Williams introduces this poem as he brilliantly unpacks the cultural and social constructions, and relationships between the terms for and histories of 'folk' culture and 'peasantry':

> From these old fashions stranger metres flow
> Half prose half verse that stagger as they go
> One line starts smooth and then for room perplext
> Elbows along and knocks against the next.
>
> (Clare 1986, 18; "Shadows of Taste," lines 87–90)

A voice moving in the run of talk—"a breathing, a naming, an intense physical presence" (Williams in Clare 1986, 18)—is passed on to a broad base of listeners through the satirical versification of Alexander Pope (1688-1744) via George Crabbe (1754-1832). These strange meters insist that "the breathing word / Becomes a landscape" (Clare 1986, 18; "Shadows of Taste"), and exemplifies the poet catching the "one-thing-after-anotherness" of world experience (Heaney 1995, 70, above). I argue that such poetic practice is colored by pedagogy. Williams may well be hinting toward a code of practice in his explicit call to fulfil the duty of materialist criticism by looking at "recorded life" beyond the voice: "the life that contained the voice" (Williams in Clare 1986, 2). Yet, it seems strange that while he is consolidating literary critical ground for analysis of the material practices of culture, Williams fails to secure commentary on the communicative aspects of this poem, namely the culturally binding intergenerational dissemination of folksong. Clare is not only a figure that embodies social acts; he offers a unique and accessible prism of a historically class-specific body of knowledge.[15] In "Shadows of Taste," Clare is explicitly drawing out the dynamic dialogue he is having with his culture—print culture and multispecies destinies alike—and thus instances Williams's argument: "The model of the peasant poet is part of a larger model, in which real discontinuities of condition and experience were mediated by forms of attempted continuity" (Williams in Clare 1986, 5).

I turn to Ashbery one last time. The final movement in "For John Clare" can be read to instance the "discernible living shape" of the world in which we come into being (Hatley 2007)—an attempt at continuity with Clare that marks the discontinuities of historical conditions and experience, yet exemplifying the premise of becoming-with. Following his reading of the wren and other birds in the scene, leading up to "confusion and hopelessness" by projecting anthropocentric communicative aspects onto the species, Ashbery gifts the reader an image after speaking for the birds: "So their comment is: 'No comment.' Meanwhile the whole history of probabilities is coming to life, starting in the upper left-hand corner, like a sail." This obscure yet compelling moment situates the reader and the observer of the birds together in an inhabited space where the world unfolds beyond our plans and our horizon of expectations. In this apace, to speak 'for' another is less freighted with a politics of representation than it illuminates coexistence. With a view to Clare's purchase on the world (above), the birds here are unremarking—perhaps remarkably so, for they bring into relief the friction of

humans: human concerns, human noise. Sweet self-reflexivity opens out into the world, instancing an ontopoetics that escapes the enclosure of self-absorption. As with Clare's printed works, the object *Double Dream of Spring* that we hold to read aloud is part of a process of becoming that redefines the practice of poetry. The song starts in the upper-left hand corner. Movement comes not from harnessing the energies of the earth but becoming-with those energies. We read and move along the lines. The anthropologist Viveiros De Castro observes that "a becoming is a movement that deterritorialises the two terms of the relation it creates, by extracting them from the relations defining them in order to link them via a new 'partial connection'" (2014, 160). For me, Ashbery's deterritorializing move defines the word "inspired" most adequately.[16]

The poem-sail "coming to life" before our eyes, and through our reading, collapses inside-outside dichotomies for it is extensively inclusive. The grace of the sail, I suggest, is not sublime but is of, from and moving to "something far more deeply interfused" (Wordsworth 1984, 132; "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," line 96). Perhaps the distinction that holds best in this example is one between graphology and nature writing. This distinction will not hold across the decolonization of pastoral that is required for readers of more-than-human subjectivity in the Anthropocene; however, it evidences a cultural shift from solipsism to inclusion, and an intellectual development from phenomenology to cross-species communication. Ashbery's own "attempted continuity" (Williams in Clare 1986, 5) embodies Clare's structure of feeling, keeping close to the spontaneity of organic connection over constrained identity formation.[17] If nothing else, we witness a rural nineteenth-century linguistic modality impressing upon a twentieth-century avant-garde poetics that betokens a spirited transatlantic sensibility calibrated for peace, and seemingly apposite for our dark times.

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[1] Williams makes no mention of Clare, nature, nor peasantry in *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (1958), and no mention of Clare in *The Long Revolution* (1961). There is only one reference to Clare in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (1980), when Williams is considering nature in the contexts of unnatural exploitation and as a place for feeling. Clare is most prominent in Williams’s critique of pastoral within a historical materialist account of agricultural and urban change in Britain (*The Country and the City*, 1973). There is a possibility here for an extended analysis of Williams’s engagement with Clare, owing to his distrust of the author’s nineteenth-century emphasis on the disappearance of the organic community, as foregrounded in *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* by F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson (1933). Williams’s cultural-studies project not only refines this highly influential text for the discipline of literary studies; it sets up connections between historical materialism, new materialism and the new spatio-temporal paradigms of the environmental humanities. A future study will come back to this.

[2] Regan’s reading of literary production complements Williams’s sense of nineteenth-century country. In Regan’s Hardy, the “chronic insecurity of the changing social order” (2009, 253) speaks to the failure to nurture the community; shifts in the economy and the cultural turn to individual liberty radically compromise the preservation of community rites, wreaking devastation and “demolish[ing] pastoral affiliations completely” (247). See also Clark (2015) and Eltringham (2018).

[3] For an example of this concept applied to community practices, see Wright (2018).

[4] Iain Sinclair (2005), in an interview about his retracing of Clare's famous walk from Epping Forest to Northborough for *Edge of the Orison* (1997), made much of the continued ruination of the countryside of the Midlands into the twenty-first century.

[5] Clare is acutely alert to, and grateful for, the contingency of each event he witnesses. Stepping back from a moment in time, to attune observations to the seasons is a first step abstraction; reading individualised subspecies only in terms of the genus, or dropping proper nouns and descriptors, are second step abstractions. Each thing has its own historical, materialist story: the dog yelping for fun as it waits for instruction has many centuries of breeding that presses up against (but does not over determine) the desire for play *on this particular afternoon under observation*; the paint cracking on the front door speaks both to the need to negate the wear and tear of the domestic space but also signals the microclimate, and the quality of the paint and the labour that applied it.

[6] For 'happening of beings' Cf. Marcuse (1898)

[7] Rather than emphasize an apposite Heideggerian reading of Clare, I refer the reader to note 5 (above).

[8] It is worth comparing Clare's sense of deep time to Wordsworthian temporality. Laura Dabundo observes that Wordsworth's extrospection leads him to eulogize the burial of individuals "who were born, lived, and then died in the bosom of community deep within the network of village life" (1988, 11–12). Kurt Fosso draws out Wordsworth's indebtedness to the dead in a valuable study of the relationship between community practice and mourning, pointing to bonds of grief forged between the living and the dead through the process of memorialization (2004). Both models seem to miss out on the extension of past time into the present, as exemplified in the continuity of the community of being that Clare and Ashbery seem to share, placing their work at one remove from elegy. With the ontopoetics of "becoming-with" in mind, Stephanie Kuduk Weiner seems a little closer to the mark in her understanding of Wordsworthian co-creative energy: "You take in the world as it moves / In toward you"—breathing it in as you perceive it, "eagle-eyed, and splendid" (2014, 161). Ashbery is alert to this distinct linguistic practice, but wishes to make it a singularity to mark the commingling of damage and loss in "The Task" and "For John Clare."

[9] This technique alludes to late nineteenth-century poet Arthur Rimbaud: "absolute modernity [was for Rimbaud] the acknowledging of the simultaneity of all life, the condition that nourishes poetry at every second" (Ashbery in Rimbaud 2011, 16).

[10] See Gorji (2009) following David Trotter, for a reading of mess, division, formlessness, disorder, and 'the art of accident' (3) in Clare's writing.

[11] Ashbery's first Norton Lecture at Harvard took the last line of this fragment as its title. See Guyer (2015) for a full appraisal of the politics of speaking for John Clare.

[12] For a considered account of the limitations in separating out life in terms of "cultural belonging" and "ecological belonging," see O'Gorman (2014).

[13] Williams indicates solipsism in the case of Clare, since his creativity turned inward through the loss of a laboring space for his folksong—both in the fields and along their supply chains, and in the literary market (Williams in Clare 1986).

[14] Jennifer Hamilton's entry for "Labour" in the *Living Lexicon for Environmental Humanities* (2014–) begins with a reference to Jacques Derrida's argument that to create a more ethical future, we need questions that bring "representation back to the world of labor" (Derrida 1994, 170).

[15] "Shadows of Taste" (Clare 1986, 18) revolves around the idea of "beings [taken] from their homes" (line 147), beginning with an alarm call to "nature's page" (line 2), "the instinctive mood" (line 3) and the "picturesque green" (line 10). Here, birds, flowers and insects exhibit "no moods of fear" (line 17) along the "barren roads" (line 25) to the "melancholly [sic] tomb" (line 26).

[16] Ordinarily understood in terms of "influence," inspiration has a long history in the English language, from Old French usage for divine guidance (OED): (i) the practice of animating with an idea or purpose; (ii) be seemingly inspired by the supernatural; (iii) an extraordinary quality arising from an external creative influence; (iv) breathing in.

[17] Comparable examples might be Ashbery's engagement with Rimbaud (2011), and John Kinsella's Dante-inspired work (2008).