

What Are Poets For?

In the last issue of *Windfall* we called for a “new realistic romanticism, in which the human relation to nature is once again called to account, as well as exalted.” What do we mean by this apparent contradiction in terms, a “realistic romanticism,” and how would it work in writing poetry today?

In poetry the term “Romanticism” recalls the movement that took hold at the beginning of the nineteenth century, including German poets such as Goethe, Novalis, and Hölderlin, and English poets such as Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats, and Clare. These poets in general were responding to the rise of the industrial age in Europe, the rationalistic, dehumanizing era characterized by Blake’s “dark Satanic mills.” The Romantic poets asserted the primacy of emotion and a redemptive relation to nature. In terms of writing about nature, Hölderlin produced numerous poems about the rivers of Germany, Keats gave us his “Ode to a Nightingale” and “Ode to Autumn,” and Shelley wrote “Ode to the West Wind.” Wordsworth engaged nature on many levels, most memorably in “Lines Written above Tintern Abbey.”

Among Romantic poets, the one whose work dealt most directly with nature was John Clare (1793-1864). Other poets were inclined to idealize nature, and their treatment of it in poetry was often symbolic and literary—Keats’ nightingale was a creature of the imagination, Greek myth, and poetic tradition, not of observation:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:

Clare himself said of Keats: “His descriptions of scenery are often very fine but as it is the case with other inhabitants of great cities he often described nature as she appeared to his fancies and not as he would have described her had he witnessed the things he described.”

In contrast to the magnificent music and movement of Keats’ Ode, Clare’s more humble poem “The Nightingale’s Nest” emerges from direct

observation of the difficulty of finding the object of its title, the specific brambles where the nest might be found, together with notations on the bird's song itself, how it occurs only in summer, leading ultimately to the discovery and description of the nest itself:

How curious is the nest: no other bird
Uses such loose materials or weaves
Its dwelling in such spots—dead oaken leaves
Are placed without and velvet moss within
And little scraps of grass and, scant and spare,
What scarcely seem materials, down and hair.

Clare's observations are always grounded in natural history, knowledge gained from wandering the fields, forests, and hedgerows around the small farming village of Helpston, Northamptonshire, where he spent his childhood and young adulthood. Clare was celebrated briefly by the London literati in the 1820's after the publication of his first book. He was seen as the "Peasant Poet" by big city readers whose expectations had been formed by armchair romanticism. In reality, his poetry was the only realistic poetry about rural life that was being written at the time. That is to say, his celebration of nature constituted a form of what we might call "realistic romanticism," appreciation of which had to wait until the twentieth century.

John Clare was explicit about the places he wrote about, often naming them. He could write about a particular tree ("Langley Bush"), or a particular piece of land ("Swordy Well"), or an entire landscape, as in this sonnet about the uncultivated fields south of Helpston, beginning with Clare's favorite phrase, "I love":

Emmonsail's Heath in Winter
I love to see the old heath's withered brake
Mingle its crimped leaves with furze and ling
While the old heron from the lonely lake
Starts slow and flaps his melancholy wing
And oddling crow in idle motions swing
On the half-rotten ash tree's topmost twig
Beside whose trunk the gypsy makes his bed—

Up flies the bouncing woodcock from the brig
Where a black quagmire quakes beneath the tread;
The fieldfare chatters in the whistling thorn
And for the 'awe round fields and closen rove
And coy bumbarrels twenty in a drove
Flit down the hedgerows in the frozen plain
And hang on little twigs and start again.

Also characteristic of locale were the many dialect words that Clare liked to deploy in his poems: "brake" refers to a bramble thicket; "ling" is heather; "odding" means solitary; a "brig" is a bridge; the "'awe" is a hawthorne berry; "closen" refers to small enclosed fields; "bumbarrels" are long-tailed tits.

Lest we of the twenty-first century are also misled by the myth of John Clare as naïve country-boy poet, we need to account for another side of his realism. The life ways and places that Clare was recording in his poetry were in fact vanishing. Throughout his adolescence, roughly 1809-1820, the countryside (the commons) around Helpston was gradually enclosed. "Enclosure" means that by acts passed in Parliament, the traditional open fields and woodlands (called "waste lands" in enclosure language), were fenced off and turned to large-scale farming. Roads replaced footpaths. Trees were cut down, watercourses altered, and trespassing prohibited. Wild shrub lands like Emmonsail's Heath were ploughed under. This development was suffered by Clare as an extreme dislocation, and his poetry protested enclosure, as in "The Village Minstrel":

There once were lanes in nature's freedom dropt,
There once were paths that every valley wound—
Enclosure came and every path was stopped;
Each tyrant fixed his sign where paths were found,
To hint a trespass now who crossed the ground:
Justice is made to speak as they command;
The high road now must be each stinted bound:
—Enclosure, thou'rt a curse upon the land
And tasteless was the wretch who thy existence planned.

Following Clare, we can say that a “realistic romanticism” would go beyond a celebration of nature to include a critique of how humans relate to nature, individually and collectively. Twentieth-century German philosopher Martin Heidegger coined an interesting word for this process: He said that artists must “unconceal” the human relation to nature. For Heidegger, the highest of arts was poetry, “the saying of the unconcealedness of what is.” As Heidegger also noted, we humans commonly place a shield of technology between ourselves and the “open draft” of nature as it is. In Clare’s time the various instruments of enclosure—whether fences, roads, ploughs, no trespassing signs, or the Acts of Enclosure themselves—represent the deployment of that technology. In our own time, poetry has hardly begun to “unconceal” the manifold means by which we keep nature at bay.

To put the issue in positive terms, poetry must unconceal how it is we can live on earth without destroying it at the same time. As Heidegger put it, we must learn to dwell where we live, and dwelling comes *before* building. Our relation to place, our dwelling, should dictate any other activity such as building that we might undertake. If we view the place where we live in this light, we can imagine that unconcealing would naturally follow: What has been built there, and what kind of dwelling does this building assume? If nothing has been built there, what is the nature of the place? How is it named? What is our Emmonsail’s Heath, and how well can we know it? How can we express our love of this place? This task is what poets are for.

Sadly, enclosure was symbolic of the fate of John Clare. He suffered for most of his life from what today would be called a bipolar condition, worsening as time went on. His brief fame in London isolated him from the village life when he returned. In 1832, when he was thirty-nine, Clare moved with his wife and six children from Helpston to a bigger house in Northborough, three miles away. As Jonathan Bate puts it in his new biography, “For Clare, the three miles might as well have been three hundred.” Northborough was fen country, less varied than the woodlands of Clare’s deep identification.

Eventually enclosure literally overwhelmed John Clare. In 1837, because of hallucinations and increasingly inappropriate language and behavior, he was committed to an asylum. In 1841 he walked from the asylum eighty miles home to Northborough, but that same year was recommitted to

another asylum at Northampton, where he spent the last eighteen years of his life. Unknown to him, four of his children died of tuberculosis during his commitment. He outlived all the other Romantic poets, and in his lifetime wrote some 3,500 poems, most remaining unpublished and unread until the twentieth century.

The poetry of John Clare sets a clear standard for poets today: to engage in our work, to unconceal, both human dwelling and nature as it is. We in the Pacific Northwest are particularly fortunate to have access to the oral literature of Native American tradition, a literature based on life lived in this sense of the open draft of nature. For instance, Dell Hymes' new book, *Now I Know Only So Far: Essays in Ethnopoetics*, provides translations of the poetic stories of myth tellers such as Louis Simpson, Victoria Howard, and Charles Cultee which are redolent of living directly in nature. Louis Simpson's "The Deserted Boy" is a masterpiece of food-gathering, communal and familial survival, and accommodation to death, set along the Columbia River in winter. Part of dwelling in the land is to know what came before, by naming, by culture, and by storied memory. At *Windfall* we hope for poems that will engage and unconceal how we live in this Pacific Northwest region of earth.

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Works referred to in this afterword:

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