

John Clare and Poetic ‘Genius’

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Abstract: The first half of this essay is an analysis of John Taylor’s Introduction to John Clare’s *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*. It argues that Taylor—Clare’s editor and publisher—made claims for Clare’s special poetic ‘genius’ by combining an emphasis on his unpropitious personal and social circumstances with a thus far under-scrutinised presentation of the Romantic aspects of his poetic practice and verse. The second half of the essay connects Taylor’s Introduction to Clare’s own writing on ‘genius’. Clare wrote a number of poems to, or about, his Romantic contemporaries. In the particular cases in question here, Clare treats the ‘genius’ of Lord Byron’s ‘sublime’ work and poetic status and the ‘genius’ of William Wordsworth’s attention to the beauties of nature and ‘human kind’. A defining quality of Romantic genius, then, is imagined by Clare in aesthetic terms. Taylor constructed a very influential idea of Clare’s genius, but the poet also shows himself to participate in significant ways in a contemporary debate on the nature of poetic genius.

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In the Introduction to *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820),¹ Clare is presented by his editor and publisher John Taylor as a native, natural,² but also a Romantic, poetic ‘genius’. This combined focus on the circumstances of Clare’s genius and the formation of his imaginative experience and his devotion to nature give—as the first half of this essay argues—Taylor’s narrative a distinctive inflection. Clare, however, also shows a concern with genius across a number of his works: it is an idea which is fundamental to his view of poetry and which he often locates by reference to the work of his Romantic contemporaries. ‘Genius’ is a concept with a long history, but Clare’s concern with genius shows us his engagement with Romantic aesthetics, at least so far as the poems analysed in the second half of this essay are about the sublime and beautiful nature of the poetic ‘genius’ of Byron and Wordsworth. What Clare has to say about ‘genius’ demands further scrutiny.

Taylor on genius

Before turning to the Romantic aspects of Taylor’s Introduction to *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (hereafter *Poems Descriptive*) some further context for this narrative is needed. In his Introduction Taylor exercised, to use Jeremy Hawthorn’s phrase (66), ‘the parental authority’ of the editor in presenting Clare as an

¹ This volume went into a fourth edition by January 1821. For details, see Sales (1).

² In Meiko O’Halloran’s concise formulation, a ‘natural genius’ was a ‘poetic prodigy who lacked formal learning’ (143).

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author to a reading public for the first time. Taylor's account must be situated within—as Catherine Boyle and Zachary Leader point out—the wider context of changing literary relations in the period (153). These include the move from patron and poet relations to publisher and poet relations, to new magazine and review ownership.³ Taylor has had a number of fierce critics, including John Lucas (50-51) and Alan Vardy (4).⁴ But Clare's letters show how Taylor was a trusted source of advice for the poet on what he often referred to as his poetic 'specimens' or 'trifles' (Storey 140, 141, 142): it is difficult to overestimate how much Clare valued, and relied on, Taylor's opinion on his poetry.⁵ As Tim Chilcott has pointed out, Taylor's editorial interventions were far more extensive for Clare's work than they were for the verse of another poet published by him, John Keats (86).

Taylor's Introduction to *Poems Descriptive* also serves to highlight wider processes involved in the publication of English poets at this time:

The task of encouraging and promulgating the work of new writers was now a profession, not a hobby. It demanded, not simply an instinctive understanding of what was good literature, but a specialised knowledge of the Trade, of the reading market, of economics and sales. It demanded that practical experience of how and when to introduce Poetry to the public, and of the influence that contemporary values exercised upon the mind of readers. (Chilcott 96)

The success of *Poems Descriptive* demonstrated Taylor's considerable commercial acumen and that he knew 'how and when to introduce Poetry to the public'. Though Taylor presented Clare as a Romantic genius, and though one of the legacies of Romantic authorship is the idea of the solitary poetic genius, from the point of view of literary history, *Poems Descriptive* can in many ways be seen as a socially-constructed and collaborative model of authorship. Clare, as Roger Sales puts it, 'saw Taylor as providing a protective screen between him and the reading public' (67), while Taylor's Introduction was bolstered by the Stamford writer Octavius Gilchrist's profile of Clare in the first number of the *London Magazine*,⁶ published, as Sales also points out (34), shortly before *Poems Descriptive*. The wider context here is that, as David Higgins argues, in 'early nineteenth-century Britain' there was an 'unprecedented interest among writers and readers in the subject of genius and, in particular, in examining and discussing the personal characteristics and life histories of "great men"' (1).

³ As Boyle and Leader point out, Clare is a complex case here. Taylor was Clare's editor and, along with James Hessey, his publisher, but Admiral Radstock and Eliza Emmerson effectively acted like patrons for the poet, especially in the early part of his career.

⁴ A later essay on Clare by Vardy (2012) acknowledges some of the subtleties of Taylor's approach in his Introduction to *Poems Descriptive*.

⁵ This is not to say, however, that Clare did not register his frustration at some of the delays that beset the publication of his later volumes of poetry (including *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1827)). See, for instance, Clare's occasionally rather unflattering portrait of Taylor in *By Himself* (131-32).

⁶ Taylor was the editor of this publication.

Taylor began his Introduction to *Poems Descriptive* with the declaration that

THE following Poems will probably attract some notice by their intrinsic merit; but they are also entitled to attention from the circumstances under which they were written. They are the genuine productions of a young Peasant, a day-labourer in husbandry, who has had no advantages of education beyond others of his class; and though Poets in this country have seldom been fortunate men, yet he is, perhaps, the least favoured by circumstances, and the most destitute of friends, of any that ever existed. (1820 vii)

Taylor's Introduction is in part an exemplary biographical account of Clare's poetry. Clare's poems are authentic: 'they are the genuine productions of a young Peasant'. Taylor's statement that Clare is a day-labourer in husbandry is also put forward as a guarantee that he is not one of the idle poor—Clare is an author therefore despite his disadvantages. These sorts of claims are familiar in presentational strategies for marketing 'peasant', self-taught or labouring-class rural poets in Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Their reputation was often (but not always) due to a middle- and upper-class fascination with primitive or natural genius (Christmas 39-51, 210, 235-5, 278). Taylor's strategy in his Introduction to *Poems Descriptive* goes beyond simple claims for Clare's natural, rural genius, and is certainly more complex than some critics have suggested.⁷

Taylor's particular marketing strategy in the Introduction to *Poems Descriptive* combines an emphasis on Clare's social origins with a Romantic insistence on his unique, solitary situation: 'the least favoured by circumstances, and the most destitute of friends, of any that ever existed'. In his Introduction to *Poems Descriptive*, Taylor in fact places a great deal of emphasis on 'circumstances' (xx, xi, xviii, and xxi). Such a manoeuvre suggests a view of 'genius' in the fashion of Thomas Chatterton, who figures heavily in John Goodridge's monograph on Clare (11-36) and who, as Daniel Cook explains, was seen by one critic as 'a starving genius whose unfortunate circumstances meant he truly deserved public sympathy' (123-23). But Taylor's use of Clare's 'circumstances' is more nuanced. Taylor argues that Clare's reading had been the potential means by which he might overcome his circumstances (poverty) and outsiderliness:

When he had learned to read tolerably well, he borrowed from one of his companions that universal favourite, Robinson Crusoe, and in the perusal of this he greatly increased his stock of knowledge and desire for reading. (xi)

⁷ John Lucas's argument that Taylor claims in his opening paragraph to the Introduction that Clare is 'to all intents and purposes [...] so uneducated as to be illiterate' (11) is, for instance, hard to countenance.

'Tolerably' is an important word, signalling to a reading public that Clare has a respectable amount of learning. It is implied that Clare has a 'desire' to read more: his literary pursuits have an admirable and sound basis. 'Universal favourite' indicates that while Clare might be 'the most destitute of friends', he also has 'companions' who furnished him with books (*By Himself* 214-16). Clare is capable of appreciating literary works that people all over the world enjoy; Robinson Crusoe, after all, was famously celebrated by Rousseau and also, by Coleridge and Wordsworth (Rogers 115). Yet Crusoe is also one of literature's most famous solitaries and survivalists. Clare records his familiarity with Defoe's novel in his 'Autobiographical Fragments' and 'Sketches'.⁸ He would also write about a rural figure whom he described as—borrowing a line from Robert Bloomfield's *The Farmer's Boy*⁹—'the Crusoe of his lonely fields' (*Later Poems* I 596; 8). Taylor embellishes his picture of Clare through an account of the development of his reading, explaining how he 'increased his stock of knowledge' in this way—which, moreover, signals Clare's preparedness for entering the public sphere of publishing poetry.

Taylor's reference to the role of Clare's 'companions' in procuring him books complicates the Romantic picture of solitary genius.¹⁰ Yet Taylor does repeatedly position Clare as solitary and 'destitute' in the Introduction—within, that is, a Romantic framework (vii). Taylor says that 'Poets in this country have seldom been fortunate men', and might have in mind Chatterton, who was an important touchstone for, for instance, Wordsworth in 'Resolution and Independence' (*Poems* I 553; 47), and an important poetic precedent for the young Clare, as John Goodridge argues (11-36). Clare apparently saw in Chatterton a 'subversive' role model for the kinds of literary survival strategies needed to cope with the contradictory 'peasant poet' label (34). Chatterton also, as Fiona Stafford argues, 'came to symbolize Romantic solitude at its most extreme' (45).

Taylor, however, claims that Clare came to relish poetry at an early stage in his life through the work of the eighteenth-century writer John Pomfret:

But [Clare's] first expression of fondness for poetry was before he had learnt to read. He was tired one day with looking at the pictures in a volume of poems, which he thinks were Pomfret's, when his father read him one piece in the book to amuse him. The delight he felt, at hearing this read, still warms him when he thinks of the circumstance; but though he distinctly recollects the vivid pleasure which thrilled through him then, he has lost all trace of the incidents as well as of the language, nor can he find

⁸ 'I became acquainted with Robinson Crusoe very early in life having borrowd it of a boy at Glinton school of the name of Stimson who only dare lend me it for a few days for fear of his uncles knowing of it to whom it belongd yet I had it a sufficient time to fill my fancys' (*By Himself* 57, 15 (57)).

⁹ The line 'And strolls the Crusoe of the lonely fields' is contained in the 'Autumn' section of Bloomfield's poem.

¹⁰ Though they are reported in a letter from early 1822, Clare's antiquarian explorations with Edmund Tyrell Artis (house steward at Milton Hall) are another example of his enjoyment in the company of 'companions' (Storey 224-25).

any poem of Pomfret's at all answering the faint conception he retains of it. (xi-xii).

'Circumstance' is again a keyword here. Clare's attraction to poetry is, as befits a natural genius, 'pre-linguistic' (Vardy, 'Clare, John, Poetry' 241, 242): 'before he had learnt to read'. His verse belongs to what M.H. Abrams calls a 'cultural primitivist' model: 'the "natural" and "artless" poetical threshers, shoemakers, and washerwomen of modern vintage, who had been happily protected by social barriers from the refinements of civilization and advanced literary art' (83). Taylor, then, is satisfying the demand among a middle- and upper-class readership for the genius whose poetic talents originate in a natural gift for poetry and in a perceived closeness to nature. At the same time, Taylor's verb 'thrilled' in the extract above is suggestive of Clare's poetic genius—a genius capable of imaginative experiences beyond the range of most men.

Clare's Romantic genius

What is also noticeable in Taylor's claim about Clare's 'fondness for poetry' (xi) is the conception of Clare as experiencing imaginative pleasure which leads to a process of memory that is distinctly Romantic—or, at least, Shelleyan. For instance, Clare's inability to 'trace' the content and the vocabulary of John Pomfret's work as described by Taylor in the Introduction to *Poems Descriptive*,¹¹ recalls Shelley's notion of the imaginative faculty of the poetic mind in 'A Defence of Poetry':

[T]he mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness [...]. Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results: but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet (696-97).

It would be overstating the case to say that in his Introduction to *Poems Descriptive* Taylor is putting forward an account of poetic inspiration which matches the grandeur of Shelley's vocabulary or the scope of his argument. It is also the case that Shelley is focused on the act of 'composition', whereas Taylor is recounting Clare's experience of having poetry read to him, and 'the faint conception' he retained of the poetic language of Pomfret (xi-xii). However, the principle described by Taylor and Shelley is similar: the poet has an imaginative experience or idea which is glorious, delightful or enjoyable in its original conception, but which afterwards loses some of its

¹¹ In his 'Autobiographical Fragments', Clare mentions Pomfret in the context of his father reading poetry to him (*By Himself* 14).

glory and detail. Clare, Taylor explains in his Introduction, ‘has lost all trace of the incidents as well as of the language’ of poetry (xi-xii).

By outlining Clare’s experience of reading Pomfret, Taylor gives Clare’s poetry a literary signpost. Clare’s experience of reading (and by implication, writing) is also mediated: ‘his father read him one piece in the book to amuse him’ (xi-xii). Pomfret, like *Robinson Crusoe*, is a guarantor of Clare’s sound cultural and literary credentials. The point here is that these credentials combine with Clare’s essentially untutored status—as described earlier by Taylor—to produce a complex poetic profile, one which is both culturally primitive and Romantic—focused on, as we will shortly see, Clare’s ‘imagination’. It remains significant, however, that Taylor refers to Clare’s father reading to him: the experience for Clare is oral and auditory—Taylor keeps the associations which derive from Clare’s social origins and circumstances firmly in view.

Taylor also keeps a Romantic vocabulary in view, focusing on—in the passage quoted below—Clare’s ‘imagination’, while stressing how vital it was that Clare was able to access (very limited) writing resources so that he could record at least some of his thoughts, so much so that if he was not able to write down some of his poetic inspirations then

CLARE would not only have lost the advantage he may derive from the publication of his works, but that also in himself he would not have been the Poet he is; that, without writing down his thoughts, he could not have evolved them from his mind; and that his vocabulary would have been too scanty to express even what his imagination had strength enough to conceive. Besides, if he did succeed in partial instances, the aggregate amount of them could not have been collected and estimated. A few detached songs or short passages might be, perhaps, treasured in the memory of his companions for a short period, but they would soon perish, leaving his name and fame without a record (xiii).

‘Evolved them from his mind’ is comparable to Shelley’s ‘the mind in creation’ from ‘A Defence of Poetry’: Taylor evokes a Romantic concern with individual, poetic inspiration and the creative act of writing poetry, suggesting that Clare’s poetic inspiration overflowed and demanded to be written out. At the same time, Taylor is using the matter of Clare’s education to justify the practice of writing poetry: Clare ‘learnt Writing and Arithmetic’ (xii) and is putting this learning to good poetic use now, despite his limiting personal, social and cultural circumstances.

But there is also a Romantic focus on the partial and fragmented (‘A few detached songs or short passages’ (xiii)) in Taylor’s Introduction, which he keeps bringing back to the circumstances of Clare’s education:

In the “Dawnings of Genius,” CLARE describes the condition of a man, whose education has been too contracted to allow him to utter the thoughts of which he is conscious:—

“Thus pausing wild on all he saunters by,
 He feels enraptur’d though he knows not why; 170
 And hums and mutters o’er his joys in vain,
 And dwells on something which he can’t explain.” (xiii)

Clare’s ‘Dawnings of Genius’ pictures a man who seems to be muttering poetry to himself—which, again, is Romantic in the sense that it offers a description of an outsider figure, rapt in an imaginative experience, one beyond full comprehension. It is tempting, of course, to read this as a portrait of Clare, with the ‘something which he can’t explain’ from ‘Dawnings of Genius’ conjuring a picture of the naive peasant poet who is inspired but cannot fathom the source of his inspiration or the thoughts that it gives rise to. The picture of the poet humming and muttering was one that Clare outlined in his prose writing. He records his anxiety about how his fellow rural inhabitants viewed with suspicion and distrust his habits of wandering alone, his solitary disposition, and his penchant for uttering lines of poetry out loud (*By Himself* 10, 13).

The circumstances which Clare describes here recall Taylor’s attention to ‘the circumstances under which Clare’s poems were written’ (vii). Taylor’s intent, however, is to tell a polite, upper- and middle-class audience that Clare has spent what little leisure time he has productively in writing these poems. As an author of poems Clare is also, according to Taylor, spontaneous and unpremeditated in the way that he writes—a childlike poetic genius. Clare’s genius is, however, more complicated than this:

CLARE, it is evident, is susceptible of extreme pleasure from the varied hues, forms, and combinations in nature, and what he most enjoys, he endeavours to pourtray [sic] for the gratification of others. He is most thoroughly the Poet as well as the Child of Nature; and, according to his opportunities, no poet has more completely devoted himself to her service, studied her more closely, or exhibited so many sketches of her under new and interesting appearances. (xix)

Clare is under the parenthood of Nature and devotes his poetry to her maternal influence. Taylor’s ‘many sketches of her [Nature] under new and interesting appearances’ is reminiscent of Wordsworth’s Fenwick Note to *An Evening Walk* (‘the infinite variety of natural appearances’ (2007 13)). Clare’s devotion to nature is Romantic. Clare the Romantic poet, however, is also a childlike poetic genius. But the poetic genius has also endeavoured to study nature ‘more closely’: spontaneity is supplemented by studiousness and attentiveness. The ‘as well as’ qualifier is significant in the passage above. Clare is a ‘Poet’ first and foremost; that is, he is sensitive and receptive to the world around him, where he has ‘devoted himself to’, ‘studied’, and ‘exhibited’ so many poetical impressions of ‘Nature’. Clare also, as Taylor suggests, possesses refined faculties and sensibilities. Here, then, the primitive natural ‘genius’

meets the poet whose faculties of sensitivity and imagination mark him out as Romantic.

Taylor also repeatedly aligns Clare with the more complex idea of the diminishing origins of Romantic imaginative inspiration, which is a theme already anticipated by Clare's poems, including the early lyric 'Dawnings of Genius', which Taylor quotes in his Introduction:

"The bursts of thought, with which his soul's perplex'd,
Are bred one moment, and are gone the next;
Yet still the heart will kindling sparks retain,
And thoughts will rise, and Fancy strive again."

There is [writes Taylor], perhaps, no feeling so distressing to the individual: it is an irremovable nightmare, as it were, to Genius, which struggles in vain for sounds to convey an idea of its almost intolerable sensations,

"Till by successful sallies wearied quite,
The Memory fails, and Fancy takes her flight;
The wick confin'd within the socket dies,
Borne down and smother'd in a thousand sighs."

That this would have been CLARE's fate, unless he had been taught to write, cannot be doubted; and a perusal of his Poems will convince any one, that something of this kind he still feels, from his inability to find those words which can fully declare his meaning. (xiii-xiv)

Taylor's emphasis on 'fate' and circumstances in the makeup of 'Genius' is perhaps not surprising from the point of view that, as Andrew Robinson explains, 'in Latin, *genius* described the tutelary (guardian) spirit of a person, place [or] institution [...] which linked these to the forces of fate and the rhythms of time' (2). Clare's 'Genius' is a heavy burden—an 'irremovable nightmare' in Taylor's striking phrase—putting the poet in a state of creative, Romantic anxiety about being able to find the words which are expressive enough to convey the force of his feeling. Taylor's discussion of 'Dawnings of Genius', then, locates Clare in the world of 'feeling' and 'sensations':¹² there is a focus on subjectivity and mental states which combines with the more straightforward idea of native poetic genius.

Clare's 'Dawnings of Genius', Johanne Clare argues, owes much to Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', expressing the sentiment that 'genius is not confined to those with learning' (113). However, Clare's 'Genius', Taylor argues, is of a

¹² In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth argues that 'feeling' and 'feelings' are central to the idea of poetry (*Poems* 885).

distinctly Romantic variety: the force of the ‘intolerable sensations’ referred to above cannot be embodied in words, just as the original potency of Clare’s ‘bursts of thought’ in ‘Dawnings of Genius’ cannot adequately be captured and recorded. A manoeuvre which Taylor makes here is to use this Romantic discourse of genius to emphasise the value of Clare’s education and his force of feeling: ‘unless he had been taught to write’ (xiv) Clare may have died at a very young age—the same fate as, for example, Chatterton. Taylor quotes Clare to claim that he would have melted away (Clare’s lines are ‘The wick confin’d within the socket dies, / Borne down and smother’d in a thousand sighs’) if he were not able to record his poetic thoughts, which, nevertheless, are always—in Romantic fashion—beyond his full reach or full embodiment. Taylor’s rhetoric at the same time centres on an expressive (the idea that poetry ‘grounded in the faculties and feelings of the poet’ (Preminger, Hardison, Warnke 206)), Romantic understanding of poetry, one of emotions and feelings and ‘intolerable sensations’.¹³ What also needs to be highlighted, however, is that it is Clare’s poems that are, in effect, mediating Taylor’s narrative: he is making claims about Clare that Clare first made himself. Taylor is shaping a Romantic view of the poet already apparent in Clare’s verse.

Taylor’s selections from ‘Dawnings of Genius’ are also appropriate because they draw attention to the fundamental importance of ‘fancy’ in Clare’s poetry. As I have argued elsewhere (‘Keats, Hunt, Reynolds, and Clare’ 15-21), ‘fancy’ is a central imaginative faculty for Clare; he refers to it again and again in his writing and it signals his similarity to, but also his difference from, his Romantic contemporaries, who tend to favour ‘imagination’—which, as we have seen, is actually the word that Taylor uses in his Introduction (xiii). Taylor also reiterates the Romantic paradox of words always being beyond full meaning (xiv), a major issue for Romantic poets, and especially for Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Byron.¹⁴ Indeed, in his poem ‘The Robins Nest’, Clare expresses his fondness for ‘words not heard but felt’ (*Middle Period* III; 2004 532-33, 32). As with Wordsworth in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (*Poems* 885), words—including presumably, those words found in verse—are for Clare inextricably (if often perplexingly) tied to feeling.

In the extract from Taylor’s Introduction cited earlier (xiv-xv), what we see is an understanding of poetry—Taylor describes Clare’s ‘intolerable sensations’ as he struggles to embody his thoughts and feelings in verse—which belongs to the Romantic, expressive tradition, which itself, as M.H. Abrams explains (97-100), is built on eighteenth-century theories. Indeed, most of Taylor’s poetic examples in his Introduction are taken from eighteenth-century literature. William Enfield’s ‘Is Verse Essential to Poetry?’ (1796) is an example of an expressive theory of poetry:

Those writers appear to have approached nearest to a true definition of poetry, who have understood it to be the immediate offspring of a

¹³ ‘Romantic’ here can again be contextualised by Wordsworth’s Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, which essentially puts forward an expressive theory of poetry.

¹⁴ For an introduction to this subject, see the second chapter of William Keach’s *Arbitrary Power: Romanticism, Language, Politics*.

vigorous imagination and quick sensibility, and have called it the language of fancy and passion ... Poets are still considered as men inspired by the power of imagination, and pouring forth the strong language of fancy and feeling (quoted in Abrams 97).

Enfield refers to poets 'Pouring forth', a phrase also used by Keats in 'Ode to a Nightingale' (*Poems* 347-57). Enfield's phrase 'the strong language of fancy and feeling' might accurately describe Clare's 'Dawnings of Genius': 'Fancy [takes] her flight' and 'Fancy strives again' (xiv), while poetry is characterised by, in Enfield's term, 'vigorous imagination', or, in Clare's phrase from 'Dawnings of Genius', 'bursts of thought' (xiii)—which, in Clare's creative endeavour, the 'heart' tries to 'retain'.

If Clare poems such as 'Dawnings of Genius' participate in a Romantic, expressive theory of poetry, then what Taylor does is to tie this to an emphasis on Clare's education, keeping his work within the boundaries of acceptable taste for the polite 'reader' and readers (xvii). Taylor claims that Clare's lack of a good hold on grammar is compensated for by an 'extraordinary exertion of his native powers' (xiv). Such claims belong to the tradition of opposing learning to genius, as Bridget Keegan explains in her essay on Clare and 'natural genius' (2000 65-70). Indeed, Clare's poems, Taylor tells us, were written under the influence of nature (xix), and this, in turn, gives us the most natural and authentic kind of writing that an author could produce: a lack of full authorial agency produces a more authentic authorial product. Taylor's phrase 'the immediate impression of this feeling' (that Clare experiences in observing nature, (xx)), for instance, reminds us of the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' which Wordsworth describes in the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (*Poems* 886). However, as mentioned previously, Taylor says that if Clare failed to write down his poems on the spot the moment of inspiration was passed and memory was not enough to help him recall the lines of verse (xiii).

In order to contextualise Clare's mobile or peripatetic kind of writing Taylor invokes a Romantic discourse of authorship and positions Clare inside its boundaries, while keeping his difference from other poets in perspective. For instance, Clare does not recollect his 'feelings' and emotions in tranquillity as the Wordsworthian poet might do, but instead has to compose in the fields or by 'road-sides' during breaks from agricultural labour ('labour and the Muse went hand in hand' (xii, xx)). Perhaps this scenario might actually be taken as an illustration of the contradictory nature of Romantic 'genius' itself, where—to return to Shelley's 'A Defence of Poetry' and the famous image of the 'mind in creation' being 'as a fading coal' (696)—an author is responsive to the impressions of imagination but cannot always find adequate means of immediately transcribing them. Taylor frequently notes, however, that it was the impression of some 'feeling' (xx) which resulted in Clare writing poetry.

While Taylor keeps in view Clare's poetic talent and genius, he also maintains the narrative of 'circumstance' and accident throughout the Introduction to *Poems Descriptive*, so that the precariousness of Clare's literary agency is evident. Clare is a Romantic genius whose thoughts and inspirations outrun his grasp, but also an

authentic genius in that the threat of obscurity is always close at hand. For instance, Taylor states that 'Poets in this country have seldom been fortunate men' (vii): genius is characterised by unfavourable and even hostile circumstances for its appearance. Such 'circumstances' as those detailed below make clear that for these reasons Clare's expressive genius is a precarious, exciting new discovery in the literary world:

It was an accident which led to the publication of these Poems. In December 1818, Mr. Edward Drury, Bookseller, of Stamford, met by chance with the Sonnet to the Setting Sun, written on a piece of paper in which a letter had been wrapped up, and signed J.C. Having ascertained the name and residence of the writer, he went to Helpstone, where he saw some other poems with which he was much pleased. (xxv)

The precariousness which attends Clare's poetic activity is drawn out by Taylor through his attention to the difficulties which the poet faces in getting his writing down on paper, so 'That no Poet of our country has shewn greater ability, under circumstances so hostile to its developement' (*sic* (xxvi)). Taylor extends this point by comparing Clare to those of more privileged circumstances:

Yet when we hear the consciousness of possessing talent, and the natural irritability of the poetic temperament, pleaded in extenuation of the follies and vices of men in high life, let it be accounted no mean praise to such a man as CLARE, that, with all the excitements of *their* sensibility in *his* station, he has preserved a fair character, amid dangers which presumption did not create, and difficulties which discretion could not avoid. (xxvii)

Clare's genius is tempered by his sober and worthy character. But Clare possesses the same faculties or sensibilities as 'men in high life'. This is one of the most striking claims that Taylor makes, and, as I have argued elsewhere, a number of Clare's poems explore the virtues of refined, aesthetic good 'taste' (including an endorsement of picturesque principles) against the vulgar habits of many of those who live in a rural locality ('Man of Taste' 38-55).

Clare's concern with aesthetic good taste reflects his poetic ambition. As Sales has pointed out, he was 'both extremely shy and extremely ambitious' (67). The Introduction to *Poems Descriptive* captures both of these aspects of Clare, not least in regard to the way in which Taylor takes responsibility for presenting and marketing Clare's particular poetic genius, while offering a commentary on the nature of genius in unpropitious circumstances. Yet genius itself also preoccupies Clare, and the focus of this preoccupation was often his Romantic contemporaries. 'Genius' (1835), for instance, has Byron at its centre: we will see that Clare saw Byron's 'genius' as one that transcended the bounds of time and place through its sublimity. Clare's sonnet 'To Wordsworth' (1840-1) thinks, as we will see, of the Romantic poet as heralding the

places where 'genius is' (9), and that the inspiring nature of this genius is its concern with beauty and the beautiful. What characterises Clare's view of genius, then, is its celebration of Romantic aesthetics.

Clare on genius

Bridget Keegan has pointed out that 'Clare's work conscientiously participates in a broader history of theorizing aesthetic ability' (66). Often this theorising is focused on his Romantic contemporaries, as his sonnet 'To the Memory of John Keats' testifies (*Village Minstrel*, II 207). Clare also stages a celebration of Byron in the context of poetic 'genius':

A charm appears in every land,
A voice in every clime,
That beautifies the desert sand,
And renders earth sublime.

Some meet it in the poet's song,
Some in the sage's fame;
Wherever seen, it pleases long,
And Genius is its name.

[...]

But Byron, like an eagle, flew
His daring flight, and won;
And looked, and felt, as though he knew
Eternity begun.

As thunder in its startled call—
As lightning from the cloud—
Seen, heard, and known above them all—
The proudest of the proud!

He dared the world a war to wage,
He scorned the critics' mock,
And soared the mightiest of the age.—
The condor of the rock

Screamed from the dizzy Apennines,
As startled by his flight,
When Manfred sought the searing shrines
Of demons in his might.

But Genius soars above the dead,
 Too mighty for his power;
 And deserts where his journey led,
 Spell-bound, are still in flower!
 (*Rural Muse* 94-96, 1-8; 21-36; 57-60)

'Flight' (22, 34) in this poem invites a comparison and a contrast with Clare's poetic flights of 'fancy' as related by Taylor in the Introduction to *Poems Descriptive*, which describes Clare's poetic struggle with 'intolerable sensations' (xiv), as opposed to the imperious flights of Byron's poetic 'Genius'. In Clare's poem, the appearance of 'Genius' is universal: it features in 'every land' and 'every clime' (1-2). Indeed, in his letters Clare cites the labouring-class poet Robert Bloomfield as one of the 'levellers in genius' (Storey 302); given Clare's celebration of Byron in 'Genius',¹⁵ it is rather ironic that Bloomfield was defended by Clare from what he saw as the 'sneering' remarks on labouring-class poets in (Byron's) *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*.¹⁶

Still, Clare thought about genius in wider or larger terms than that of the 'natural genius'. Clare's 'Genius' suggests that genius 'beautifies' and 'renders sublime' (3-4): it works above and beyond local limits. In his Introduction to *Poems Descriptive* Taylor had hinted at Clare's desire to experience 'real transport' and transcendence (xxi), to look at 'romantic prospects' beyond the 'immediate impression[s]' of nature (xxi). Indeed, the transcendent power which Clare claims for genius in 'Genius' is in this sense clearly Romantic. This is also an outright celebration of genius: Byron is exalted and raised above his peers. Byron's hauteur and distain is part of his wonderful genius. He wages a war with the contemporary reviewers ('He scorned the critics' mock, / And soared the mightiest of the age' (30-31)) and produces sublime verse. While these lines from 'Genius' are all in the past tense, this does not quell or mute the triumph of the Byronic genius, which, bird-like, soars (57) above its poetic rivals. Genius is a matter of the transcendental powers of the poet, which 'Screamed from the dizzy Apennines'. A defining aspect of genius for Clare is its opposition to 'Fashion' (66) and the superficial tastes of the day.

Clare also celebrates another Romantic-period author in 'Genius': Sir Walter Scott (9-16).¹⁷ Along with Byron, Scott was the most popular and famous British author of his time. Again, this suggests that when it came to the idea of genius, Clare had affiliations with William Hazlitt, who discusses Byron and Scott and the idea of genius. Bonnie Woodbery claims that Hazlitt's 'On Genius and Common Sense' 'uses Scott's impersonal genius [...] as a touchstone against which to measure the extent and form of Byron's genius' (286). In 'Genius', Clare introduces Scott before Byron; Scott, however, while

¹⁵ See Storey (24) for details of Clare's reading of Byron's poetry.

¹⁶ The lines from Byron's poem are: '[I]f Phoebus smiled on you, / Bloomfield! Why not on brother Nathan too? / Him too the Mania, not the Muse, has seized' (781-83). Nathaniel Bloomfield was a labouring-class poet, brother of Robert Bloomfield and author of 'Honington Green', a poem about enclosure.

¹⁷ Clare mentions Scott's 'Lady of the Lake' in his letters (Storey 46).

capable of genius, is, in the realm of poetry, only a ‘touchstone’ in so far as the former’s ‘timid hand’ (17) allows us to more clearly see the bold and daring genius of Byron. Byron, by way of contrast, is figured in Clare’s poem as a force of nature (‘As thunder in its startled call— / As lightning from the cloud’ (25-26)), elemental and profound. Clare also lauds Byron’s defiance in the face of hostile critical reviews (‘He scorned the critics’ mock’ (30)) as an outright act of genius.

Still, Clare’s ‘Genius’ returns to Scott and his writing on ‘history’ (45), his ‘heritage sublime’ (46). While Clare claims that a lasting effect of genius is its sublimity, the dominant metaphor and simile in the poem is that of ‘genius’ giving rise to powers of flight, associated here with Byron’s eagle-like status. Byron’s refusal to bow to fashion and fickle tastes leaves a legacy of genius and beauty: ‘For poesy is in verse or prose / Not bound to fashion’s thrall: / No matter where true Genius grows, / ’Tis beautiful in all’ (65-68). Informing Clare’s view of ‘Genius’, then, are claims for its sublime and beautiful nature: Clare is drawn to, admires, and celebrates the aesthetic properties of Romantic genius.

Yet in his prose writing, Clare states that he actually values another Romantic contemporary more than Byron (the context here is two ‘gentlemen’ visiting Clare):

He [one of the ‘gentlemen’] talkd much of the poets but did not like Wordsworth and when I told him I did he instantly asked me whether I did not like Byron better I don’t like these comparisons to knock your opinions on the head with — I told him that I read Wordsworth oftener than I did Byron and he seemd to express his surprize at it by observing that he could not read Wordsworth at all (*By Himself* 221)

Clare’s appraisal of Byron and Wordsworth is in one sense another valuation of Romantic aesthetic ability. Two of the main concerns in ‘Genius’—the idea of aesthetic pleasure and the disdain for critical opinion—also inform Clare’s sonnet about the ‘genius’ of Wordsworth:

WORDSWORTH I love; his books are like the fields,
 Not filled with flowers, but works of human kind;
 The pleasant weed a fragrant pleasure yields,
 The briar and broomwood shaken by the wind,
 The thorn and bramble o’er the water shoot
 A finer flower than gardens e’er give birth,
 The aged huntsman grubbing up the root—
 I love them all as tenants of the earth:
 Where genius is, there often die the seeds;
 What critics throw away I love the more;
 I love to stoop and look among the weeds,
 To find a flower I never knew before:

WORDSWORTH go on—a greater poet be,
Merit will live, though parties disagree! (*Later Poems* I 25; 1-14)

The critical dismissal of Wordsworth is for Clare a sure sign of his poetic ‘genius’:¹⁸ ‘What critics throw away I love the more’. This contempt for critical opinion and judgement is something that Clare attributes to both Wordsworth’s and also (in ‘Genius’) Byron’s Romantic genius.

But the main thrust of Clare’s sonnet is its admiration of Wordsworth’s poetry in aesthetic terms. Timothy Webb has contended that Clare’s position in the sonnet quoted above takes him beyond Wordsworth: ‘Clare’s oxymoronic delight in smelling the weeds (“The pleasant weed a fragrant pleasure yields”) is probably more deliberately transgressive than the general tendency of Wordsworth’s taste’ (230). This might be true, though what is also noticeable from the sonnet is the emphasis which Clare puts on the human quality of Wordsworth’s verse.

Clare is, then, concerned with more than the quality of Wordsworth’s poetic descriptions of nature. The octave of his sonnet, for instance, is circular. It opens with a highly personal statement—‘Wordsworth I love’—and elaborates the reasons why, which are based on the poet’s ability to make the beauties of nature the subject of human regard: nature can intensify a concern with human life. The eighth line of Clare’s sonnet then arrives back at another highly personal statement: ‘I love them all as tenants of the earth’ (8). ‘Tenants’ is a curious word; it seems to symbolise on the one hand something temporary rather than permanent, while, on the other, suggesting a sense of belonging in the adjacent phrase ‘of the earth’. Clare reiterates the ‘great beautys’ of Wordsworth’s verse in a letter of 1826, where he also proclaims that Wordsworth is one of ‘the most original [*sic*] poets of the day’ (Storey 371).

In Clare’s sonnet on Wordsworth, the sense of pleasure from reading Wordsworth’s poetry is evident in the alliterated ‘briar and broomwood’ (4),¹⁹ which gets some resonant alliteration from ‘bramble’ (5) in the later line and catches the plosive sound on ‘grubbing’ (7). For Clare, Wordsworth’s genius is also focused on human life in a distinctive sense. Clare’s phrase the ‘aged huntsman’ refers to Wordsworth’s ‘Lyrical Ballad’, ‘Simon Lee’. Simon Lee is one of ‘the poorest of the poor’, and is also described by Wordsworth as an encloser of land: ‘This scrap of land he from the heath / Enclosed when he was stronger’ (*Poems* 301; 45-46). That Clare should approvingly quote from ‘Simon Lee’ is especially interesting given his hostility to enclosure.²⁰ The aesthetic appeal of Wordsworth’s poem,²¹ Simon Lee ‘grubbing up the root’ (Clare’s phrase is itself felicitous in terms of sound (7)), apparently overrides any social and economic contradictions for Clare. Such is Wordsworth’s poetic genius: those

¹⁸ Clare acquired a copy of Wordsworth’s *Miscellaneous Poems* (1820) in 1822. This four-volume edition contained most of Wordsworth’s work up until 1820. I am grateful to Bob Heyes for pointing this out.

¹⁹ ‘Pleasure’ is itself a central concern of Wordsworth’s essentially expressive theory of poetry as found in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (*Poems*, I; 891).

²⁰ On this, see Goodridge (105-34).

²¹ Indeed, in his essay on ‘Popularity in Authorship’, Clare refers to ‘Wordsworth’s beautiful ballad of “We are Seven”’ (Birtwhistle 301).

figures that he writes about seem to be part of life, dwellers on the earth. Wordsworth's depictions of flowers and fauna also inspire by virtue of being more pleasing and beautiful than real life: 'A finer flower than gardens e'er give birth' (6). Indeed, a number of works in Clare's *Poems Descriptive of Real Life and Scenery* contemplate the quality of beauty (109, 118, 150), while Taylor claims in his Introduction to the volume that some of Clare's early compositions were inspired by the 'beautiful scenery of Burghley Park' (xi). Aesthetic valuations remain key to thinking about Clare's poetic genius.

Clare's sonnet is focused on 'Wordsworth', and it is true that, as Helen Boden argues, both poets 'exhibit a preoccupation with autobiography, and present alternative versions of themselves, testing different notions of what it means to be a poet' (30). The sonnet 'To Wordsworth' is a bold declaration and case study of poetic genius, and is structured around a series of horticultural metaphors and similes. Clare's poem also works by incremental repetition ('flower(s) 2, 6') and 'I love' (1, 11), building up Wordsworth as a genius. In fact, Clare uses the 'I love' construction four times in his sonnet (1, 8, 10, 11), paying personal testimony to 'where genius is'. The perishing of the 'seeds' (9) of genius at a premature stage might also make opaque homage to Chatterton, the 'marvellous Boy' of Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence'.

Yet as the close connection of 'pleasant' and 'pleasure' (3) in Clare's sonnet on Wordsworth suggests, the human remains inextricably tied to the natural world here. Indeed, Clare might diverge from Hazlitt's 'On Genius and Common Sense' and the idea of Wordsworth's egotism ('His genius is the effect of his individual character' (*Table Talk* 98)), but the second half of Hazlitt's definition of genius itself is not a million miles away from Clare's sonnet on Wordsworth: 'Genius or originality is, for the most part, *some strong quality in the mind, answering to and bringing out some new and striking quality in nature*' (emphasis in original, *Table Talk* 93). For Hazlitt, Rembrandt embodies this idea of genius: 'He lived in and revealed to others a world of his own, and might be said to have invented a new view of nature'; he pointed 'out to us what is before our eyes and under our feet' (*Table Talk* 95). Clare's celebration of Wordsworth, then, also helps to locate a contemporary, Romantic discourse on Wordsworth's genius—Clare voices his admiration for Wordsworth's genius as a process of (like Hazlitt) attending to what is beneath our feet: 'I love to stoop and look among the weeds, / To find a flower I never knew before' (11-12).

In *The Spirit of the Age*, Hazlitt lists a series of phenomena which each become an 'object of imagination to' Wordsworth, so that 'even the lichens on the rock have a life and being in his thoughts' (195). For Clare and Hazlitt, then, the beauty of objects in nature gains a new life in Wordsworth's verse. Indeed, as explained earlier, Taylor drew attention to Clare's close relationship to nature in his Introduction to *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (xix). Taylor quotes Wordsworth's dictum (in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*) that no new image of nature had been produced in British poetry between *Paradise Lost* and *The Seasons*. Here, Taylor argues, is the source of much of Clare's poetic originality and genius: Clare is 'happier in the presence of nature than elsewhere' (xx) and is inspired poetically by it.

In Clare's original valuations of Byron and Wordsworth, the work of these poets (Clare, as we have seen, references *Manfred* by name in 'Genius' and alludes to 'Simon Lee' in his sonnet on Wordsworth) is figured as aesthetically inspiring and as going against the critical grain. It is these qualities which help to guarantee that, as Clare puts it in 'Genius', 'No matter where true Genius grows, / 'Tis beautiful in all' (67-68). Clare's is an apprehension of the aesthetic modes of Romantic genius. In the case of Byron, it is the sublime, daring, soaring force of his works which stand as examples of poetic genius, while the truth of Wordsworth's poetry is its beauty, its truth to human life *and* nature. While Taylor marketed Clare as both a natural and a Romantic genius in the Introduction to *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, Clare, as this essay has shown, often mobilises a discourse of genius himself: his reverence, regard, and 'love' for sublime, beautiful and inspiring poetic genius shows his demonstrable engagement with the work of his Romantic contemporaries.

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