



PROJECT MUSE®

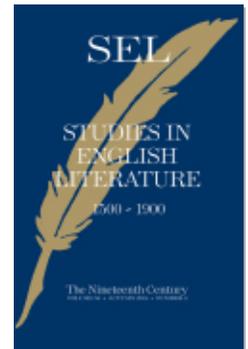
Autumnal Affect in the Poetry of John Clare

Jonas Cope

SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900, Volume 58, Number 4, Autumn 2018, pp. 855-875 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sel.2018.0032>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/709498>

Autumnal Affect in the Poetry of John Clare

JONAS COPE

I. INTRODUCTION

John Clare's poem "The Last of Autumnn," composed in late 1820, opens with a gentle invitation:

Come bleak november in thy wildness come
Thy mornings clothd in rime thy evenings chill
Een they have powers to tempt me from my home
Een they have beautys to delight me still
Tho nature lingers in her mourning weeds
& wails the dying year in gusty blast.¹

Bleak autumn mornings and evenings "have powers" that "tempt" the speaker away from a warm and safe home. This article identifies such powers as affect: the manifold of unqualifiable intensities that condition and enable feelings—feelings such as "delight" in line four. The affective realm includes the illimitable points of contact between a body and its environment that inform or form the sensibilities and, ultimately, the sentiments of that body. Affect always already precedes feelings and, necessarily, any words used to express feelings—words William M. Reddy has called "emotives."² Clare wrote dozens of poems about autumn—his

Jonas Cope is Assistant Professor of English at California State University, Sacramento. He has published a monograph, *The Dissolution of Character in Late Romanticism* (2018), and several articles on canonical and noncanonical Romantic-era texts in such journals as *Romanticism*, *Studies in Romanticism*, *Romantic Circles Praxis*, *European Romantic Review*, and *The Keats-Shelley Journal*.

“favorite season”—that register the divide between affect and feelings, privileging affect as the proper subject matter for a poetry of nature.³ Emotives certainly appear in the autumn poems, as one would expect, but they are often trivialized, conflicted, or qualified, distracting from what appears to be the real focus. “The Last of Autumn” implies that rimy mornings, “evenings chill,” and “gusty blast[s]” are unusual, perhaps morbid, sources of “delight.” They possess certain obscure “powers” that “tempt” or draw the speaker from his house and precede his reported “delight” in their “beautys.” As the poem moves along, such “powers” become its focus, and the emotions that respond to these powers appear less owned, less colonized, as it were, by the speaker who names them. Like many poems of its kind, “The Last of Autumn” dramatizes “the way the sensual world greets the sensate body,” in such a way as to de-emphasize the importance of emotion as a unique and exquisitely private experience.⁴ The strange thing about this poem is that the feelings expressed in it appear to the reader like objects: like things that the speaker meets, encounters, and observes, lumping them together with other external objects of his perception.⁵ If, for instance, “naked fields hang lonley on the view,” or a pair of “Arches half filld with witherd leaves ... meets the view”—the sensual world literally greeting (“meet[ing]”) the sensate body—then the speaker of “The Last of Autumn” also “meet[s] with pleasures,” “Mixd in the uproar of those little seas / That roll their floods w[h]ere summer left her flowers” (lines 11, 30–1, and 26–8). Here, pleasures are literally and materially caught up in rain puddles and perceived along with them. Later, on the road, the speaker encounters “A joy that dwells in autumns lonly walks,” and that “wispers” to him about the future spring “as [he] pass[es]” (lines 37–8 and 35). This is not his “joy” but “joy” that resembles an external object of perception, one detached from a feeling subject and moving about the landscape. At one point the speaker exclaims that

there is somthing in that wind that mourns
 & those black clouds that hide the heaven as well
 & in that sun that gilds & glooms by turns
 Which leaves a pleasure thats unspeakable.

(lines 93–6)

The first three lines of this poetic sentence capitalize on the act of sensation. The focus is not on the feeling of “pleasure” but on the “something” heard in the wind and seen in the “black clouds” and

shifting sun that “leaves” an “unspeakable” residue, “pleasure.” And pleasure here looks less like an emotion wrought from within the speaker than a thing mysteriously left behind that either cannot or should not be speakable.

This and other autumn poems imagine human feelings as closer to what David Hume calls “original impressions”—which “without any antecedent perception arise in the soul, from the constitution of the body,” or “from the application of objects to external organs”—than to what Hume calls secondary impressions, which proceed directly or indirectly from original impressions and include “emotions” and “passions.”⁶ For Clare, a feeling seems to be less reliable or authentic in proportion as it is removed from the immediacy of sensory perception. In this light, his poems may be said to question, if not directly to challenge, the legitimacy of what Ann W. Astell has called the “Romantic view of the educational process” outlined in William Wordsworth’s “Preface” to the *Lyrical Ballads*.⁷ According to Wordsworth, “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.”⁸ But these feelings, though sudden and powerful, are not—at least in the case of good poets—aimless. Wordsworth claims to have trained his sensibilities so that the emotions he has—when excited by the right sort of natural object—are automatically directed toward human kinship, toward what is “really important to men.” His “habits of meditation,” as Wordsworth puts it, “have so formed [his] feelings” that his descriptions of “such objects as strongly excite those feelings ... carry along with them a *purpose*.”⁹ How does this process work? How can a conscientious poet train his feelings? Not directly, by training the feelings per se, but indirectly, by training the thoughts that represent them. Thoughts, Wordsworth claims, are the “general representatives” of “all our past feelings.” If we can learn to “contemplat[e] the relation[s]” between our thoughts, between one feeling representative and another, then we can ultimately direct the course of our thoughts and, it follows, the course of the feelings for which they stand.¹⁰ As Astell notes, the whole process “involves the conversion of essentially passive and spontaneous *reactions* to the world of sensory experience ... into freely-willed and energetic *responses*—that is, the purposeful connection of our feelings with important subjects—through the habitual exercise of the intellect in the close examination, modification, and direction of our emotions.”¹¹ Wordsworth assumes that feelings are educable and can be trained into an automatic “connection ... with important subjects.” A person can so regulate her feelings over time that each one comes to appear active, sober, others-centered, mature;

or, as the speaker of Wordsworth's "Lines: Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" explains the educational process, one can move from having a feeling in the presence of natural objects that is more like a "passion," an "appetite," or a "raptur[e]," to having a feeling leavened with the "charm" of "thought."¹² In the latter case, thought is something added to a feeling that "chasten[s] and subdue[s]" it, without which the feeling might arise like one of Hume's "original impressions," still bearing the not-quite-edifying film of sensation.¹³ It may be easy for Western readers to agree with Wordsworth that a thought is somehow the natural or inevitable endpoint, the "representativ[e]," of a feeling, since Western philosophical tradition has tended to consider feelings as noncognitive impulses that anticipate, rather than complement, thought—as not-quite-matured mental activities with a "conceptual destiny."¹⁴ Clare's autumn poems, however, seem to question the value of not only trainable but also personalized feelings, calling attention to the material conditions of a body and its environment that precede all individual feelings.

All poems discussed in this article are generally about—and often addressed to—autumn. There are two reasons for this focus. The season is, first, intimately connected to Clare's body, and, second, integral to his now-familiar aesthetic of disorder. Clare suffered physically during autumn. He associated the season with traumatic and explicit memories. In the autumn months he dreamed of a visionary goddess who legitimated his worthiness as a poet and promised him redemption—and who bears similarities to several of the personified female Autumns in his poems. Thus, his treatment of autumn in poetry is closely related to the bodily and mental trauma he underwent with increasing severity during the period loosely between harvest and Christmas. It may be no coincidence, considering this trauma, that he perceives autumn in particular as a season of disorder. Clare revels in the disorder of variegated leaves, windfalls, powerful and destructive storms, fickle skies, hunts in forests—the wild sounds rather than the cruelties to animals—children scrambling for hazelnuts and blackberries, etc. Though it is now a truism to say that "Clare found beauty in the absence of order," this aesthetic has received little attention in light of the poet's psychosomatic relationship with autumn—especially in light of how and to what extent autumn affected Clare's body and his art.¹⁵ Critics usually trace Clare's appreciation of disorder in the natural world to his aversion to the artificial ordering of the English landscape through the Enclosure Acts, or to the contrived "economy and precision" that charac-

terizes the Linnaean system of floral and faunal classification.¹⁶ Without diminishing the social and political importance of these arguments, I would add that a richer sense of the aesthetic value Clare places on disorder requires an awareness of his personal experience with and discursive treatment of autumn.¹⁷ His love of disorder, which is avowed explicitly and routinely in the autumn poems, reflects not only his political allegiance to what is unkempt, untouched, unregarded, and uncared for in the rural landscape and its inhabitants—as has been argued—but also what I will call autumnal affect.

II. A LIFE OF AUTUMN

Autumn was more to Clare than part of his “abiding interest in seasonal ... patterns.”¹⁸ It became painfully associated with a number of traumatic events that occurred during his young adulthood and haunted him throughout his life. In his *Sketches in the Life of John Clare* (1821), Clare attributes his “week const[itu]tion and ... severe indisposition” to an incident that took place in August 1811 when he was eighteen. His

indisposition, (for I cannot call it illness) originated in fainting fits, the cause of which I always imagined came from seeing when I was younger a man name Thomas Drake after he had fell off a load of hay and broke his neck the gastly palness of death struck such a terror on me that I could not forget it for years and my dreams was constantly wanderings in church yards, digging graves, seeing spirits in charnel houses etc etc in my fits I swooned away without a struggle and felt nothing more then if I'd been in a dreamless sleep after I came to my self but I was always warnd of their coming by a chillness and dithering ... every spring and autum since the accident happend my fears are agitated to an extreem degree and the dread of death involves me in a stupor of chilling indisposition.¹⁹

The death of Drake, a Northampton churchwarden, took place during harvest. Clare claims that ever since he witnessed this event he was prone to grisly nightmares and fainting fits that eventually weakened his constitution permanently. Every spring and autumn since the accident, furthermore, he felt more pronouncedly his “week,” “severe,” and “chilling indisposition.” Jona-

than Bate suggests that his “periodic ... swoons” may have owed less to the death of Drake than to “his own fifteen-foot drop from a tree whilst gathering nuts.”²⁰ The fits may also have stemmed, I would add, from Clare’s habit of falling asleep under trees on cold autumn nights, so that “in the Autumn nights the ryhme usd to fall and cover me on one side like a sheet which affected my side with a numbness and I have felt it ever since at spring and fall and I often times think that the illness which oppresses me now while I write this narative proceeds from the like cause.”²¹ The actual “cause” of the fainting fits, which Bate compares to the symptoms of “non-convulsive epilepsy,” is less important for our purposes than the fact that each harvest reawakened in Clare memories of both a fatal accident and his own brushes with death.²² He witnessed another accident in his early thirties. In his journal for 1 December 1824, he records that a late autumn flood has just swept through Deeping Gate and drowned his “old neighbour Sam Sharp out last night ... and attempting to get home.”²³ Aside from deaths and near-deaths, Clare also associated autumn with dark nights and superstitious terrors. In one of his *Autobiographical Fragments* he recalls that “the worst fright [he] ever met with was on a harvest night.”²⁴ It was near midnight and he was returning home from working the harvest when he “had a terror haunting spot to cross calld Baron parks in which was several ruins of roman camps and saxon castles.” Suddenly he

fan[c]yd I saw somthing stand wavering in the path way ...
wether of flesh and blood was a question my astonishd
terrors magnified it into a horrible figure it appeard to
have ears of a vas[t] length and the hair seemd to hang
about it ... I trembl'd and almost wishd the earth woud
open to hide me.²⁵

Suddenly Clare could not speak. He ran as fast as he could only to learn to his “increasd terror” that this monstrosity was “close at [his] heels.” He was now certain that it was an “infernal” creature and was so terrified that when he finally returned home he “felt nearly fit to dye.”²⁶ The demon turns out—almost like the episode of the fulling-mill hammers in *Don Quixote de la Mancha*—to have been a wandering pet foal. The event was apparently no less terrifying for its anticlimactic conclusion. Eric Robinson and David Powell suppose that the anecdote is not mere posturing but the result of “fact and fiction ... hav[ing] become intertwined in Clare’s mind.”²⁷

There is no doubt that Clare suffered acutely during the autumn months and that his hospitalization in private and public asylums was the end result. Bate stresses that his illness was as physical as it was psychological. Clare was affected by the “[f]en, fever, ague and influenza” that “flourished in the damp autumn weather.”²⁸ He was also “conscious of the seasonal cycle of his illness. In temperate climates depressive symptoms peak in spring and autumn: these were the times of the year when [Clare] said that the blue devils most often came upon him. Spring and autumn are also the peak times for suicides, a fact noted by Clare’s doctor Matthew Allen, who was a great believer in the influence of atmospheric conditions on mental health.”²⁹ Some of the personal letters Clare wrote between September and December testify to his physical and mental trauma during the “atmospheric conditions” of autumn. They refer to severe autumn thunderstorms, his childhood friend Richard Turnhill whom he lost to typhus, his last will and testament, an inability to read or write without great effort, his having “like Job broke[n] out in b[o]ils from head to foot,” a “numbness & stupidity in the head & tightness of the skull as if it was hooped round like a barrel,” his feeling of “dead living lethargy” and an “excess of melancholly” owing to his “brains seem[ing] to boil up almost into madness & [his] arms & legs burnt as it were with a listless feebleness that almost rendered them useless.”³⁰ At one point the strenuous activity of the harvest seems to have agitated his imagination: “my fancys are exceedingly ruffled with the Harvest as I am working away at it as hard as a negroe.”³¹

If autumn was a time of bodily and mental suffering for Clare, then it was also a period of intense dreams. In *Autobiographical Fragments*, composed at some point between 1821 and 1828, Clare writes that he “feel[s] a beautiful providence ever about me as my attendant deity.” That deity “shield[s]” him from “trouble,” “attends [him] like a nurse,” and encourages him “like a friend” when he is “doubting.” She “opens her mind as a teacher” to impart “truth” and “wisdom.”³² He writes about this same goddess some years later, in what Bate calls a “dream-diary.”³³ Clare notes in his “dream-diary” that he had a “remarkable dream” on the night of 13 October 1832. He dreamed “that [my] Guardian spirit in the shape of a soul stirring beauty again appeared to me with the very same countenance in which she appeared many years ago and in which she has since appeared at intervals and moved my ideas into extacy.” The spirit assumed “the shape of a young woman with dark & rather disordered hair and eyes that spoke

more beauty than earth inherits"; she had a "witching voice" that proceeded from a "witching face."³⁴ At this point, in October 1832, Clare was convinced of her existence, since she had already appeared to him in several, much earlier dreams. The "first dream in which she appeared," he goes on in the "dream-diary," occurred before he had ever written a line of poetry. In that instance the guardian assured the very young, dreaming Clare that he would one day be a renowned poet, and he regarded her thereafter as his "good genius" in whose "ideality" he believed "almost as fresh as reality."³⁵ He met her again in a later dream that took place before the October 1832 dream—this time in a ghostly village on which the sun shone like the "pale moon" and "the sky had a dull unnatural hue" to it. As she and he walked through the village, Clare felt "called to judgment" and followed a crowd of villagers into a churchyard. His companion appeared to him "in white garments beautifully disorderd but sorrowful in her countenance." When a voice from the chancel of the church called out his name and Clare felt "awfully affraid tho not terrified," his "conductress smiled in extacy and uttered something as prophetic of [his] happiness." She then led him "into the open air," where he felt "delighted and sorrowful and talked to her awake for a moment as if she were still bending over [him]." Clare gives this goddess various names—"beautiful presence," "woman-deity [who] gave the sublimest conceptions of beauty to [his] imagination," "lady-divinity," and "guardian genius."³⁶

It makes sense that some of the material from Clare's "dream-diary" appears also in his poems—particularly in his poems related to autumn. The only dream that Clare actually dated, after all, occurred in the month of October 1832. A close comparison of the "dream-diary" and the autumn poems, in fact, suggests some compelling affinities. In one of the earlier dreams he had of his guardian, we recall, Clare walks through a village where the sun shines like the "pale moon" and "the sky had a dull unnatural hue." Clare uses the words "pale" and "dull" frequently to describe autumn landscapes or human-like autumn figures in his poems. For instance, a personified female Autumn in the poem "October," from *The Shepherd's Calendar*, appears "like fair woman in decay / Which pale consumption hourly wastes away"; on her "waining features pale & chill" she "Wears dreams of beauty that seem lovely still."³⁷ Notice not only that Clare twice describes the autumn figure as "pale"—recalling the "pale moon" of the "dream-diary" and the "white garments" worn by the dream goddess—but also that "dreams" in this poem are fig-

ured as beautiful clothing with which Autumn covers her sickly features. She puts on dreams—a sort of dream coat?—to cover her physical defects. In this instance the speaker effectively blurs the contents of an old dream and what seem to be—or at least seem to originate from—the objects of his waking perception. Is Clare hinting here that this autumn figure looks as beautiful as she did in one of his own dreams? That she appears as lovely as the dream guardian from whom, possibly, she is derived? Or that the beauty of the autumn figure is so otherworldly as to resemble the fantastic content of dreams in general? The correct answer in this case is less important than the fact that dreams are strangely physicalized: they resemble either clothing or something worn like clothing. That Clare thus physicalizes dreams suggests his investment in the material origins of immaterial phenomena—a point to which I will return in my discussion below of “Springs flushing bud has open into leaf.”

The consumptive autumn figure in “October” marks only one of several lexical connections between the “dream-diary” and the autumn poems. In “The Dark Days of Autumn,” the “sun pales like sulphur” and the “dull season” of autumn is “the sweetest of any.”³⁸ In other poems autumn is still a sweet season, though also usually “dull & dark,” full of “Dull shadows glooming dreary,” and “dull days of clouds.”³⁹ As to the dream guardian herself, in the “dream-diary,” we recall, she appears “in white garments beautifully disorderd but sorrowful in her countenance,” with “disordered hair and eyes that spoke more beauty then earth inherits”; she has a “witching face” and a “witching voice.” These bodily features also find their way into the autumn poems. The famous Collinsian poem “Autumn” anthropomorphizes the season as a “Syren of sullen moods & fading hues,” a “Sweet vision with ... wild dishevilled hair,” a “Disorderly divine” “queen.”⁴⁰ Elsewhere Clare calls autumn a “rural queen.”⁴¹ The speaker of “Written in Autumn” longs to compose a “witching measure” appropriate to the witching genius of autumn, in order to seduce her to linger while her variegated beauties “lastingly decline.”⁴² What these examples reveal is that both beings, visionary and seasonal, appear variously pale, sad, disheveled, sirenic, beautiful, and divine. Moreover, the word “disorder[],” which Clare uses to describe the garments and hair of his dream guardian, signifies the nonpersonified autumn landscape in several poems: a “shower of cobwebs” blankets the earth in one poem, whose “threads of silk in strange disorder twist”; “wild disorderd clouds” drift across “wilder skyes” in another; “scenes of woods & fields”

are “disordered” in a third; “wild disorder rings ... thro the woods” in a fourth; and so on.⁴³

The main point here is that Clare’s psychosomatic “disorder” is dynamically interrelated with his aesthetic of disorder and that both are grounded in the season of autumn. The body of the poet that sickens and struggles during autumn bleeds into his description of a female autumn figure in “October” dying of consumption. The poet who dreams of a guardian angel in October 1832, and who has dreamed of her repeatedly since childhood, reproduces that angel in his poetic descriptions of autumn landscapes—some anthropomorphized, some not—which herald death while promising new life. Both the dream guardian and the female spirits of autumn are, indeed, “prophetic of ... happiness”—the latter in their countless affirmations of the coming spring. In an untitled poem about autumn, written between 1820 and 1822, the speaker looks on the “clouded skyes” and “colord leaves that fade & fall,” observing that “woods & vallys seems / Wrapt all in visionary dreams.”⁴⁴ This last image recalls the female autumn figure in “October,” who wrapped her sick body in “dreams of beauty.” Clare seems to offer another allusion to the dream guardian in the autumn of 1823. The correspondence between Clare and Eliza Emmerson describes how the letter writer is “haunted by ... the ‘abiding shadow’ of ‘visionary mysteries.’”⁴⁵ Both the poem “[Aut]umn Is Beautiful to See” and the letter just quoted were each composed somewhere between 1820 and 1823. The excerpt from *Autobiographical Fragments* cited above—in which Clare first mentions the guardian angel explicitly in print—is dated somewhere between 1821 and 1828. All of these facts reinforce the likelihood that the deities particular to the “dream-diary” and to several autumn poems are dramatically intermingled.

III. AUTUMNAL AFFECT

A given autumn poem is a blend of observation, moralizing, and emotives. The emotives typically suggest hybrid states: joyful sadness, melancholy delight. This practice is relatively standard in Romantic poems about autumn; the season simultaneously tends to elicit “fulfilment and melancholy, harvest fruits and a most vivid sense of transience.”⁴⁶ But Clare does more than capitalize on the familiar emotional nuances. His autumn verse, informed by his own physical and psychological responses to the season, gestures toward the precognitive, material interactions between a body and its surroundings that are ultimately responsible for

emotional response. Next to this kind of exploration, the actual emotives in the poems can appear secondary, frustrated, appended, out of focus.

One early and—as far as I can tell—virtually unknown, untitled sonnet opens with a set of powerfully functioning images, only to segue into a half-confident, moralizing elegy:

Springs flushing bud has opend into leaf
 Summers blown [flower] hath shed its seed & gone
 Browning wheat fields rustle in the sheaf
 Which springs first sun beam lookd so green upon
 So natures beauties vanishes away
 The very dreams of what was once decay
 Mid pale consumptive autumns windings round
 When summer beauties & and the suns warm ray
 Like charms of woman wanes & vanishes
 Ah sad to think that beautys burning eyes
 Shoud shine in borrowd light ah sad to see
 Such lights extinguishd in a mortal shroud
 Ah sad to think joys flower so sweet shoud be.⁴⁷

The opening quatrain engages the reader in dynamic processes of growth and decay conveyed rapidly in dense images. Lines 1 and 2 are written in the present perfect tense and indicate basically that though spring and summer have passed, their absence continues to be felt. But this sense of absence is portrayed so as, momentarily, to be felt as a presence. The present participle “flushing”—“send[ing] out shoots,” as the *OED* proposes—suggests growth so immediate as to be almost visible in the here and now.⁴⁸ Most readers will internalize this suggestion on first glance; we are introduced to the spring bud in the very act or process of its flushing. But the bud cannot be both opening into leaf and “opend into leaf” at one and the same time. The reader is quickly forced to acknowledge that the flushing has already taken place: the plant has sent out its shoots. A similar temporal shift occurs in line 2. We are no sooner invited to visualize a blown flower—a flower “[i]n bloom; that has blossomed”—than our mental image of it is dashed: we are told that its seed is shed and the flower is actually long gone.⁴⁹ Clare thus nests presentness in pastness, growth in decay, potentiality in actuality. And just when we imagine ourselves in a position of temporal steadiness in line 3—the actual season is autumn, since the “Browning wheat fields rustle” (present participle and present-tense verb)—we are reminded of

“the sheaf / Which springs first sun beam lookd so green upon.” The memory of the departed spring has encroached once again on the description of the present autumn. This quatrain manages to capture the natural agencies of three seasons—spring, summer, and autumn—in three distinct but carefully interrelated images: bud, flower, and field.

The emphasis in these lines is on dynamic sensation and perception. An obvious meaning of line 4 is that the sun once shone upon the now-brown sheaf at a time when that sheaf was young and green. But the syntax of the line creates the distinct, counterintuitive impression that the spring sunlight actually absorbed the greenness of what it illuminated and shone greenly. The first reading is more apparent with the following syntactical rearrangement: “the sheaf / Which ... lookd so green upon ... springs first sun beam”—i.e., the sheaf appeared so green while the first sunbeam of spring was shining on it. A different permutation, however, privileges the second interpretation: “the sheaf / [U]pon [w]hich springs first sun beam lookd so green”—i.e., the sunbeam appeared (“lookd”) so green as it shone on the sheaf. The syntactical ambiguity suggests something important, I think, about perception. The speaker perceives vigorously in such a way as to diminish the distinction between the properties of illuminating source and illuminated object—just as he obscures the distinction between the three seasons earlier. An overall sense of simultaneity, of grand sensory disorder, emerges in these lines only to be weakened as soon as the speaker tries to interpret them, to rewrite the images in moral and emotional terms.

The remainder of the poem—lines 5 through 13—indeed strains to integrate these initial, image-laden lines into a sort of conventional moral-rhetorical structure. Out of this structure emerge feelings, signaled with words such as “sad” and “joy[.]” The poem reinforces the fact that the more we think we know about our own feelings, the more we seem to be lost in discourse; the further we have traveled from the material conditions of sensation and, hence, the building blocks of feeling. “So natures beauties vanishes away” in line 5 retroactively designates the quatrain that opens the poem as a vehicle in a simile, whose nine-line tenor invites but refuses to draw clear emotional conclusions. That all things in the natural world—such as “natures beauties”—decay seems to be the relatively clear-cut point of line 5. But the rest of the poem yields tortuous meanings; it is as if the attempt to interpret, define, and conventionalize affective energies—energies initially trapped or undifferentiated in acts of sensation, energies

unfinished or as yet undeclared as feelings—has rendered the poem less intelligible or meaningful.

The poem is remarkable for its complete lack of punctuation, which makes lines 5 through 9 somewhat difficult to interpret. It seems, though, that line 5 should be read as a single sentence with a subject and predicate: “natures beauties vanishes away.” The subject-verb disagreement can be explained by the fact that Clare had originally written “natures beauties are begone,” superimposing over “are begone” the words “vanishes away.”⁵⁰ Line 6 elaborates or rephrases line 5: “The very dreams of what was once decay.” All but the last word in this line is the grammatical subject, and “decay” is the verb: dreams decay. The speculation that follows is concerned not with how or through what cause the dreams decay but when: “Mid” the “windings round” of autumn, “pale” and “consumptive,” during a time “When summer beauties & the suns warm ray ... wanes & vanishes ... Like charms of woman.” The actual cause of the decaying dreams is not as important as when or during what material circumstances the decay is thought to have happened. Line 6 is of tremendous importance to this article. In line 5 we are told that “natures beauties” are gone, vanished. In line 6 we are told that even the dreams we have had of, presumably, “natures beauties” are also prone to decay—so that not only natural phenomena, but also the dreams we have about natural phenomena, are subject to material decomposition. Dreams decay just like the objects dreamed about. All of this forces mental processes into alignment with physical processes, collapsing Cartesian dualism and reinforcing the material origin and end of all mental activities—activities presumed to be alienated from the “windings round” of the physical world.

To arrive at this reading takes considerable work—in my case numerous rereadings. One could say that this interpretive work is clear evidence of the fact that this poem was meant to be punctuated by editors—presuming it was ever a candidate for publication in the first place. But even with punctuation one cannot escape the enigmatic quality of line 6—“The very dreams of what was once decay”—unless one inserts a comma between “once” and “decay.” It takes some effort to realize that the dreams themselves are decaying and not that someone has had dreams of things that at one point were decaying (i.e., “The very dreams” of things that were once in a state of “decay” and now may be dead). And yet, even though the reading that I have implied is the preferred one seems sensible, the reader cannot escape the haunting image of a person dreaming of things that were once in a state of decay

and, presumably, are in such a state no longer—as if luxuriating in the state of dissolution. This activity is by no means an unthinkable occupation for Clare; one of his other speakers did, indeed, hope to be present while autumn “lastingly decline[d].” We can sum up as follows: the speaker may be suggesting that he or others have dreamed of the decay of natural beauties, or that such dreams of natural beauties themselves are subject to decay. The confusion is relevant, I think, for its absorption of all things, including mental activities, into the organic realm of birth, growth, decay, and death.

What I find interesting with respect to emotives is that the lack of punctuation in this poem presents few problems until after the first quatrain, as if the extraction of emotional activities from material processes induces confusion. I am thinking in particular of lines 10 through 13. The repeated emotives in these last few lines feel forced, as if the speaker is moralizing in spite of himself: “sad to think,” “sad to see,” and “sad to think” once more. The objects of these brief emotional phrases also seem strangely distanced from the content of the rest of the poem. To whom or what belong the “burning eyes” mentioned in line 10? To Beauty herself? To Nature, who was earlier said to possess or exhibit her own “beauties” in—maybe—the form of natural objects? Is it, in fact, one of these personifications whose “burning eyes” are “borrow[ing] light,” and, if so, from whom or what are they borrowing it? What is “joys flower,” and why is its sweetness sad? I do not want to suggest, with all these questions, that the sonnet is somehow confused or lacks a transcendental signified; rather, I suggest that its real force lies in its highlighting the divide between affect and emotion. The poem seems to lose its power and coherence in proportion as the poet moves from describing acts of sensation and perception to acts of moral and emotional restructuring. It is also important that autumn is figured in this poem as “pale” and “consumptive,” suggesting the failing health of the poet around the harvest season and recalling, yet once more, the dream guardian.

Clare often locates feeling states in or around the material phenomena of autumn—and without recourse to the Wordsworthian faith that vegetation can feel. In critical discourse on the Romantic lyric it is common to presume that these feeling states are displaced fragments of subjective states, that autumn serves as a “projection screen” for the mind of the poet in the act of creation or creative observation.⁵¹ But the case with Clare is different. One gets the distinct sense that a few of his poet-speakers actu-

ally stumble upon feelings as so many windfalls scattered across disordered autumn landscapes—feelings detached from their originary agents, if they ever had them. It is as if these speakers find feeling states stuck to or alongside leaves, branches, winds, bridges, stones, and clouds, and are slow to claim or appropriate them or to imagine them as claimed or appropriated by someone else. One speaker notes that “Pleasures lie scattered all about our ways ... half buried in the shade / Of rude disorder,” and on another occasion that, in the “leaf strewn mornings” of autumn, “Some little scraps of happiness is seen ... whenever wanderers roam.”⁵² Another speaker observes that “Mid [November’s] uproarious madness ... scraps of joy my wandering ever finds.”⁵³ Here “joy” is a thing found in “scraps” by a “wandering” speaker. It is not an emotion claimed by a subject, as a response to what the subject sees. Still another speaker affirms, during a “wet and dreary” autumn day, that “joys, and flowers, smell ... sweet.”⁵⁴ Such found and/or physicalized feelings are somewhat, but not exactly, “transpersonal” in the sense that Adela Pinch and others have suggested. Pinch says that feelings in the eighteenth century can often be read as “autonomous entities that do not always belong to individuals but wander extravagantly from one person to another.”⁵⁵ But this is not what Clare means here by the feelings he points out in his poems. Pinch is referring to feelings that jump from person to person—“transpersonal” feelings. Clare’s particular feeling states, on the other hand, seem able to move in and out of intersubjective traffic altogether—discardable somewhere without an originary trace. On a related note, Sarah Ahmed claims that certain objects are actually “happy” because affect sticks to them. Such happy objects “accumulate positive affective value” as people in social environments become oriented toward them as bringers of happiness.⁵⁶ In the passages cited above, Clare minimizes the importance of private, or even intersubjectively shared, orientations with objects. Wandering poets find feelings in the same way that wandering naturalists, like Clare himself, find botanical specimens.

Clare’s autumn poems present a material landscape in which the immaterial subject has been dismembered and fossilized. Nancy Armstrong has observed that certain literary productions inspired by the eighteenth-century cult of sensibility “question[ed] the autonomy of the individual as it developed in the tradition of Locke, Hume, and Smith,” suggesting that “sensations do not come directly from external objects, as Locke understood them”—in which case the sensations would be legitimate—but

from objects “loaded with meaning and charged with feeling well before we set eyes on them.”⁵⁷ In other words, the mind does not first experience sensations and then learn reason and judgment internally by processing the raw sense data. That very sense data is always already cluttered with social meanings and emotional resonances. Feelings are thus not internally generated but in some cases absorbed in sensation. The residue that is absorbed can, in turn, affect, or infect, reason and judgment. According to Armstrong, this view represented a dangerous alternative to the Enlightenment concept of the individual as a self-enclosed and self-forming being. Such rogue “modes of subject formation” were therefore marginalized and obviated by traditional novels that preserved, however tentatively, the idea of the modern subject as developed by Enlightenment epistemology and moral philosophy.⁵⁸ Clare was writing right in the middle of this dialogue between radical and more traditional modes of narrative fiction. What I find interesting is that his poetic language questions the self-encasement of the individual subject without stressing—though it is amenable to—the particular view that feelings are socially contagious, transmittable from subject to subject. Instead, the poems portray feelings as quasi-material percepts, natural beauties with sensible properties, like the joy with the odor of a flower.

Clare’s speakers tend not only to perceive feeling states among the material phenomena of autumn landscapes, but also to defer feeling as a private mental experience. Clare singles out autumn as a Heraclitean season, the constant fluctuation and disorder of which never cloys, never permits feeling states to settle in the mind-like sediment. The season is preferred because it resists subjective efforts to contain it in neat descriptions or emotions. The disembodied eye of one of his speakers is fascinated by the “birthless beauties” and “namless hues” of autumn—“Shades endless melting into shade.”⁵⁹ Another would “say much of what now meets my eye / But be[a]utys loose [him] in variety.”⁶⁰ The attention here is on the eye that cannot not differentiate between colors, shades, and beauties. It cannot—and would not—translate an endless variety of visual stimuli into discrete mental categories. Autumn for Clare is “More sweet then summer in its loveliest hours / Who in her blooming uniform of green / Delights with samely & continued joy.”⁶¹ In autumn, as opposed to summer, there is no “samely & continued joy”—no joy at all in a strict or stable sense—only “wildness that can never cloy.”⁶² Along what appears to be the “samness” of a violet autumn sky, “Storm upon storm in quick succession crowd,” and “Heaven paints its wild

irregularity.”⁶³ Such a “scene” is always “strange & new / & every object wears a changing hue.”⁶⁴

Clare reproduces this sort of divine disorder—wild impressions of noncloying stimuli—in synesthetic lines in which “senses and affect bleed into one another.”⁶⁵ In an undated poem, composed while he was an inmate in the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum between 1842 and 1864, Clare wrote the following lines:

The dead leaves a falling and winds singing round
The willow and ash leaves they choak up the fountain
There's health i' the strife o't and joy i' the sound.⁶⁶

Presumably there is “health” in the “strife” of leaves accumulating over a natural spring (“fountain”). Whose “health” is it? Does the sight of leaves falling and collecting over a spring invigorate the speaker—induce in him a sense of his own health? Or is the “health” here somehow inherent in the very leaves and the spring, apart from human observation? The same questions apply, more importantly, to the word “joy.” Intuitively we ascribe the “joy” to the speaker. It is his joy to be witness to this luxury of sound. And yet the tendency of the autumn poems to distance feeling states from feeling subjects invites us to regard this joy like some of the others: as a liminal thing trapped or oscillating between object and consciousness, or even as part of an object of perception. Joy is in the sources of sound, the external object of audition, as much as it attends the sensations of the speaker from within the speaker.

IV. CONCLUSION

Clare's autumn poems suggest that luxuriating in the sensual encounter between one's body and its material environment is not a prelude to the articulation of refined feelings, as Wordsworth might claim, but a dynamic encounter with autumnal affect, with the building blocks of all mental activities. Throughout the months of autumn, Clare's body aches and his brain weaves dreams of a nurturing female divinity. Features of this divinity reappear in poems written during and/or about autumn: either in an autumn landscape or in personified autumnal deities who oscillate—like the dream guardian—between present sadness and promised joy, sickly consumption and visionary grandeur. Clare characterizes both kinds of deity as “disordered,” a quality whose aesthetic

value he cherishes not in spite of but because of the fact that it is rooted in his own seasonally induced psychosomatic “disorder,” his own “exceedingly ruffled ... fancys” during autumn. The poems I have studied demonstrate how the creative powers of the poet are embedded in the material intensities of a particular season—its “powers” of rimy mornings and cold nights and wind blasts that “tempt” poets out of their houses. Such powers circulate in and through the body of the poet and seem to materialize in his verse. The autumn poems also dramatize what happens when feelings, generally thought to be the private, internal affairs of individuals, are imagined instead as scattered along autumnal landscapes, with no one to claim them, but which a wandering poet here and there may be fortunate enough to find.

NOTES

¹ John Clare, “The Last of Autumn,” in *Poems of the Middle Period, 1822–1837*, ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell, and P. M. S. Dawson, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1:340–7, lines 1–6. Subsequent references to “The Last of Autumn” are from this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text by line number. I use the Oxford editions—which transcribe the actual manuscripts on which Clare first copied down his poems—despite the fact that Clare wanted his editors to correct the idiosyncratic stops and spellings that appear on these manuscripts (though he did not want his editors to tamper with his actual words). I feel that a literal transcription of any given poem in manuscript brings readers as close as possible to the actual experience of Clare sitting outdoors and tracing the flux of sensation in penciled words.

² William M. Reddy defines “[e]motional expressions,” or “emotives,” as “utterances aimed at briefly characterizing the current state of activated thought material that exceeds the current capacity of attention” (*The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001], p. 111).

³ Geoffrey Summerfield, *John Clare: Selected Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 30, qtd. in Luisa Conti Camaiora, “Poetical Perception of Seasonal Change in John Clare’s ‘Autumn,’” *Quaderni di Lingue e Letterature* 23 (January 1998): 71–85, 72.

⁴ Ben Highmore, “Bitter after Taste: Affect, Food, and Social Aesthetics,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2010), pp. 118–37, 121.

⁵ That feelings can be impersonally encountered rather than privately felt recalls a central argument by Adela Pinch, who does not apply it to Clare: eighteenth-century authors sometimes imply “that one’s feelings may really be someone else’s; that feelings may be purely conventional, or have no discernible origins” (*Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* [Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996], p. 7).

⁶ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Ernest C. Mossner (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 327.

⁷ Ann W. Astell, "Anne Elliot's Education: The Learning of Romance in *Persuasion*," *Renascence* 40, 1 (Fall 1987): 2–14, 4.

⁸ William Wordsworth, "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems*, in Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads, 1798 and 1802*, ed. Fiona Strafford (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), pp. 95–115, 98.

⁹ Wordsworth, "Preface," p. 98.

¹⁰ Wordsworth, "Preface," p. 98.

¹¹ Astell, p. 4.

¹² Wordsworth, "Lines: Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798" (hereafter "Tintern Abbey"), in *Lyrical Ballads*, pp. 87–91, lines 78, 81, 86, and 82–3.

¹³ Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," line 94.

¹⁴ Thomas Pfau, *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790–1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2005), p. 28.

¹⁵ Stephanie Kuduk Weiner, *Clare's Lyric: John Clare and Three Modern Poets* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), p. 64.

¹⁶ Margaret Grainger, general introduction to *The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare*, ed. Grainger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. xxxiii–l, xlii. On the issue of Clare and Linnaean taxonomy see John Lucas, "Crabbe's Disorderly Nature," in *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, ed. Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells (London: Zed Books, 1998), pp. 110–23, 115.

¹⁷ Greg Crossan has observed that "[t]he whole tendency of Clare's taste in landscape and his relationship with the natural world seems to be summed up in the phrase which he used to capture the fitful moods of autumn: 'Disorderly divine'" (*A Relish for Eternity: The Process of Divinization in the Poetry of John Clare* [Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1976], pp. 124–5).

¹⁸ Weiner, p. 3.

¹⁹ Clare, *Sketches in the Life of John Clare*, in *John Clare by Himself*, ed. Robinson and Powell (Manchester UK: Carcanet, 2002), pp. 1–31, 18–9.

²⁰ Jonathan Bate, *John Clare: A Biography* (London: Picador, 2004), p. 76.

²¹ Clare, *Autobiographical Fragments*, in *John Clare by Himself*, pp. 34–165, 74.

²² Bate, p. 76.

²³ Clare, *John Clare's Journal*, in *John Clare by Himself*, pp. 174–243, 200.

²⁴ Clare, *Autobiographical Fragments*, p. 45.

²⁵ Clare, *Autobiographical Fragments*, p. 45.

²⁶ Clare, *Autobiographical Fragments*, pp. 45–6.

²⁷ Clare, *John Clare by Himself*, p. 291n13. Robinson and Powell rightly notice the similarities between this incident and the events of Robert Bloomfield's poem "The Fakenham Ghost," in which a terrified woman runs from a ghost in the middle of the night that turns out to be a foal.

²⁸ Bate, p. 274. Clare shares this particularly English malady with Mrs. Maria Hale of *North and South*, for whom autumn "was most unpropitious to health as well as to spirits" (Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, ed. Angus Easson [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008], p. 68).

²⁹ Bate, p. 413.

³⁰ Clare to John Taylor, London, 3 September 1821, in *The Letters of John Clare*, ed. Mark Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 211–3,

211; Clare to Taylor, London, 15 September 1825, in *Letters*, pp. 346–7, 347; Clare to Taylor, London, 17 November 1827, in *Letters*, pp. 404–5, 404; and Clare to Eliza Louisa Emmerson, London, 13 November 1832, in *Letters*, pp. 603–6, 603–4.

³¹ Clare to George Darley, London, 3 September 1827, in *Letters*, pp. 396–8, 398.

³² Clare, *Autobiographical Fragments*, p. 134.

³³ Bate, p. 395.

³⁴ Clare, *John Clare's Journal*, pp. 253–5, 254 and 253.

³⁵ Clare, *John Clare's Journal*, p. 254.

³⁶ Clare, *John Clare's Journal*, pp. 254–5.

³⁷ Clare, "October," in *The Shepherd's Calendar, Poems of the Middle Period*, 1:137–45, lines 53–6.

³⁸ Clare, "The Dark Days of Autumn," in *The Later Poems of John Clare, 1837–1864*, ed. Robinson and Powell, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 2:811, lines 2–3.

³⁹ Clare, "The Shepherds Almost Wonder Where They Dwell," in *Poems of the Middle Period*, 5:268, line 11; Clare, "The Last of Autumn," line 119; and Clare, "To Autumn," in *The Early Poems of John Clare, 1804–1822*, ed. Robinson, Powell, and Grainger, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 2:494–5, line 11.

⁴⁰ Clare, "Autumn ['Syren of sullen moods & fading hues']," in *Poems of the Middle Period*, 3:258–68, lines 1, 37, 104, and 108.

⁴¹ Clare, "The Autumnal Morning," in *Early Poems*, 1:373–6, line 66.

⁴² Clare, "Written in Autumn," in *Early Poems*, 2:318, lines 11 and 14.

⁴³ Clare, "A Autumn Morning," in *Poems of the Middle Period*, 4:307–8, lines 7–8; Clare, "Autumn Showers," in *Early Poems*, 2:587, line 5; Clare, "Autumn ['Syren of sullen moods & fading hues']," line 45; and Clare, "The Last of Autumn," line 51.

⁴⁴ Clare, "[Aut]umn Is Beautiful to See," in *Early Poems*, 2:544, lines 5, 3, and 13–4.

⁴⁵ Bate, p. 251. Bate draws upon the correspondence of Clare in the Egerton Manuscript Collection of the British Library, MSS 2245–50. Although Bate attributes the phrases "abiding shadow" and "visionary mysteries" to Clare (MS 2246, fol. 251), the collection lists its holdings as incoming letters to Clare.

⁴⁶ Summerfield, p. 30, qtd. in Camaiora, p. 72.

⁴⁷ Clare, "Springs flushing bud has opend into leaf," in *Early Poems*, 2:426, lines 1–13.

⁴⁸ *OED*, 2d edn., s.v. "flush, v.²," 4.

⁴⁹ *OED*, 2d edn., s.v. "blown, adj.²"

⁵⁰ See "Springs flushing bud has opend into leaf," p. 426n5.

⁵¹ Lilian R. Furst, "Autumn in the Romantic Lyric: An Exemplary Case of Paradigm Shift," in *Romantic Poetry*, ed. Angela Esterhammer (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002), pp. 3–22, 16.

⁵² Clare, "The Clump of Fern," in *Poems of the Middle Period*, 4:306–7, lines 1, 5–6, 12, 28 and 27.

⁵³ Clare, "November," in *Poems of the Middle Period*, 4:195–6, lines 3–4.

⁵⁴ Clare, "Autumn ['The autumn day it fades away']," in *Later Poems*, 1:332, lines 2 and 23.

⁵⁵ Pinch, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Sarah Ahmed, "Happy Objects," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, pp. 29–51, 29.

⁵⁷ Nancy Armstrong, introduction to *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism from 1719–1900* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 1–25, 15.

⁵⁸ Armstrong, p. 11.

⁵⁹ Clare, "Autumn ['The summer flower has run to seed']," in *Early Poems*, 2:73–80, lines 118–20.

⁶⁰ Clare, "Written in Autumn," lines 9–10.

⁶¹ Clare, "To Autumn," lines 4–6.

⁶² Clare, "To Autumn," line 9.

⁶³ Clare, "November," in *The Shepherd's Calendar, Poems of the Middle Period*, 1:144–55, lines 80, 79, and 81.

⁶⁴ Clare, "A Autumn Morning," lines 13–4.

⁶⁵ Highmore, p. 120.

⁶⁶ Clare, "The Dark Days of Autumn," lines 6–8.