

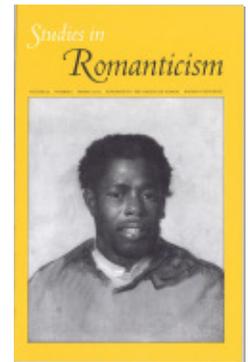


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Possibility of Justice

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SARA GUYER

Figuring John Clare: Romanticism, Editing, and the Possibility of Justice

SINCE JOHN TAYLOR'S FIRST EDITION OF JOHN CLARE'S *POEMS DESCRIPTIVE of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820), the question of how to present Clare's poetry has obsessed scholars and critics. Over the years, they have struggled with questions like: Should Clare be considered a romantic poet, or does this categorization lead us only to "colonize" Clare rather than to recognize him as the misfit that he appeared during his infrequent trips to London? Should we read Clare's asylum poetry—including poems that he wrote in Lord Byron's name—as continuous with his early poetry or rather as the "poetry of madness," whether an aberration or a lens through which Clare's complete works can retrospectively be understood?¹ Yet, it is the question of *editorial* presentation, specifically, whether Clare's language, spelling, and punctuation should be "normalized" or published as it appeared in manuscript (or as close to that appearance as possible), that has attracted the most intense and ongoing attention.

Clare's first editor, John Taylor (also Keats's publisher), was a great supporter of Clare while well aware of the difficulty of finding a significant audience for the poetry. Taylor was responsible for publishing the *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, yet there is little agreement on the merits of Taylor's editorial role. Tim Chilcott suggests that from at least 1821, Clare "began to rely increasingly on Taylor to transform rambling and untidy manuscripts into poetry ready for publication."² The result, in the words of another editor, Arthur Symons, is that "it is difficult to know how much of the early poems were tinkered for publication by the too fastidious publisher Mr. Taylor."³

1. See Geoffrey Grigson, ed., *Poems of John Clare's Madness* (London: Routledge, 1949). See also Fredrick Burwick, *Poetic Madness and the Romantic Imagination* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

2. Tim Chilcott, *A Publisher and His Circle: The Life and Work of John Taylor, Keats's Publisher* (London: Routledge, 1972), 96.

3. *Poems By John Clare*, edited with an Introduction by Arthur Symons (London: Henry

In their 1963 essay on “John Taylor’s Editing of Clare’s *The Shepherd’s Calendar*,” Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield follow this line of inquiry and aim to expose “the nature and extent of Taylor’s ‘slashing’ of *The Shepherd’s Calendar*” (the word “slashing” is, as they acknowledge, Taylor’s own). They go on to argue that even “when all appropriate allowances have been made, Taylor cannot be judged a consistently reliable editor.”⁴ Jonathan Bate points out that Taylor did precisely too much “tidying” and leaves Clare’s poems not cleaned up, but positively “botched.”⁵ It is this tidying up that led Robinson and his co-editors to undertake the massive project of producing a nine-volume collected Clare for Oxford, a collection of poetry and prose that aims to present Clare’s manuscripts “intact.”

Robinson goes so far as to call Taylor “careless, dilatory, bullying” and insists that “it must be appreciated that Taylor was not simply trying to transcribe Clare’s manuscripts, a difficult task in itself, but also to alter Clare’s vocabulary, grammar, spelling, punctuation, and sometimes sentiments.”⁶ In undertaking to correct Taylor’s excesses, which Robinson figures as intentionally malicious, the Oxford volume intends a restoration and transcription (rather than what we might call a translation) of Clare’s original manuscripts.⁷ As a result, the volume maintains the obscure, and sometimes simply mistaken, spelling and grammar found in Clare’s manuscripts, reproduces Clare’s alternatively minimal, excessive, or incorrect punctuation, and tries to recover poems that have been erased, written over and muddled.⁸ Bate, while sympathetic, to the aspirations of this proj-

Frowde, 1908), 4. See also Paul Chirico, “Authority and Community: John Clare and John Taylor” in *Authorship, Commerce and the Public: Scenes of Writing, 1750–1850*, eds. E. J. Clery, Caroline Franklin, Peter Garside (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 84–99.

4. Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield, “John Taylor’s Editing of Clare’s *The Shepherd’s Calendar*,” *The Review of English Studies* 14, no. 56 (Nov. 1963): 359.

5. Jonathan Bate, ed., “*I Am*”: *The Selected Poetry of John Clare* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), xix.

6. John Clare, *Poems of the Middle Period, 1822–1837*, Vol. 1, Eric Robinson, David Powell, and P. M. S. Dawson, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), xiii.

7. Simon Kövesi also introduces “translation” as a term in this context when he writes: “The Oxford editors’ claimed intention is not to transcribe Clare’s manuscripts exactly as the poet wrote them. But this cannot be true. In editorial terms, the action of ‘transcription,’ carries with it a transformative, a transitional, and a translatory effect. Transcription involves activity, not passivity. . . . ‘Transcription’ therefore demands value judgements in each choice of textual variant, or more politely put, requires the enactment of editorial ‘discernment’” (“Beyond the Language Wars: Towards a Green Edition of John Clare,” *John Clare Society Journal* 26 [2007]: 66–67). Although Kövesi seems to consider questions of ethics (judgment, value) here, my own discussion of the ethical claims that ground the various editorial projects follows a somewhat different trajectory.

8. See for example Eric Robinson’s discussion of editing Clare’s misspellings: “There are a few misspellings of the sort we sometimes see in our students’ essays such as ‘where’ for

ect, also calls this process not editing, but “unediting,” and he compares it with “the restoration of an over-varnished canvas to its original colours.”⁹ He acknowledges that the effect of such restoration is that “Clare’s language was revealed in all its freshness and immediacy,” but also worries that the confusion spawned by poor punctuation and misspellings also can interfere with the ease—and even immediacy—of the poems.¹⁰

In the introduction to his 1873 volume of Clare’s life and works, J. L. Cherry explains: “of those [poems, selected from the manuscripts of over 500] which are printed, scarcely one was found in a state in which it could be submitted to the public without more or less of revision and correction.”¹¹ Cherry holds the position that Clare must be edited, that his manuscripts are incomplete or filled with errors that it is the *duty* of an editor to correct. Bate’s position resonates with this one, although he is careful to distinguish between acts of correction and the kinds of *rewriting* that Taylor undertook. Alternatively, in his 1908 edition of the poems, Arthur Symons concedes: “I have tried in vain to find the original manuscripts, which I would have liked to have printed exactly as they were written, having convinced myself that for the most part what Clare wrote actually was better than what his editors made him write.”¹² Robinson and his co-editors share in this conviction and go to extraordinary lengths to reproduce the manuscripts as closely as possible, believing that any alteration is just that, an alteration. Yet, even Robinson, who has claimed copyright of the poems, admits that while he can preserve Clare’s text, he cannot reproduce the experience of encountering the manuscript, which would require transmitting the smell of vinegar, like a chip shop, that lingers on them.¹³

Despite ideological and stylistic differences, these editors, past and pres-

‘were’ and vice-versa, or ‘their’ for ‘there.’ They should not cause much difficulty in understanding Clare” (“Editing Clare: Words,” *Wordsworth Circle* 34, no. 3 [Summer 2003]: 14f).

9. Bate, “*I Am*,” xix.

10. Jonathan Bate, *John Clare: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 564.

11. J. L. Cherry, *Life and Remains of John Clare “The Northamptonshire Poet”* (Northampton: J. Taylor & Son, 1873), vii.

12. Symons, *Poems By John Clare*, 23. Here Symons refers to the manuscripts to which Cherry had access.

13. Robinson writes: “The state of Clare’s manuscripts is to us still a cause of wonder. There are difficulties (common to the manuscripts as a whole wherever found, in whatever period of Clare’s creativity) such as Clare’s cramped handwriting with its special quirks, making it impossible always to distinguish between words ending in ‘y’ and ‘ing’ or those beginning with ‘sn’ or ‘m,’ such as ‘snow’ and ‘mow’; the endless erasures created not only by crossing out words and letters or by writing through them, but also by chemically fading them (the Peterborough manuscripts used to smell strongly of vinegar like fish-and-chip

ent, share in the wish to let Clare speak and be heard. In this sense, they differ not in their aims or in their assumptions about the task of editing and publication, but only in their means. Although Bate compares Robinson's editorial project to the restoration of a canvas to its original state, and thus sees the Oxford texts not as worn out, but too enhanced, he is like Robinson, and for that matter, like Taylor himself, in that he is involved in his own project of restoration, not of an image (the well-worn image of Clare as peasant poet), but rather of voice, a voice that could be audible, authoritative, and true. Thus, it is the question of *how* this amplification can be accomplished, rather than *whether* and *at what cost* such a project is possible, that marks their differences. Indeed, this question of voice leads Simon Kövesi to cast the two editorial camps as figures in a political struggle. He argues that debates about how to edit Clare mirror debates about standard language in Britain, which he figures chromatically as "red" and "blue" (colors that signify in a British context in the opposite way as they do in the US), and explain why this scholarly difference has attracted the attention of left thinkers, like Tom Paulin.¹⁴ Yet, these positions need not be read only as symptomatic of contemporary politics. Rather, they can be analyzed as evidence of the confusion of aesthetic and ethical positions in literary scholarship and editing. Whether one can simply overcome this confusion or whether, as the most visible examples seem to suggest, the aesthetic and ethical projects—the supposed restoration of Clare's voice and the presentation of Clare's text—are inextricably linked to the project of publication itself is the question that I take up in the pages that follow.

Put another way, the question of editorial presentation has both ethical and aesthetic dimensions, yet the debates about how to edit Clare reveal that an aesthetic or figural act is the effaced ground of the editors' ethical claims. Arguments about how to edit Clare assume that it is more or less ethical to allow Clare's "true" voice to be heard for the first time by publishing it without editorial interference than it is to rescue Clare from the illegibility of his most faithful editors (those who maintain his poor spelling and absent punctuation) in order to render him accessible. No position within these debates can do without positing Clare's authentic voice as the ground for their claim. Their ethical force depends upon this fiction of voice, this act of presentation. Whatever their differences, insofar as the debates surrounding Clare's manuscripts rely upon ethical positions that are also aesthetic positions (or presentations of Clare), they are examples of aesthetic ideology at work. They reveal an ethics of reading (and editing) that

newspaper) when in ink, or by erasures with bread, penknife, or abrasives when written in pencil" (John Clare, *Poems of the Middle Period*, 1:xiii–xiv).

14. Kövesi, "Beyond the Language Wars," 64.

rests upon an aestheticization of their object (Clare), the possibility of which their truth claims must deny.¹⁵

In 2003, Jonathan Bate published not only a new (and intentionally popularizing) edition of Clare's poetry, which I have already mentioned, but also a comprehensive biography of the poet. Taken together, these two volumes revived interest in Clare and his work; yet the coincidence of the two publications is also important. Many scholars and critics, including Sarah Zimmerman, have noted that Clare's biography has regularly been read in lieu of his poetry, and the author's life, "a young peasant, a day-labourer in husbandry, who has no advantages of education beyond others of his class" as Taylor explained in his first edition of Clare's works, has been of utmost importance in the reception of Clare.¹⁶ In some respects, Bate's double-barreled publication project can be understood as a *response* to this tendency. By issuing a collection of poems alongside the biography, by giving them matching covers and including cross-references, Bate registers the necessity of reading the life and the work together. At the same time, the co-publication of poetry and biography also seems to repeat the structure that Zimmerman identifies, for Clare's biography once again overwhelms his poetry in size and scale.¹⁷ Part of the heft of this biography is due to the fact that it promises to be authoritative and free from error, in distinction from Clare's earlier biographers, above all the first, Frederick Martin, on whom Cherry also bases the *Life and Remains*. Just as Bate envisions himself as being true to Clare's life, he also describes his editorial works as follow-

15. On aesthetic ideology, Andrzej Warminski reminds us that for Paul de Man, "rhetoric" was a key intermediary between aesthetics and ideology. As I will suggest, it is precisely rhetoric—a figure or prosopopoeia—that is both the condition and aim of the editorial projects I will discuss. See his "'As the Poets Do It': On the Material Sublime," in *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 3–31.

16. See Sarah Zimmerman, "Accounting for Clare," *College Literature* 62, no. 3 (January 2000). She writes: "I am concerned with a literary historical irony: that some of the very critical practices that have served to keep Clare in view have also rendered him half visible and thereby partially inaccessible to students, scholars, and general readers. An often subtle, yet persistent emphasis on biography in Clare criticism, a convention that began as a successful marketing strategy by Clare's publisher and editor John Taylor for promoting the 'Northamptonshire peasant' (as he was identified on the title pages of his first two collections), ultimately had the less salutary effect of subordinating the poems to the appeal of a life well told" (317). Zimmerman offers an excellent account of the way that critics and editors from the beginning have either feminized or hypermasculinized Clare and in so doing have produced Clare as a passive figure. My argument in this essay shares some of Zimmerman's interest in recognizing the "critical fiction" that is John Clare, although my focus on editing and ethics differs from hers.

17. Indeed, although Clare wrote about 3500 poems in his lifetime, Bate's biography is nearly twice as long as his collection of poetry.

ing Clare's intentions by adhering to a "middle way," one that "avoid[s] errors and alteration, but provide[s] light punctuation and regularize[s] the spelling without diluting the dialect voice."¹⁸ Bate figures the question of editing as an ethical question. He asks "Is justice done to him by the presentation of his manuscripts in the raw, free from the shackles of prescriptive grammar? Or does the reproduction of their idiosyncrasies unintentionally perpetuate the image of him as a semi-literate primitive, an eternal child?"¹⁹ In order to answer this somewhat hyperbolic question, Bate turns to Clare and explains: "Clare indicated in a note to his publishers that he expected his editors to normalize his spelling ('I'm' for 'Im,' 'used' for 'usd,' etc.) and to introduce punctuation for the sake of clarity, but he did not want them to over-regularise his grammar or remove the regional dialect words that were so essential to his voice."²⁰ Bate does not cite Clare's note in the introduction to the selected poetry, but it does appear in the biography. Indeed, upon having described the Oxford edition as "stripped of all punctuation and replete with misspellings, slips of the pen and so forth," he asks, "Is this what Clare would have wanted?"²¹ Bate then goes on to cite parts of the note Clare wrote to his publisher in which Clare "explained that he had not attempted his own '*Stops or Punctuation*' and that 'Bad spelling may be corrected by the amanuensis, but no word is to be altered.'" Bate interprets the passage to mean, "His clear implication is that stops and spellings *should* be corrected by the professional scribe, but that his lexical choices are to be respected."²² Thus, Bate justifies his process as a faithful one, while, at the same time, he betrays it by not lowering the "s" or the "p" in "*Stops and Punctuation*." This point, however, is incidental to the larger suggestion that I am at work to make, which is that Bate promises to do justice to Clare by actually listening to him, by finding a text addressed to another and understanding it as addressed to him. In this respect the authority of the editorial project, like that of the biographical project, necessarily rests upon speculation and ventriloquism. Thus, despite his active intervention in debates about *how* the poetry should be edited, Bate cannot settle finally the question of the proper nature of that poetry, and whether it should be served, to use his own metaphor "raw or

18. Bate, *John Clare*, 568.

19. Bate, "*I Am*," xix. Curiously, as I'll show later in this essay, in the poem from which Bate draws the title to his book, the poetic subject, whom we can associate with the authorial subject, does long for a position akin to childhood, and registers this "return" as a utopic arrival.

20. Bate, "*I Am*," xix.

21. Bate, *John Clare*, 565.

22. Bate, *John Clare*, 566.

cooked.”²³ The most obvious reason for this ambiguity is that his claim relies upon the same evidence as Robinson’s claim.

Several critics already have attested to the limitations of or contradictions within Bate’s project. For example, in his review of Bate’s *Selected Poems of John Clare* (a British edition of the collection), R. K. R. Thornton notes that, far from being uniformly consistent, Bate’s editorial project relies upon a projective identification of Clare’s “spirit,” and promises to correct “alterations [by previous editors] that go against [Clare’s] spirit.”²⁴ Thornton worries that “alterations of [Clare’s] text can be corrected, but can his spirit be agreed upon?”²⁵ Yet, by framing his question in this way, Thornton also seems to suggest that, unlike a “spirit,” Clare’s text could be “corrected” and agreed upon. However, this is precisely *not* the case, for Clare’s text as much as his spirit, perhaps even more than his spirit, remains in question. Likewise, in an essay that imagines a “green edition” of Clare, a project that no doubt is indebted to Bate as one of the vanguard of literary ecocriticism, Kövesi argues that “Bate’s return to the manuscripts to edit them with his ‘new-found’ fundamental principle [i.e., following Clare’s wishes to the letter], is also a species of ‘textual primitivism.’”²⁶ Moreover, Kövesi goes on to suggest that even Bate cannot always abide by his own rules and includes some “raw” texts when, “the problems of regularizing seem too great.”²⁷

One way of describing this situation is to recognize that the ethical aim of these editorial projects is constituted by a single, recurring gesture, that is, by a rhetorical figure, a prosopopoeia, the master trope of the lyric (as well as of autobiography and witnessing), through which the mute, dead, or absent are made to live and speak.²⁸ Prosopopoeia in this instance does not solve the problem of absence or death, but ultimately calls attention to its impasse. In this case, Clare’s muteness, his failure to communicate, re-emerges at the very moment that his editors insist upon having heard him

23. R. K. R. Thornton, another of Clare’s editors, takes this alternative as the title of his review of Bate’s and Robinson’s selected poems. Thornton also goes on to suggest that “we cannot tell always and exactly what Clare’s wishes were, and we have in that case to let his texts have authority we would otherwise usurp.” In other words, he suggests that we think about authority as a textual rather than an authorial effect. See “Review of *John Clare, Selected Poems*,” *John Clare Society Journal* 24 (2005): 82.

24. Thornton, “Review,” 85.

25. Thornton, “Review,” 85.

26. Kövesi, “Beyond the Language Wars,” 66.

27. Kövesi, “Beyond the Language Wars,” 66.

28. See Paul de Man, “Autobiography as De-Facement,” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); and J. Hillis Miller, *Versions of Pygmalion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

properly and having allowed him at last to speak. When the editorial horizon becomes the restoration of Clare's voice, the ethical project becomes indissociable from a figural one.²⁹

Now this insight—the entwinement of the ethical and the figural—is far from original. In fact, J. Hillis Miller has shown that “doing and evaluating are related to personification,” and “doing and evaluating” are precisely Miller's way of signifying “ethics.”³⁰ But what is distinctive in Clare's case is the necessity of a denial of figuration (or, stated positively, the necessary claim of authenticity) at the moment that an ethical determination rests upon a prosopopoeia for its force. In other words, Clare's editors gain their legitimacy by a claim to authority that retrospectively produces the voice and the subject that they figure as speaking to—but also through—them. In this sense, the editorial projects rely upon a fiction of posthumous address. This fictional voicing at once marks the difference between these projects (Bate and Robinson hear Clare differently) and collapses the difference by virtue of depending upon a fiction for their authenticity.

In the appendix on “Clare's Text,” with which he concludes the biography, Bate marshals a version of prosopopoeia in which the dead (Clare) is understood as living and speaking. Bate writes (and these are the book's last sentences): “The John Clare Society thrives. Schoolteachers have discovered that his ‘nature’ writing is an ideal way to introduce children to poetry. Enthusiasm for the work and fascination with the life may be found among a startling array of common readers, many of them far beyond the academic environment in which poetry is often confined. At long last, John Clare is in good health. But we still await a balanced presentation of the full range of his texts.”³¹ Here, Clare becomes “healthy” for the first

29. Angus Fletcher also has reflected upon prosopopoeia in Clare although in a somewhat different context. He writes: “The chief obscurity of what happens to the factual in eighteenth-century descriptive poetry is that poets interlard facts and material names with personifications. While this device has been much discussed, it seems we should more strongly emphasize the ancient purpose of the figure: it bridges between material and spiritual worlds, sharing in both, announcing the ideal, but always embodying some kind of personhood—the face, the masking *prosopon*, the visage of a believed ideal form. Personification seems to express our need to believe that ideas are only existentially significant if they appear to us as living beings, as thoughts capable of personal agency . . . is it possible that Clare's perceptions of the creatures of his village, Whitman's phrases of note as he confides his vision of democracy and democratic variety, Ashbery's wandering asides, while he perambulates through the landscape of his own thoughts—is it possible that these are all a new variant of ancient personifications, new *persons* always on the lookout of their own discovery?” See *Toward a New Theory of American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of the Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 136.

30. Miller, *Versions of Pygmalion*, viii, 15.

31. Bate, *John Clare*, 575.

time, a metaphorical health that evokes several senses of illness: Clare's physical and mental illness in his life and his neglect in life and after death. This health is signified by an interested nonacademic readership, a thriving society devoted to his work, and a place in the school curriculum, and it occurs despite ongoing uncertainty about the very texts through which Clare continues to "live."

The appendix suggests that Clare's work draws its legitimacy from listening to Clare, but it is also the condition of the very voice upon which this legitimacy rests. This metaleptical structure, a confusion or substitution of causes and effects, far from resolving the problem of Clare's life and death, health or illness, instead repeats it. Moreover, if Bate seems to suggest that Clare will live despite his texts' mutilation, this suggestion calls into question the importance of the debates in which Bate has been a central participant. Or, understood another way, it is precisely *because* Clare is still speaking (because he is in "good health") that we must listen to him, but he speaks and is healthy only through these texts.

When Bate describes the Oxford editorial project, he does so by explaining that Robinson "believed he was restoring the *authentic* voice of Clare, freeing him from the kind of control that had been exercised over his work by Taylor and the other early editors. . . ." ³² Rather than turning away from a logic of restoration and authenticity, Bate offers only another version of it when he undertakes to present Clare in such a way that he might be read and received. In other words, Bate's complaint about Robinson is not that he assumes that the authentic voice can be restored, but rather that he understands the authentic voice to be registered through poems transcribed directly from the manuscript, blemishes, errors, omissions and all. Bate turns to Clare in order to justify this concern and recalls that "Clare knew that he wrote too profusely and that he needed editing" and Bate insists further that the "key" to "Clare's art" is "immediacy," which, in his view is ironically unobtainable when one must first work through a manuscript filled with unfamiliar spellings, awkward punctuation, and other distractions. ³³ Thus, Bate's project, like Robinson's, is underwritten by an attempt to reveal Clare's true art by listening to him, yet Bate undertakes to achieve this by shaping and "drilling" (Clare's term for punctuating) without tidying and botching. ³⁴ This process appears to restore that which was lost, but at the same time, in figuring its project as a restoration, it also de-

32. Bate, *John Clare*, 574 (my emphasis).

33. Bate, "I Am," xv.

34. Again see Thornton and Kövesi for a discussion of the possibility or impossibility of achieving this end.

nies the absence of authoritative poems.³⁵ This is not to say that there are no poems by Clare, but rather that we cannot finally establish how a poem by Clare should appear.

In this sense, it is not merely a question of agreeing on Clare's spirit, but rather agreeing on the order, shape, and existence of his texts. The problem of appearance is so fundamental that we cannot conceptualize the project as one of restoration without betraying the crisis of appearances that is the context for these debates. Indeed, the framework in which editors have staked out their positions as ethical positions (or questions of justice) cannot but rely upon the trope of the restoration of a voice. Thus they edit the poetry in a way that assumes a listening to Clare while at the same time establishing the vehicle through which he might "speak to us" and "be heard." These gestures, in making claims to authenticity, also invent a textual past that never quite existed, and yet they pass this invention off as an act of faithfulness and justice.

In an essay on the limits of trauma theory, Dominick LaCapra reflects upon the distinction between *absence* and *loss*, a difference that also could be understood as central to Paul de Man's account of prosopopoeia.³⁶ While LaCapra recognizes that the difference between *absence* and *loss* is important for reasons of "intellectual clarity and cogency," he is ultimately concerned with the "ethical and political dimensions" of this distinction.³⁷ In his account, *loss* is an historical category whereas *absence* is a transhistorical one. To confuse or conflate the two, to assume that what once existed has never existed or to assume that one can recover what has never been, as if it was merely lost, can lead to myth, nostalgia, or melancholia.

35. This absence can be understood as a quintessentially romantic predicament. See the example of the Jena Romantics, especially as discussed by Jean Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and by Maurice Blanchot. Blanchot writes: "Romanticism, it is true, ends badly, but this is because it is essentially what begins and what cannot but finish badly: an end that is called suicide, madness, loss, forgetting. And certainly it is often without works, but this is because it is the work of the absence of (the) work; a poetry affirmed in the purity of the poetic act, an affirmation without duration, a freedom without realization, a force that exalts in disappearing and that is in no way discredited if it leaves no trace" (*The Infinite Conversation*, trans., Susan Hanson [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993], 352–53). While this statement refers specifically to the Jena Romantics, it can be easily related to Clare's asylum poetry (much of which was dictated), and, I would argue, it also can be understood to describe Clare's work more generally as "absent."

36. When de Man reads Wordsworth's *The Excursion*, he notes the difference between being "deaf and mute"—i.e. an inability to hear or speak—and being "silent"—merely not speaking. One could say that the distinction between an absolute and a relative capacity to speak is parallel to the difference between an absolute absence and an historical loss. See "Autobiography as De-Facement," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*.

37. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 44.

In LaCapra's terms, Robinson and Bate both can be understood to construe Clare's poetry (and voice) as having been *lost* in the work of prior editions and to frame their own editorial projects—whatever their significant differences—as the restoration of a text, and implicitly a voice, assumed to be lost. The editors both abide by a belief that their task is to recover this voice in such a way that it might properly be heard, and perhaps even be heard for the very first time. Yet the question remains: has something been lost—or was it never there in the first place? And if it never existed or appeared, or never existed as a unity, if there ultimately is no proper, authentic manuscript or way of receiving the manuscript, only a multiplicity of pages and directives and practices that cannot finally be resolved into one authoritative text or voice, do these editorial models encounter the same limit: the confusion of absence and loss in the claim to restore or recover what never was lost because it never was there to be lost? This confusion, which also corresponds to the grounding of ethics in aesthetics, or the positing of voice as the condition of authenticity, can be seen to complicate LaCapra's account while exemplifying it. For, to speak of Clare's authentic voice as absent may not be the same as saying that there is no poetry. This absence is not the same as the romantic absence of work that Maurice Blanchot describes when he acknowledges that for all their talk of poetry, the Jena Romantics actually failed to write poems, for Clare wrote plenty of poems—hundreds and hundreds of them. Yet, this excess of poems and the open question of poetic completion correlates to a form of absence that easily can be misrecognized as merely a distortion or disappearance: the nonidentity of Clare's work that is spawned by indeterminacy, incoherence, and uncertainty.

LaCapra recognizes that the conflation of absence and loss has both affective and political implications. As he explains: "When absence is converted into loss, one increases the likelihood of misplaced nostalgia or utopian politics in quest of a new totality or fully unified community."³⁸ LaCapra goes on to suggest, "the difference (or nonidentity) between absence and loss is often elided, and the two are conflated with confusing and dubious results. This conflation tends to take place so rapidly that it escapes notice and seems natural or necessary," and "the conversion of absence into loss gives rise to both Christian and oedipal stories (the Fall and the primal crime)—stories that are very similar in structure and import."³⁹ It may seem that we have traveled quite far from Clare and his editors. And yet, it is precisely the nostalgic, naïve, and antihistorical aestheticization of the political that LaCapra recognizes as the outcome of this conflation. While re-

38. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 46.

39. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 47–48, 51.

cent biographies and introductions have revealed Clare's awareness of his poetic predecessors (as well as his awareness of local ballads, etc.), which is to say the extent to which he was not quite as naïve as his popular image as "the peasant poet" suggests, it might be that the process of editing, even when, as in Bate's case, it aspires towards nuance and avoids valorization of the primitive, nevertheless reintroduces the very logic it claims to reject.

This confusion of absence and loss has a further manifestation here. Clare's editors, each in his own way, focus not on the absence of voice or life, but rather its *loss* or destruction by their predecessors and peers. They construe the editorial project as an act of recovery, albeit one that allows Clare to be heard for the first time. Yet, conceiving of editorial work in this way also suggests that it is an invention (production of something that never before existed) rather than restoration (recovery of a lost or mutilated text), raising questions about the nature of authorship and authority, which they claim to defend. Indeed, the difference between recovery and invention is disturbed when restoration is understood to allow for a belated, though originary, experience. One result of this concept of restoration as allowing for an originary event is that Robinson's claim to hold the copyright on Clare's texts, rather than appearing as violent and inappropriate, can be seen to reflect the impact and the stakes of editing. Understood in this way, editing *is* a mode of production or invention, rather than mere coordination.

A reading of Clare's "I Am," a poem that, despite its ambiguities, raises the question of voice and life in a remarkably clear fashion, might give some insight into these editorial—and textual—predicaments. Indeed, the poem reflects on loss, self-loss above all, and forgetting, while also evoking the utopic and nostalgic tropes that LaCapra describes. As a poem that opens in a lament for absent recognition, "I Am" might tell us something about the debates surrounding the presentation of Clare's texts, just as it reflects (and effects) one of the central ambiguities in Clare's reception: the confusion of textual and personal identity. Moreover, as a poem that appears in both Robinson's and Bate's editions (as well as having been published in at least seven other editions), it also is an episode within the debate. Here is the text of the poem as it appears in the Oxford edition:

I.

I am—yet what I am, none cares or knows;
 My friends forsake me like a memory lost:—
 I am the self-consumer of my woes;—
 They rise and vanish in oblivion's host,
 Like shadows in love's frenzied stifled throes:—
 And yet I am, and live—like vapours tost

2.

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,—
 Into the living sea of waking dreams,
 Where there is neither sense of life or joys,
 But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems;
 Even the dearest, that I love the best
 Are strange—nay, rather stranger than the rest.

3.

I long for scenes, where man hath never trod
 A place where woman never smiled or wept
 There to abide with my Creator, God;
 And sleep as I in childhood, sweetly, slept,
 Untroubling, and untroubled where I lie,
 The grass below—above the vaulted sky.⁴⁰

Clare's "I Am" accounts for an experience of suffering that approaches melancholia. It opens with an interrupted statement, "I am—yet what I am none cares or knows," and uses a series of comparisons to describe the failed recognition of both the subject ("My friends forsake me like a memory lost") and his "woes," which both determine and evacuate him ("They rise and vanish in oblivion's host / Like shadows in love's frenzied stifled throes"). Understood in this way, the poem relies upon figures of comparison to stage a scene of recognition that does not take place outside of it.

One could say that the ongoing debates surrounding the publication of Clare's texts point to a situation opposite to the one described in the poem. Clare's editors harbor an almost obsessive desire to know Clare, and they defensively care for him, protecting him from further disappearance or mutilation. Yet, their insistence upon the authentic Clare issues through an act of figuration. The prosopopoeia that I discuss above, rather than an instance of adequate recognition, can be seen instead as a form of effacement and misrecognition. What appears to be an act of restoration (making Clare speak) is instead an act of invention, albeit one that must deny its status as such. Thus, the obsession with Clare can be understood both as a response to and repetition of this non-knowledge, that is, as another instance of the

40. John Clare, *The Later Poems of John Clare, 1837–1864*, Vol 1, eds. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 396–97. In his edition, Bate removes the double punctuation in lines 2, 3, 7; the final comma in lines 4, 7, 8; the middle commas in lines 6, 11, 13, 16, 17. He adds a comma after "rather" in line 12 and after "above" in line 18; adds end commas in lines 13 and 14; adds an apostrophe to "lifes" in line 10; changes the semicolon in line 15 to a comma; replaces the possessive "s" in line 5 with a hyphen. He also spells "tost" as "tossed."

impossibility of knowing *what* Clare is, rather than a remedy for the abandonment that the poem describes.

At the same time, as Timothy Morton has pointed out, the poem can be read autobiographically in another sense. For Morton “I Am,” as if anticipating Mallarmé (or recalling Medieval riddles) accounts for its *own* existence as a “spectral quasi-object suspended in nothingness, an inconsistent bunch of squiggles that cannot ever know itself as such.”⁴¹ Understood in this way, far from recovering a human subject in pain, the poem instead refers only to itself. It is an instance of specular self-reference and non-understanding that comes into being through a statement of obscurity, and as such allegorizes poetic emergence. Following upon Morton’s reading of the tension between positing (“I am”) and cognition (“none cares or knows”), between the lyrical-autobiographical subject (the *I* as authorial or poetic subject) and the poem as at once the subject of positing and the object of indifference and non-cognition, we can see that the subjective predicament (the failure of recognition) emerges as indistinguishable from a poetic predicament. Indeed, this coupling of the subjective and the poetic, of the obscurity and betrayal of the subject and the obscurity and betrayal of the poem, is not far from what occurs in the ongoing debate about how to edit Clare. The very obscurity and indifference that the poem identifies, laments, and even repeats in the poetic act may be what the anthropomorphizing claims of editorial practices that rely upon “hearing” and “understanding” Clare also elide—and in eliding (in failing to recognize) repeat.

This repetition, a repetition of non-recognition in the mode of restoration or recognition, is also reflected, if not explicitly thematized, in Clare’s poem. While the poem seems to follow a path from ceaseless, even self-perpetuating, pain to an alternative world arrived at in the poetic imagination, that path ultimately has mere repetition, rather than hoped for freedom, as its end. For Clare, like his editors, this repetition also involves a confusion of absence and loss, invention and restoration.

Clare renders the drama of absence and loss in the poem’s third and final stanza, which describes the first-person subject’s desire for a utopic scene “where man hath never trod.” Rather than reflecting a world that never could have been experienced before (a world in which this subject, like all human beings, is absent), the scene instead is figured as a return to what has been lost, childhood. What never could have been possible (the experience of a world without other men) and would need to be invented is understood as what already has taken place but no longer remains (childhood).

41. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 198.

The subject imagines and wishes for a place that has no human history, while at the same time figuring this place that by definition precludes him as the site of a return—the place of childhood and of oneness with his creator. This longed for “scene” of unity with God in the absence of (or prior to) human presence also would be a return that would allow the subject to experience again the tranquility of childhood sleep.

The “scenes” without others, and hence without the abandonment and betrayal by them that the poem’s first two stanzas describe, would be a paradise. They would belong to a world in which loss and woe would not be possible, while at the same time admitting that such a world would have to do without human life. Here, the conflation of an impossible “scene” (the “scene” in which he is the first and only human being) and a lost “scene” (the “scene” of childhood sleep), also suggests that childhood never will have occurred, like a world without humans that nevertheless could be witnessed and experienced by a first person subject, whether understood as man or poem. Childhood thus becomes an impossible or mythic prehistory, rather than a stage of life.⁴² The poem concludes with the subject asleep and free from the pain described in the beginning of the poem. Yet, if the first stanzas describe a world in which “what I am, none cares or knows,” the final stanza, with its turn away from present pain into a mythic past, turns out to be a repetition, rather than a radical change. If in the first stanza, the poet is painfully ignored and invisible, in the final stanza he becomes not an object of care, but of irrelevance: “untroubling and untroubled where I lie, / The grass below—above, the vaulted sky.” This mythic place, a new world figured as the recovery of a lost one, turns out finally to be merely the repetition of what is: oblivion, indifference, and abandonment.⁴³

While within the context of the poem’s itinerary, this blissful scene may be only another repetition of the same, evidence of the failure to break out of the world in mind or poetry, rather than a final arrival in paradise, it also stands as a figure of poetic vision in another sense. When Clare refers to the sky as a “vault,” he seems to see the sky as Kant, distinguishing between moral and aesthetic judgment, explains that poets do. Indeed, in a section on the analytic of the sublime whose antithetical logic Paul de Man has ex-

42. It is in this sense that the poem also can be understood to exemplify a certain mode of witnessing or testimony.

43. For another version of this structure, see Paul de Man’s reading of Wordsworth’s “A slumber did my spirit seal” in “The Rhetoric of Temporality.” That both poems rely upon sleep, in Wordsworth’s case a powerful vision of awakening, in Clare’s the return to sleep from suffering in “the living sea of waking dreams” (line 8), may suggest that the figure of sleep as a scene of overcoming or restoration, insofar as it remains an overdetermined figure, has a particularly high propensity for repetition.

plicated in detail, what Kant perceives as a poetic way of seeing, is just that, a matter of seeing rather than thinking or interpretation or understanding. Kant's example is another vaulted sky: "If, then, we call the sight of the starry sky *sublime*, we must not place at the foundation of judgment concepts of worlds inhabited by rational beings and regard the bright points, with which we see the space above us filled, as their suns moving in circles purposively fixed with reference to them; but we must regard it, just as we see it, as a distant, all-embracing vault. Only under such a representation can we range that sublimity that a pure aesthetic judgment ascribes to this object . . . we must regard it as the poets do, merely by what the eye reveals."⁴⁴

To see the sky as a vault is not to understand it as a distant homeland or a figural tomb, but rather as a mere form. This kind of seeing ("just as we see it"), which de Man associates with "flatness" and the absence of personifying gestures, does not involve understanding, imagination, or integration, but is an instance of Kant's formal—or as de Man translates it, material—sublime. While de Man turns to Wordsworth as a poet who employs the same figure of the sky as vault, he shows that Wordsworth's use of the figure is precisely *not* poetic in the way that Kant understands it, and by registering this difference, he also points to a break between romantic and idealist, poetic and philosophical modes of seeing. For Wordsworth, the sky's sublimity rests upon its functioning as a shelter. It protects and also can expose the fragility of man, and this is the mark of its power. As de Man explains, for Wordsworth "the sky is originally conceived as a roof or vault that shelters us by anchoring us in the world, standing on a horizontal plane, *under* the sky, reassuringly stabilized by the weight of our own gravity."⁴⁵ De Man goes on, however, to remind us that "if the sky suddenly separates from the earth and is no longer, in Wordsworth's terms, a sky of earth [Wordsworth writes, "The sky was not a sky / Of earth"], we lose all feeling of stability and start to fall, so to speak, skyward, away from gravity."⁴⁶ And it is this sheltering, subjectivizing capacity that, in de Man's account registers the difference between two apparently similar claims: in Kant the sky only appears (and appears as a vault); it cannot be understood, however, to function as a shelter. Whereas in Wordsworth, we have not simply a matter of appearance, but an operation, one that does not merely domesticate the sky, but also threatens the physical world.

In Wordsworth's autobiographical poem, the subject is at stake. Yet in

44. Quoted in de Man, "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant," in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 1996), 80.

45. De Man, "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant," 81. See also, de Man, "Kant's Materialism," in that same volume, 127.

46. De Man, "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant," 81.

Kant, despite the centrality of the subject to his account of the sublime, far from personifying, in this account of aesthetic judgment, we have a “flat” and formal scene in which there can be no mind, no consciousness, just pure “unmediated” vision. An aesthetic vision, as Kant imagines it, a vision of the sky as vault (or the ocean as mirror or abyss), is a purely formal, non-anthropomorphic, non-lyrical, or two-dimensional way of seeing. De Man shows in his succinct reading of Wordsworth that precisely what grounds the human also can unground or undo him, leading to a catastrophe of major proportions. Returning now to the moment in Clare’s poem of self-positing, if not self-reflection, a poem noted for *its* sublimity, we are left with the question of how to understand the final line (and stanza) in which the sky emerges as a vault. Is this poetic vision like Kant’s or like Wordsworth’s? Is sublimity marked by flatness and form or by mind and imagination? Is this an aesthetic or a moral judgment? How does the poet see it?

In some respect, Clare’s autobiographical poem resembles Wordsworth’s autobiographical poem. And yet, for Clare the inversion of earth and sky is a matter of grammatical, rather than figural uncertainty. In the final line of “I Am,” the subject, rather than standing upright, is instead already fallen: he is prone and asleep. While the dash between below and above (“The grass below—above the vaulted sky”) seems to stabilize the relation, to hold apart and render parallel earth and sky, it is also like the “I” described in the poem, a horizontal rather than a vertical figure, one that is too weak to maintain the order of things. Rather, the blank separation—the dash—cannot secure the vertical relation between earth and sky and thus “the grass below” also can be heard and read catastrophically to stand “above the vaulted sky” (i.e., “the grass below [stands] above the vaulted sky”).⁴⁷ While the subject may be “Untroubling and untroubled,” it would seem that such a scene is also nothing but trouble: trouble for the reader, trouble for the subject, trouble for the world.

If the poem at first glance might seem to end with the arrival at a utopic scene, a pleasant world of order and quiet, this world for all its thematic and textual resolution, nevertheless repeats the chaos and the disturbance of the poem’s first two stanzas. In this sense what appears to be the overcoming of pain through the imagination (i.e., in an act of mind) turns out

47. Morton offers a similar reading of this passage, albeit in an ecologic mode. He writes: “At first glance, the closest thing we get to ecology is the last couplet where the narrator wishes for an impossible relief. And even here there is an ambiguity in the sense of ‘above’: is the narrator lying with the sky above him, or lying ‘above . . . the sky’ in heaven? But the very form of this yearning and impossibility is precisely the *most* ecological thing about the poem” (*Ecology without Nature*, 198). In his sophisticated reading, Morton goes on to suggest that Clare’s ecologism, far from determined by his attachment to the local, instead is marked by an awareness of the other and by his very *displacement*.

rather to repeat and reveal the failure to recognize the self. Indeed, what had been cast as the fault of others here emerges as equally the doing of the self.

The world of which the subject dreams, neither absent nor lost, turns out to be merely a repetition of the same world in which he endures, a world that even at the furthest reaches of the imagination he cannot escape. This inadvertent repetition can be understood traumatically as the compulsion to repeat or as an instance of the non-difference between life and death (this time cast in a negative mode, for death is one way of naming the desired state). It also suggests that whether imagined as an impossible scene or as the recovery of a lost scene, this utopia occasions an experience akin to the one that is the source of so much pain, living without recognition, without the capacity to be seen, heard or understood. Thus, if there is a change in the poem, it is not due to recognition, but rather to numbness. The subject is not only “untroubling” but also “untroubled,” unmoved, stable, blank or flat like a dash, despite the catastrophe everywhere around him.

This stability, this being-untroubled, is also what the poem states with its insistence upon the “I Am” despite all else. The “I Am” is a statement of what remains untroubled, and in this sense it is a formal claim (Fichte, Coleridge), empty of content, and also a performative one.⁴⁸ But if “I am” becomes a statement of something like death, of total stability in the face of catastrophe (the world turned upside down) it is of course also the statement of the existence of the subject—however formal, empty, or iterable the statement may be. The vertical *I* and the horizontal dash, the upright self and the fallen, slumbering body *both* remain frozen, stable and unmoved between heaven and earth.

Yet, the lyric “I Am” ends in a grammatical crisis, rather than a figural one. Far from the sky as home or tomb, the sky (like the “I” with which it rhymes and that its rhyme repeats and incorporates) is a subject of grammar. The poem, which seems to rely upon personification for its address—the positing of self and other, reflection and mirroring in the absence of subjectivity and recognition—instead can be understood as an instance of the flatness or “Unpersonifying” that Clare elsewhere describes. Thus, even a poem that would seem to involve poetic and autobiographical vision, a poem wrought with pathos—which is to say, even a lyric poem—here turns out to be a poem of non-personification, which is also one way of describing the very situation that causes so much pain.

48. See Emile Benveniste, “Subjectivity in Language,” in *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans., Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971).

If, in conclusion, we return to the debates about editing Clare, we can see how grounding ethical claims in rhetorical figures, in making Clare live and speak through the editorial process, would seem to register a different situation. But is this scene so very different? Aren't spelling, punctuation, and grammar the central issues in each of these debates? Isn't Clare made to live, speak, and be heard so that he can tell us something about his commas and periods? And if these commas and periods are more than mere marks, caesurae, and drillings, if they are the vehicle through which Clare becomes a poet, the vehicle furthermore of his living on and speaking to us and of our recognizing him, are these editors not personifying grammar at the very moment that they insist upon its sheer importance? Does the personification of Clare posit him not only as an ethical subject (the subject of justice), but equally a grammatical subject, to recall the last line of the other poem he wrote called "I Am," "that's all." And perhaps, then, it is no great surprise that for all their animosity, the *difference* between Bate's and Robinson's editions of the poem comes down to commas and dashes.⁴⁹

Doing justice to Clare is a real temptation: who wouldn't want to remedy the harm done to him through years of betrayed allegiances, indifferent audiences, and unrealized success. But justice, in particular a late justice or-

49. This is not, however, the case in comparison to the 1865 Frederick Martin edition, which is significantly different from the others:

I am! yet what I am who cares or knows?
 My friends forsake me like a memory lost,
 I am the self-consumer of my woes,
 They rise and vanish, an oblivious host,
 Shadows of life, whose very soul is lost
 And yet I am—I live—though I am toss'd

 Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
 Into the living sea of waking dream,
 Where there is neither sense of life, nor joys,
 But the huge shipwreck of my own esteem
 And all that's dear. Even those I loved the best
 Are strange—nay, they are stranger than the rest.

 I long for scenes where man has never trod,
 For scenes where woman never smiled or wept;
 There to abide with my Creator, God,
 And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept
 Full of high thoughts, unborn. So let me lie,
 The grass below; above the vaulted sky.

In Frederick Martin, *The Life of John Clare*, introduction and notes by Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield (London: Frank Cass & Co, 1964), 293.

dered by an effaced prosopopoeia, can only fail to accomplish its aims: it becomes an aesthetic, rather than an ethical project, or a moral rather than an aesthetic project, or merely a grammatical project. This is not a problem, per se, except that it relies upon the exclusion of this conditional possibility. The case of Clare, perhaps, should stand for us as a quiet warning as we recur to ethical terms and temptations in our own critical practices. What kind of justice can criticism accomplish? To whom or to what does it address itself? And is this addressee, rather than a voice we listen to and amplify, instead a voice we posit and figure? It may be that so long as critical claims take the form of ethical claims they also will rely upon a figural or aesthetic act from which ethical acts may be indistinguishable. The example of Clare reveals that as editorial (and critical) interventions become more and more heavily (and at times dogmatically) focused on ethical claims, they also forget the very rhetorical gesture that is their condition of possibility, which is also, as I have tried to suggest, the condition of their impossibility.

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