Editorial

John Clare, the nineteenth century English peasant-poet, was born in 1793 in the village of Helpston, Northamptonshire. On a recent 'pilgrimage' to his birthplace, one couldn't help noticing how little the present day village reflected the place that Clare so lovingly describes in his poems. To capture a 'sense of place' one has, paradoxically, to go to his poems rather than to the place itself. The north–south axis of the old village, for example, has been replaced by an unforgiving east–west ribbon development, and there is little evidence of the nooks and crannies that were Clare's everyday haunts.

In attempting to explain what we have lost, some philosophical colleagues resort to talking of an intrinsic value that is independent of human valuing. I have struggled for a long time to understand this notion, but so far without success. Indeed, one reason commonly offered for adopting such a notion seems plainly fallacious. Without such a notion, it is claimed, the natural world would have had no value until humans arrived. However, from the fact that yellow things can only be recognised as such by creatures with a certain sort of sensory faculty, it doesn't seem to follow that there were no yellow things before such creatures evolved. Whether this issue can ever be resolved by purely conceptual arguments of this kind is unclear, so I am minded to try a gentler, more empirical approach.

Throughout Clare's nature poetry, I would claim, it is undoubtedly his humanism that shows through, that gives the natural world its very savour. Whether observing the lowly snail in 'Summer Images':

> And note..
> The jetty snail creep from the mossy thorn
> In earnest heed and tremolous intent
> Frail brother of the morn
> That from the tiney bents and misted leaves
> Withdraws his timid horn [1]

or the hare in his poem about the skylark:

> Where squats the hare to terrors wide awake
> Like some brown clod the harrows failed to break [2]

the reference point of human experience is inescapable. This is again particularly noticeable whenever he reverts to birds – one of his favourite subjects. This from 'Emmonsails Heath in Winter':

> While the old heron from the lonely lake
> Starts slow and flaps his melancholy wing
> And oddling crow in idle motion swing
> …

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> The field fare chatter in the whistling thorn
> …
> And coy bumbarrels [long-tailed tits] twenty in a drove
> Flit down the hedge rows in the frozen plain [3]

Nor is this a humanism of the possessive kind. About his moving house – he moved all of three miles but even this took him out of his local 'knowledge' – he writes to John Taylor that 'I have some difficulties to leave the woods & heaths & favourite spots that have known me so long, for the very molehills on the heath & the old trees in the hedges seem bidding me farewell' (a thought repeated later in his autobiography where he avers 'the very wild flowers seemed to forget me').[4] It is the flowers, trees and molehills that are the 'residents', he the passer-through. No land-ownership mentality here; he simply belongs. Nor any ascription of intrinsic value; it is simply where he feels at home.

Now, suppose that the idea of value independent of the human valuer, and especially independent of a humanistic valuer does make sense, what would this 'value' be like? What account of the heron or the long-tailed tit do we give if we are barred from referring to them as melancholy or coy? In light of John Clare, what is particularly difficult to conceive of is an environmental sensitivity that is not at the same time a humanistic sensitivity. One has to worry that William Hazlitt's uncharacteristic outburst against rural ignorance points to where we might end up if we dispense with a humanistic perspective:

> All country people hate each other! They have so little comfort, that they envy their neighbours the small pleasures or advantage, and nearly grudge themselves the necessities of life. From not being accustomed to enjoyment, they become hardened and averse to it – stupid, for want of thought, selfish for want of society … There are no shops, no taverns, no theatres, no opera … no books or knowledge of books. Vanity and luxury are the civilisers of the world, and sweeteners of human life. Without objects either of pleasure or action, it grows harsh and crabbed. The mind becomes stagnant, the affections callous … Man left to himself soon degenerates into a very disagreeable person. Ignorance is always bad enough, but rustic ignorance is intolerable.[5]

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[1] J.W. and A. Tibble, *John Clare: His Life and Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1956), p. 53.

[2] E. Robinson and G. Summerfield, *Selected Poems and Prose of John Clare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 77.

[3] Ibid., p. 138.

[4] J. W. and A. Tibble, *Letters of John Clare* (London: Routledge, 1951) p. 257.

[5] Quoted in R. Blythe, *Talking About John Clare* (Nottingham: Trent Books, 1999), pp. 69–70.