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AN ECOCRITICAL EXAMINATION OF BRITISH ROMANTIC NATURAL
HISTORY WRITING: THE LITERATURE OF A CHANGING WORLD

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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May, 2010

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Title: An Ecocritical Examination of British Romantic Natural History Writing: The Literature of a Changing World

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This dissertation examines multiple forms of natural history writing from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in England. Natural history writing is a foundational element in the formation of contemporary science, culture, and education. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the natural sciences experienced an epistemological shift from a more localized, myth-based field to a more universal, classificatory based area of study focused on dispelling myths. At the same time, the popularity of the natural sciences was increasing on all levels of society from royalty to the lower classes, from schools and universities to the formation of local clubs and animal rights groups.

While natural history was growing in popularity throughout England, the amount of literature that related to natural history increased exponentially as well. Many writers incorporated distinctive forms of natural history into their poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. Promoting and incorporating natural history writing in their work both reflected and possibly influenced the shifts in natural science that led to the modern understanding of nature. Essays, prose, and poetry all paralleled and contributed in heightening the awareness in the general public of natural history, and ultimately, in enabling it to become a foundational element of the western educational system. The authors focused on in this study include: John Clare, Gilbert White, John Leonard Knapp, William

Wordsworth, James Thomson, Charlotte Smith, Erasmus Darwin, and multiple others as well.

Through examining the natural history literature of the time, we can better understand the origins of contemporary biological science and our contemporary environmental thought. This study seeks to untangle many of the various threads of the history of natural science in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries through examination and analysis of the literature that paralleled and possibly influenced the pivotal shift in scientific thought.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION: NATURAL HISTORY WRITING IN CONTEXT

1. John Clare and Natural History Writing

I first came across a poem by John Clare about thirteen years ago in an anthology of English literature. “Clock-a-Clay” is a linguistically simple poem about life through the eyes of a ladybug, which I discovered from a gloss on the side of the page. The poem is happy and childlike in tone while providing me with a provocative idea: what would life be like lived through the eyes of an insect? At the time, I thought about this image quite a bit, but it did not seem like a momentous concept, merely one of the many new perspectives that I was discovering in my early years of college. In retrospect, the concept of seeing the world through the eyes of an entirely different species engaged my mind in ways that I have not yet completely reconciled. A descriptive poem in simple language did more for challenging my thought process than any complicated essay or philosophic tome ever had. Since that moment, I have wrestled with attempting to understand why this simple poem had such a powerful impact on me at the beginning of my intellectual journey.

My views on Clare and his work have changed considerably over the last decade as I wrestled with how to define and categorize his work in the context of the periodization of English literature. Because he produced an enormous range of work, any categorization is problematic. His oeuvre includes songs, ballads, narrative poems, sonnets, and prose. Beyond that, many of his poems, particularly his asylum poems,¹ fit what is now generally considered the genre of Romantic poetry, but the vast majority of them do not fit neatly or cross multiple genres. Of course, there is no unified definition of

Romantic literature;² however, there are some fundamental points of agreement. For instance, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* breaks the thematic strains of the period into five main categories: “Tourism and the Romantic Landscape,” “The Gothic,” “The French Revolution,” “Romantic Orientalism,” and “The Satanic and Byronic Hero” (*Norton Anthology of English Literature On-line*). Although many critics contest the basic justifications for these categories and even any categorization,³ the *Norton Anthology* continues to be the dominant anthology in the field,⁴ and a good place to begin analysis of the thematic strains of the period. John Clare’s work does not neatly fit into any of the categories outlined in *Norton*. Of course, the majority of Clare’s poems that are analyzed in my study could fall under the section “Tourism and the Romantic Landscape;” however, the selections that the *Norton* includes in this section embody different visions of landscape than Clare expresses throughout his oeuvre. “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” “The Prelude,” Coleridge’s conversation poems, Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals, Percy Shelley’s “Alastor,” “Mont Blanc,” and Keats’s “To Autumn” are presented as the quintessential poems of this section, all of which produce a vision of nature quite different than that of Clare.

Nevertheless, John Clare’s nature poems do have a lot in common with the “Tourism and Romantic Landscape” poems listed above, although the commonalities prove an incomplete fit. First, “Tintern Abbey” provides us with an interesting contrast with Clare. For instance, if we compare Clare’s “Helpstone” with “Tintern Abbey,” both poems present natural scenes in ways that challenge the framing of the natural world. Wordsworth and Clare both express an intense reverence to nature in these poems, as

Clare writes, “Hail, scenes obscure! so near and dear to me” and Wordsworth references nature as “sublime” and writes about how his “spirit” turns towards nature (Clare line 1, Wordsworth lines 37, 55). The poems also express the effect of passing time on nature and the speaker (in Clare’s case, twenty years; and for Wordsworth, five years).

A major distinction between the two poems is that Wordsworth celebrates the continuation and renewal of nature, while Clare mourns the loss of the landscape as he had known it and presents a method for remembrance. Throughout “Tintern Abbey” Wordsworth repeats the word “again” a total of seven times as he comes across the images that he had seen five years previous, while Clare focuses on the parts missing from his scene: “for now the brook is gone,” the green is “vanish’d,” and the bushes and trees are missing as well. Clare continues writing about the bushes and trees that are missing, the beetles, a “mossed o’er stone,” and a “post” that he had been fond of. For Wordsworth the focus is on what is present, where for Clare the focus is on what is absent from the scene. This is the point where the two poems diverge. “Helpstone” becomes intensely focused on loss of a very specific location, what caused the loss, reminiscing about the nature that used to be there, and recording the scene in poetry for posterity. In contrast, Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” instead of focusing on what is lost, focuses on what remains, therefore, the speaker’s focus becomes wider and more expansive, or as M. H. Abrams writes, “meditative” (202). The speaker in “Tintern Abbey” continues examining and cherishing the scene, while at the same time musing about philosophical, ideological, and religious ideas spawned from the interaction with the natural world.⁵ Obvious examples of these musings are Wordsworth’s declaration that

nature has restorative powers and his examination of death (lines 30, 40-46). In both of these cases, Wordsworth analyzes the deeper philosophical thoughts that nature inspires and includes natural descriptions of land that is still present. The contrast between these two poems illustrates how, for Clare, loss often narrows one's focus to what was lost and what caused the loss, while, for Wordsworth, maintaining what one cherishes allows the mind to ponder endless philosophical possibilities.

The integral distinction between the way that Wordsworth and Clare present the natural world in "Helpstone" and "Tintern Abbey" rests in the fact that Clare's land was destroyed. Because of this destruction, Clare's focus becomes preservation, and he uses his writing as an act of bearing witness for what was lost. This makes Clare's writing intensely local and distinct from Wordsworth whose writing often depicts, then philosophically transcends (or what Susan J. Wolfson refers to as Wordsworth's "lofty contemplation") the location that is the subject of the poem (114).⁶ William Galperin refers to Wordsworth's descriptive scenes in "Tintern Abbey" as a "mind that half perceives and half creates," while Clare remains intensely focused on using his senses to perceive and translate those perceptions into poetry. Even though there is this distinction, between Clare's loss and Wordsworth's level of contemplation, ultimately both of them achieve similar goals in attempting to create poetry that enables the reader to reproduce the sentiment that the poems introduce. However, they accomplish this feat through distinct methods as Clare creates a testimony to parts of the natural world that have been destroyed, while Wordsworth focuses on the natural scenes that remain.

The contrast between “Tintern Abbey” and “Helpstone” elucidates the reason why much of Clare’s poetry would not comfortably fit into the *Norton* category of “Tourism and the Romantic Landscape.” First, in much of the poetry that is examined in this study, the natural scenes that were written about no longer exist. The poetic scenes serve as a remembrance of what was and a warning of what could happen to other natural spaces. Clare’s poetry is physical, local, and concentrates on the act of recording in the same manner as a natural history writer. While the other writers in this section also have many physical elements in their poetry,⁷ their main purpose is not in witnessing or warning readers about the destruction of nature. Because Clare concentrates on what was lost, the result is that his poetry has a narrower agenda than the other writers who both write about physical nature and also reach beyond it towards philosophical, political, and religious ideas as well. Of course, this is not to say that John Clare does not ever write philosophical poems more similar to some of included in the “Tourism and the Romantic Landscape section of the *Norton*.”⁸ The largest portion of Clare’s poetic oeuvre focuses on natural history rather than the broad range of subjects that the other poetry addresses.

Even more confusing about categorizing Clare’s work is that although his work does not easily fit into most Romantic categories, John Clare fits into the period because of the tendency of critics towards analyzing his life rather than his work. For instance, it is easy to Romanticize his image into that of a noble-savage-like figure because of his limited education, his lower social class, and his working in the natural world as a agricultural laborer most of his life. This image is deceiving though because he actually was very well read and self-taught. However, a more realistic portrayal of Clare would be

as a Byronic hero who was a writer in a working class community that disparaged and even feared writing and when he entered the literary community, he did not fit there because of his social status: his flaw was that he was doomed to never really fit comfortably anywhere in any social situation, so he was destined to wander about the fields of his hometown until he eventually lost his sanity and ended up in an asylum. The association with Byron is especially apt because when in the asylum he literally believed he was Byron for brief periods in the early 1840's,⁹ and he rewrote the poem "Don Juan" under this false identity. With Clare's work not fitting neatly into any Romantic genre, but his life fitting nicely, examinations of his work, until recently,¹⁰ have been heavy on biography and light on textual analysis in general.

Elements of Clare's work fit into many genres, and arguably, even multiple literary periods. His life (1793-1865) extended from the Romantic period into the Victorian period of literature, although, he was highly influenced by his immediate predecessors in the eighteenth century as well. For instance, because his main influence was James Thomson, much of his writing resembles the pastoral writing of the early eighteenth century, although in chapters five and six of this work, I argue that Clare expands on the works that influenced him in such ways that he cannot completely be categorized as a pastoral or picturesque poet. There is a lot of resemblance between Clare's work and other eighteenth century authors like George Crabbe, William Cowper, Robert Burns, James Thomson, and others, but the difference between Clare and all these writers is significant because of Clare's intense focus on precise location, natural destruction, and biological accuracy. A great deal of Clare's writing is also comparable to

Victorian works, especially his asylum poetry with dark motifs and sense of utter hopelessness.

Clare's work poses categorical problems that have not yet been reconciled. This is often challenging for critics of Clare in deciding what aspect of his work to focus on. For instance, many critics have concentrated on his enclosure poems (Johanne Clare, John Goodridge, Eric Miller), others on his asylum poetry, (Simon Kovesi, Gary Harrison), his nature poetry (James Mckusick, Bridget Keegan, John Barrell), his ballads (Eric Robinson, Margaret Grainger), and his biography (Robinson, Jonathon Bate). I have chosen to focus on one main aspect of his work: his tendency to use biologically accurate descriptions. When reading through his oeuvre, Clare wrote many notes on natural history and a large portion of his approximately nine thousand poems could be considered natural history poems, so making that the focus of my analysis was an easy decision. Most major anthologies on British Romantic literature do not recognize natural history as a major thematic strain in the period. But there was a considerable number of natural history writers during this period such as John Leonard Knapp, Gilbert White, Oliver Goldsmith, and others included in this study, even though, most of these writers' works were scattered across many anthologies.¹¹ In order to better understand this thematic strain, we must first understand the origins and development of natural history writing.

2. An Epistemological Shift in the Natural Sciences

Natural history writing is a foundational element in the formation of contemporary science, culture, and education. While the origins of natural history date

back to Aristotle,¹² there was an enormous shift in popularity and focus in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Michel Foucault writes about this shift in *The Order of Things* (1970) arguing that prior to the eighteenth century exploration of the natural world was limited to histories of plants and animals that explored physical characteristics mixed with:

[T]he virtues it was thought to possess, the legends and stories with which it had been involved, its place in heraldry, the medicaments that were concocted from its substance, the foods it provided, what the ancients recorded of it, and what travelers might have said about it. (129)

The mixture of demonstrable facts with local mythologies produced an unreliable form of natural science. Jean Jacques Rousseau writes about this shift in natural history writing in his *Letters on the Elements of Botany* (1785),¹³ arguing that nature studies needed a “reformation” in order to escape the myths spread throughout the field (10). Rousseau claimed that the problem was based in the fragmentation of the field and that a unifying classificatory system was needed to dispel the myths. Contemporary critics Alan Bewell (2004) and Mary Pratt (1992) both argue that this epistemological shift occurred because of colonialism and the discovery of a vast number of new species,¹⁴ while others such as Ralph Lutts (1990) and David Allen (1976) argue that the shift either was caused by or occurred concurrently with a popular environmental movement and the introduction of the natural sciences into school curriculum.¹⁵ Regardless of the cause of the shift, the main point is that a shift in natural history occurred and paralleled a major increase in the popularity of environmental writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁶

Throughout this period, as popularity was increasing, schools and universities throughout England began having teachers, professors and eventually entire departments based on the natural sciences.¹⁷

This shift in the direction of natural history studies from many localized, myth-based natural histories, to a more centralized universal natural history formally began with Carolus Linnaeus's books *Species Plantarum* (1753) and *Systema Naturae* (1758). While there were competing naturalists vying for their systems to become universal (J.P. Tournefort and John Ray the two most notable), Linnaeus produced binomial names using Latin roots, which proved so efficient that by the turn of the nineteenth century most prominent European scientists were using Linnaean binomial nomenclature (Allen 34-38).¹⁸ Over a similar time period, from the mid-eighteenth to mid nineteenth centuries, many European universities began teaching some form of natural history led by Linnaeus's University of Uppsala. By 1763 professors at both Cambridge and Edinburgh Universities began giving lectures on Linnaean classification (Allen 34). American Universities also began teaching the natural sciences, however, many of them were introduced as programs for women, and under the reigning patriarchy were considered less important than other subjects.¹⁹ For instance, Harvard University created courses designed for women that included the natural sciences, but omitted what were thought of as more important subjects like Greek or Latin (Butts 141). Harvard also created a professorship for natural history as early as 1728, although, it would be unrecognizable in terms of modern natural history focusing on subjects like mathematics and meteorology and not including geology, zoology, botany, or other core subjects. It would not be until

1912 that the natural sciences would be incorporated formally into core studies at Harvard University.²⁰

As classification was becoming more formalized and the natural sciences were being incorporated into school curriculum in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the popularity of the natural sciences increased and was encouraged from the highest levels of society. David Elliston Allen explains the influence of royalty in natural history studies:

[T]he accession of George III in 1760 had among its many effect... placing at the nation's head, for the brief space of just two and a half years, a trio of enthusiastic botanists. These were the Queen herself, whose interest in the science was certainly real enough to lead the King to buy her Lightfoot's herbarium as a present; the King's mother, the Princess Augusta, whose hobby of raising plants was to lay the foundations for what is now the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew; and, keenest of all, the Earl of Bute, the King's chief minister... Bute's interest in botany... extended to field-work round London, to collecting together a herbarium and a very large library of botanical book and paintings of plants, and to financing the printing of a massive new system of classification intended to rival that of Linnaeus-on the last of which he allegedly lavished the absurd sum of 12,000 (pounds). (Allen 38)

The effect of having three influential naturalists in close proximity to the King is difficult to measure beyond the material effects of large sums of money being used for

classification and the creation of elaborate gardens. However, regardless of whether or not these prominent naturalists affected the popularity of natural history, the importance of the subject in the royal family at the very least paralleled the increase in popularity of natural history throughout the kingdom.

As the natural sciences grew in regard to royalty and the highly educated, it also grew in popularity throughout other classes of English society as well. The book *Cultures of Natural History* examines the many populations within England that began taking more interest in natural history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries including working class artisans, journeymen, and laborers. Anne Secord writes about local botanical societies that began appearing in towns like Prestwich, Lancashire in the early nineteenth century that consisted of “handloom weaver[s],” “shoemakers,” journeymen, and other “working-men botanists” (380).²¹ In England, many people of the working classes that were literate grew fond of the natural sciences through the many herbal, botanical, and other basic nature-based books that were published in the eighteenth and nineteenth century like James Lee’s *Introduction to Botany* and William Paley’s *Natural Theology*.²² Many laboring class individuals who were illiterate joined botanical societies for five or sixpence a month in order to have Linnaean classification explained to them:

Those attending were required to bring plant specimens, which were randomly piled on a table before being named aloud by the president. This oral transmission was essential when some members were illiterate...

Artisans’ pub meetings not only fulfilled a didactic purpose but also

allowed the more expert botanists to accumulate information more rapidly.

(Secord 382)

The interactions between the laboring classes and those involved in education and experimentation were integral for gathering samples and information that helped both groups of individuals. The popularity of natural history and Linnaean classification was spreading through all levels of English society as well as around the world.

While natural history was growing in popularity throughout England, the amount of literature that related to natural history increased exponentially as well. Many writers incorporated distinctive forms of natural history into their poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. One of the reasons that these writers gained fame in their lifetimes was because of their dedication to presenting nature accurately and the public's hunger for writing in this genre. Writers who will be examined in this study like William Wordsworth, Charlotte Turner Smith, Gilbert White, John Clare, and James Thomson all incorporated natural history into their work. Promoting and incorporating natural history writing in their work both reflected and possibly influenced the shifts in natural science that led to the modern understanding of nature. In many distinct ways, each of these writers, and many others, influenced the modern forms of the biological sciences that continue to be the building blocks for scientific knowledge in our society.

James Thomson's *The Seasons* became the bestselling book next to the *Bible* and *Pilgrim's Progress* influencing readers across the cultural spectrum with his intricately detailed natural scenes. Many poets,²³ including John Clare, attributed their love of nature to *The Seasons*.²⁴ William Wordsworth incorporated nature into nearly all of his work

and produced a *Guide to the Lakes* that proved so popular it went through five editions in his lifetime. Eventually, guided by a career of writing nature poetry, Wordsworth became the poet laureate of England (1843-1850) and widely considered one of the most prominent poets of the first half of the nineteenth century. John Clare sold thousands of books of poetry at a time when few poets in England could sell more than a few hundred copies, proving the popularity of natural history in a poetic format.²⁵ At the same time, Clare kept detailed natural history notes where he identified sixty-five “first records” of birds (qtd. in *Clare’s Birds* xii). Charlotte Smith sold a large number of books as well (in the late eighteenth century), though, more importantly she helped to alter the direction of poetry for the next generation of poets. For instance, Wordsworth wrote of her work “Charlotte Smith [was] a lady to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be either acknowledged or remembered. She wrote ... with true feeling for rural nature, at a time when nature as not much regarded by English poets” (Poems of Wordsworth Vol. 2, 522). Smith’s work both revitalized the sonnet in English poetry and proved that biologically accurate nature poems could be both popular and well regarded. The fact that such influential writers used nature as their main subject illustrates the importance of natural history in this era.

Gilbert White’s natural history writing is so detailed and powerful that it is still highly regarded by contemporary scientists, such as ornithologist Jeffery Boswall who considers him the “father of English natural history” (254). Many famous naturalists have considered White their inspiration including the famous John Burroughs (1837-1931), who influenced Theodore Roosevelt’s natural history views. Burroughs considered White

his ideological mentor, writing that White “remembers only nature... There is never more than a twinkle of humor in his pages, and never one word of style for its own sake” (Lutts 38). At a time when Burroughs and Roosevelt were highly critical of many naturalists, they viewed White as the epitome of natural history writers because of the accuracy of his writing.

Many writers incorporated nature and natural history into their work in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The abundant number of works on this topic illustrated the influence that the changes in the natural sciences were having on public and educational thought. This early era of natural history writing played an integral part in forming the institutional study of the natural sciences and biology as currently exist. Essays, prose, and poetry all paralleled and contributed in heightening the awareness in the general public of natural history, and ultimately, in making it a foundational element of the western educational system. Through examining the natural history literature of the time, we can better understand the origins of contemporary biological science and our contemporary environmental thought. This study seeks to untangle many of the various threads of the history of natural science in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries through examination and analysis of the literature that paralleled and possibly influenced the pivotal shift in scientific thought.

3. Natural History and Natural Philosophy

The transformation from the natural sciences most prevalent in the early eighteenth century to those common in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries occurred because of many reasons including: industrialization, privatization, colonialism,²⁶

development and discovery of new species in the Americas,²⁷ American and English nationalism,²⁸ continued expansion of classification and observation, commercialization of nature writing,²⁹ new scientific theories,³⁰ and the institutionalization of the natural sciences in schools and universities.³¹ Because of the preponderance of changes occurring over a relatively short period of time, it is challenging to untangle all of the strands of environmental thought that contributed to our contemporary understanding of the interrelation of nature and science. One of the ways to understand some of these strands of thought is through the differentiation of natural philosophy and natural history.

Prior to the changes in the natural sciences in the eighteenth century, natural history served as a bridge between modern biological science and the natural philosophy of Aristotle. Natural philosophy was distinguished from natural history: the former focused more on philosophical claims, natural laws, and universals similar to the study of ethics or basic physics, whereas, natural history was more classificatory, analytic, and descriptive. Modern natural history can be divided into two categories that often overlap: analytic classification and qualitative description. The first category involves the systematic classification of the world including plants, animals, and at times, humans as well.³² This focus on classification was an integral part of the formation of our current biological studies; however, analytic classification could not have created the many current branches of the natural sciences on its own because of the importance of interrelations and dependencies within the natural world that demand a more holistic approach. The more qualitative natural history writing served an integral role in the origins of our contemporary classification system as well as serving many other purposes

that include: recording the ever-changing landscape to help future generations study how it has been altered; attempting to reconnect humankind to the natural world in an industrialized society; serving as an advocate for the natural world that appears to have no voice; and popularizing the study of nature. Together, writers and scientists who focused on analytic classification and those who focused on a more holistic descriptive approach paralleled and encouraged the development of our current form of natural science that includes both analytic taxonomy and more holistic ecological studies.

The main concentration of my study is on natural history writers who focused on description more than classification, observation over experimentation, interactions with the environment rather than separating the plant or animal from their environment, and in general, a view of the natural world that is more holistic rather than fragmented. In other words, the writers given the most attention in this work are the forbearers of what would eventually be called ecology.³³ Because of the nature of these categories, more often than not, the individuals represented here would be considered writers first and natural historians second. Because they were primarily focused on natural history, their writing was more focused on natural details and descriptions more than metaphors or philosophical meditations. Metaphors and philosophy were not completely absent from their writing, but their writing was heavily weighted with natural details.

One focus of this dissertation is to trace both natural history prose and natural history poetry. The first two chapters of this work focus on contextualizing the writing environment throughout the era where natural history studies were shifting from a more myth based system to the contemporary system. The next two chapters present natural

history prose that is exceptional, especially considering that the writers were not primarily natural scientists. Then, chapters five and six of this work present details about the lives and work of natural history poets who wrote poetry in a unique manner that was often rejected and even derided during their lifetimes as being too descriptive or not philosophical enough. Of course, what the critics of these writers missed was the fact that the realistic, biological descriptions presented by these writers produced similar fruitful results as many realist painters produced in their paintings. For example, William Wordsworth explains how nature provokes thought and inspiration in reference to the connections between running water and eternity in *Essays upon Epitaphs*, I (1810):

Never did a child stand by the side of a running stream, pondering within himself what power was the feeder of the perpetual current... he must have been inevitably propelled to follow this question by another: 'Towards what abyss is it in progress? What receptacle can contain the mighty influx?' And the spirit of the answer must have been... a receptacle without bounds or dimensions; nothing less than infinity.

(*Prose Works*, ed. Owen & Smyser, II, 51).

Wordsworth explains that as a person stands near a stream, the experience of the natural world conjures up questions about origins, life, and eternity. This sentiment suggests that because one cannot stand near a stream without conjuring up thoughts about life and the world, neither can they read detailed descriptions of natural images without having similar abstract thoughts. Therefore, for Wordsworth, descriptive poetry and the philosophical thoughts that are conjured by it are often inseparable. Because natural

description and the philosophical thoughts that it produces are inseparable, the differences between Wordsworth and Clare's work is not as great as it may seem. Wordsworth merely provides philosophy in his poetry that is more overt; whereas, Clare's philosophy often needs to be deduced from his detailed descriptions.

A second critical aspect of this dissertation is the idea that natural history writing often blurs the distinctions between humankind and the natural world. The blurring of distinctions results in questioning the anthropocentric mindset that dominates western science, education, literature, and society in general. In questioning this dominant mindset, these authors introduce a powerful empathy that helps the reader connect to the natural world. Once the basic concept of anthropocentrism is deconstructed in this way, it is much harder to systematically destroy nature for capitalistic means. Because of economic and political exploitation, natural history writing and advocacy for environmental conservation often overlap. Also, once anthropocentrism is questioned, it is easier to view the world from an ecological point of view where all living things coexist in a series of complex webs and systems, an orientation that was not formally elaborated on until the twentieth century.

Those works that resist anthropocentrism in order to view humanity and nature on more of an equal plane are integral to an understanding of natural history writing. Of course, any work that focuses on nature accomplishes some degree of integration between humanity and nature, but this dissertation seeks to find exceptional natural history works that emphatically blur the lines between nature and humanity. Many writers approached this blurring of the boundaries between humankind and the natural

world through different methods. An example comparable to others that will be examined in this work, Erasmus Darwin, in his work *Zoonomia* (1794), compares the metamorphosis of animals to that of humans. He depicts caterpillars changing into butterflies with the “feminine boy” developing into the “bearded” more masculine man. Then, he compares tadpoles changing into frogs with the “infant girl” changing into the “nascent woman”³⁴ (*Zoonomia* 2:500). At the same time, Darwin introduces England to the sexualized Linnaean taxonomic system that uses sexual metaphors in order to better understand plant diversity. For example, the concept of plant fertilization is now almost universally recognized through human (or animal) sexual metaphors such as: stamens (male organs) and pistils (female). These metaphors are completely artificial, yet now nearly completely accepted as objective and universal. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, natural philosophers and writers begin to imply that these are more than just metaphorical depictions and should be used for systematic classification because of the easiness of its application. Through Darwin’s example, and many others throughout this study, the intersection of natural philosophy, natural history, and the literary world over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries helped to shape the scientific world as we now know it.

Significantly, from the more agrarian capitalism of the eighteenth century to twenty-first century capitalism, challenging anthropocentrism has become a nearly impossible task, although, with advances in other areas of theory, there are some encouraging signs. For instance, an enormous body of feminist theoretical work has challenged and deconstructed many elements of patriarchy. The same can be said of

Marxist works that challenge capitalist, class-based texts, or postcolonial theory that breaks down imperialist texts. These advances in theory have led to advances for women, minorities, and other disenfranchised groups. Because of the success in these theoretical areas, it is encouraging that ecocritical texts share the general project of deconstructing anthropocentric texts and create a more mutually beneficial relationship between humanity and the natural world. Nevertheless, the opposition of the dominant neoliberal ideologies are powerful. The idea that humans are exceptional is the very basis for most western theology, democracy, education, lifestyle, and society. So, of course, anthropocentrism will be the most difficult idea to challenge or deconstruct and will encounter the most resistance inside and outside the field.³⁵

Another focus of this study is examining the writers who blurred the boundary lines between writer, poet, and scientist. For example, writers like Erasmus Darwin, who I would describe as a naturalist/poet; Charlotte Smith, who I would consider a poet/naturalist, John Clare, a natural history writer and poet; Gilbert White and John Leonard Knapp, natural history prose writers. These writers do not fit neatly in any category, yet their work parallels the shift in the natural sciences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Because of this, we need to further study natural history writing and establish new ways of examining and teaching these texts.

4. Theoretical Context of this Study

Many important natural history writers are missing from this study for many reasons, often arbitrarily, because the study would have been too large had I included everyone deserving of recognition in this field. For instance, I did not write any chapters

about the traditional Romantic canonical writers, such as John Keats, William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, or Percy Shelley even though they all addressed natural description in some manner. Also, not included in this study were many of the women writers of this period, such as Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Joanna Baillie, Dorothy Wordsworth, Mary Shelley, and many others. Equally left out were poets of the lower social classes that wrote nature poetry like Robert Bloomfield, William Cowper, Stephen Duck, and Robert Burns. Some of the most difficult exemptions were many American writers like John James Audubon, William Bartram, John Muir, and Henry David Thoreau.

I have focused on a small group of writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries who focused on qualitative,³⁶ local descriptions of their environment.³⁷ But this specific focus contextualizes my analyses within the broader debate about the role natural history writing plays in literature and society in general. An obvious question when reading this study would be why many of the most canonized writers of the Romantic period were not analyzed. After all, when thinking of nature poetry often the first authors who come to mind are the British Romantics. These writers wrote about nature extensively in many distinct and exciting ways, often challenging the dominant mindset of their era and the preceding era as well. Ashton Nichols, in his book *Romantic Natural Histories* (2004), wrote aptly about the paradox that many British Romantic writers faced in regards to science in general:

Romantic literature has often been discussed as though it stood in direct opposition to the scientific materialism of its age. John Keats is cited for

his claim that Isaac Newton destroyed the poetry of the rainbow, while William Blake satirizes both classical atomism and Newtonian physics. William Wordsworth criticizes those who would murder to dissect and Lord Byron poetically parodies the scientific spirit of his age... (2)

Nichols then argues that the truth is a bit more complex as most of these writers spent a lot of time experimenting and studying science:

Coleridge's notebooks and marginalia are full of reflections on experimental and observational science: zoology, chemistry, electricity, and galvanism. Percy Shelley experimented with chemicals and electric machines in his rooms at Oxford. (2)

In many ways these writers both resisted scientific materialism and also participated in it through experimentation and throughout much of their prose writing. At the same time, for the most part, they seemed to maintain a distance between their scientific practices and their poetry that was often more meditative or philosophic in nature (as previously discussed in M.H. Abrams's discussion of Wordsworth). Nichols's work, *Romantic Natural Histories* (2003), provides a lot of context and insight into natural history writing and the general scientific mindset of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Nichols's work is his definition of the Romantic natural history period of literature as primarily fitting between Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802) and Charles Darwin (1809-1882), or more specifically, the period between their major contributions, from approximately 1780 to 1859. This time period was pivotal for natural history studies and the enormity of output is astounding. While Nichols's

work is one of the closest to my study, there are some major distinctions between them as well. For instance, Nichols takes a wider view of the term natural history. Examples of his wider array of subjects include: writing on early chemistry like that of Sir Humphrey Davy, works on galvanism like that of Giovanni Aldini, multiple American authors, and the work of Charles Darwin. Because he is providing more of an overview of natural history and I am concentrating on close textual analysis, he is able to address a wider variety of subjects. Nichol's work analyzes the historical context and outlines many of the major scientific concepts. In contrast, my work focuses more on close readings of both literary and natural history works of prose and poetry in order to determine their pivotal contributions to the larger historical movement. Overall, *Romantic Natural Histories* is indispensable for providing context and a larger framework, whereas this dissertation takes a narrower focus by analyzing the actual texts in order to determine the varied perspectives of the many authors.

The work of James Mckusick has also played an integral part of understanding nature writing in the Romantic era and throughout modern history. In his book *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (2000), he writes about how the British Romantic poets were the source and inspiration of a large part of American environmentalism. In particular, he notes that Emerson, Thoreau, John Muir, and Mary Austin were all immensely influenced by their British predecessors (11). He echoes Karl Kroeber with the idea that the English Romantics were the "first full-fledged ecological writers in the Western literary tradition" (19). At the same time, Mckusick challenges the false dichotomy between "spontaneous Nature" and "cold, rational culture" suggesting that in

truth both concepts are inexorably interconnected (16). The natural connections can be most clearly found in Coleridge's theories of organicism as the relationship between humanity and nature are interwoven in a multitude of connections. Mckusick's study echoes similar themes as he analyzes early descriptions of ecology, food chains, and other more holistic scientific areas.

One important aspect of *Green Writing* is Mckusick's attention to poets who present biologically realistic scenes such as George Crabbe (1754-1832) and John Clare. Mckusick argues that both Clare and Crabbe "rehistoriciz[e] the landscape by representing it as a product of class conflict" (24). Throughout chapters five and six of my work I write about Clare's persistent advocacy for nature and focus on his mourning the loss of the land of his youth. The connection that I do not fully elaborate on, that Mckusick aptly covers, is that the characteristics of land as we know it in the twenty-first century represent a result of class conflict. There are few areas around the globe that are absent from the markings of class-conflict. The land that we regularly see all around us bears the markings of a war between public and private space, industrialization and agricultural development, war and peace, conservation and exploitation. Writers like Clare and Crabbe promote themselves as witnesses to the exploitation of the land in hopes of preserving a history of what they knew would be lost by the impending modernization of their country. My study focuses on why writers like Clare, White, and others were able to act as effective witnesses to the degradation of the land because of their intense focus on their immediate location.³⁸ Where *Green Writing* and my study differ the most is that Mckusick focuses on the more canonical writers, Wordsworth and

Coleridge, and American writers like Emerson, Thoreau, John Muir, and Mary Austin, while the writers covered in my study are generally lesser known authors. Another integral distinction between our two studies is that Mckusick's work connects the British writers to the later American writers in order to show a trajectory of nature writing, while my study is more concentrated on establishing the early nature writers as impressive early ecologists who created a positive environment for modern ecology to sprout. My study shows that the boundaries between science and literature were less rigid than in contemporary society and that this interdisciplinarity paralleled and encouraged the transformation to the contemporary form of biology, which is a mixture of analytic classificatory science (binomial nomenclature) and the more holistic descriptions (ecology).

Even more integral than Mckusick's literary criticism is the anthology that he compiled with Bridget Keegan entitled *Literature and Nature: Four Centuries of Nature Writing*. This book traces nature writing from the seventeenth century until the twentieth century. Their choice of works provides a wide variety of perspectives on nature and the way that western society's views have changed over that time. In their introduction, they explain how the term nature has changed over the four centuries they cover in the anthology and suggest that the idea of nature writing needs to expand beyond the canonical British Romantics and American Transcendentalists to some of the less prominent writers listed in this study (as well as many who were not listed) (2-3). The introductions to each century of nature writing are equally as impressive in providing a framework to understand the wide variety of texts included in their anthology.

One thing that is clear throughout Keegan and McKusick's anthology is that nearly every major writer addresses the natural world in some manner. However, quite often, the best natural history writers are not the most recognized figures of their time. For instance, in the first section on the seventeenth century most of the major authors are recognized such as Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, and others, even though they are given equal textual space with lesser-known writers like Silvester Jourdain, Izaak Walton, and Mary Rowlandson. The same selection choices appear in each of the three following sections as well. For instance in the eighteenth century Defoe, Swift, Pope, Blake, are recognized and given an equal amount of textual space as Stephen Duck, Mary Collier, Gilbert White, and William Cowper. The nineteenth century follows the same pattern as the previous two with the more prominent authors like William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and John Keats receiving as much textual space as John Clare, Robert Bloomfield, and other lesser-known poets. Significantly, John Clare was given twenty-seven pages in this section, more than any other writer except Ralph Waldo Emerson with twenty-nine. The same trend of recognizing lesser-known authors equally with the most prominent figures occurs in the twentieth century. The most obvious conclusion when examining the contents of this anthology is that compiling texts for an anthology is an inherently political act. McKusick and Keegan systematically chose the texts for this anthology in order to show the wide variety of nature writing and to give more textual space to those who wrote about nature in an exceptional, and often more realistic manner.

Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991) is another influential text in understanding where my study fits in British

Romantic ecocritical studies. The main argument in *Romantic Ecology* is that William Wordsworth was the first truly ecological poet. Of course, I do not reject the idea of Wordsworth being an ecological poet, merely the idea that he was the first. As I attempt to establish in this study, there was a long line of natural history writers who blurred the lines between their descriptions and ecology dating back well before the eighteenth centuries and arguments could be made dating all the way back to Theocritus.

The important accomplishment that Bate makes in *Romantic Ecology* is that he plays a part, along with many other critics, in saving Wordsworth's poetry from evaporating into the ether of philosophy and ideology. Bate argues that throughout much of the latter half of the twentieth century Wordsworth was mainly thought of by critics as a poet purely focused on the subjective ego and the imagination.³⁹ While Wordsworth does concentrate on these topics often, he also has a vast array of works that can be considered materialist and are grounded in the class-conflicted land described in *Green Writing*. In particular, Bate wrote, "Wordsworth sought to enable his readers better to endure or enjoy life [by] teaching them to look at and dwell in the natural world" (4). Bate traces readings of Wordsworth by Jerome McGann, Nicholas Roe, and Alan Liu (who all read Wordsworth from a different historical and political perspective) and the attempt by Hartman and Bloom to use philosophical perspectives in order to interpret the historical readings of the texts. Bate then argues that Hartman followed Paul de Man's lead in "arguing that Wordsworth sought to go beyond nature" (7).⁴⁰ Bate contends that Hartman's argument, is untenable when understanding the way that Wordsworth's contemporaries read his work. Whereas most twentieth and twenty-first century readers

view *The Prelude* as the central work of Wordsworth's oeuvre, his contemporaries (like John Ruskin) would have seen "The Excursion" as his central work, which is much more grounded and materially focused than *The Prelude* (9). This distinction is critical to understand how far modern critics have strayed from what appears to be Wordsworth's original purpose.

Bate's argument provides a contextual theory that alters the way that my study may be viewed. For example, when viewing my study in the context of the Hartman and de Man viewpoint that Wordsworth's poetry is mostly philosophical and focused on the subjective ego,⁴¹ or even the view of Abrams and Bloom who view Wordsworth as a "meditative-descriptive poet," the natural history writers that I examine would directly contrast because of their focus on materiality. However, when we view Wordsworth's writing through a more nuanced lens, like that of Bate,⁴² the writers examined in my study exemplify the more materialist part of Wordsworth's writing. Basically, when we view Wordsworth through the de Man and Hartman lens, then a separate counter-canon needs to be developed for natural history writers, and when we view him through the more nuanced Bate lens, natural history writers can be incorporated into the traditional Romantic canon. This divergence in perspective makes a huge difference in how we view the field and is one that has been and will continue to be debated. Either way, there is no doubt that the natural history writers should be incorporated more regularly as an integral part of the canon, and they need further interdisciplinary study.

William Galperin makes a similar argument as discussed above about the materiality of Wordsworth in the book *The Return of the Visible in British Romanticism*.

Galperin uses his expertise in the areas of British Romanticism and film studies to examine the connection between the “visible and the visionary” in Romantic poetry (3). The book suggests that the material (or visible) has always been present in romantic poetry; although, movements such as deconstruction and historical criticism have “repressed” the physicality of these poems (3-4). The first chapter of the book addresses the reaction of the Romantic poets against the “pictorialist” poets of the eighteenth century and the realism that they termed the “tyranny of the eye” (qt. in Galperin 19). Galperin uses Shelley, Lamb, Wordsworth, and Coleridge as examples of poets that “had suspicions regarding the world viewed as against a world of imagination” (19). However, despite the tendency of Romantic works to “staunchly resist the visible,” Romanticism has another side that represents an “unappreciated rejection of itself” based in materiality (28-9). Significantly, the tendency of Romanticism to “resist the visible” separated Romantic poetry from the paintings of the time that embraced the visible, but through artificial techniques (30). Because of this distinction, Galperin argues that Romantic poetry ended up “hav[ing] more in common with a Diorama or a photograph than with a painting” because there was less influence of the artificial descriptive techniques that dominated the paintings of the era (30).

Nichols, Bate, and Mckusick all present nuanced arguments for the importance of including nature writing in the Romantic cannon. Perhaps the most significant advancement in this movement has been the development of comprehensive ecocritical studies. A prominent writer who has contributed to the incorporation of ecocriticism into Romantic studies is Karl Kroeber. His important study, *Ecological Literary Criticism:*

Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind (1994), starts from a similar perspective as Bate, that Wordsworth is a much more complex writer than Hartman and de Man imagine, and that the deconstructionist focus on the political and historical environment of the text misses the material realities of nature in Wordsworth's poetry. Kroeber argues:

I share Bate's view that romantic 'nature poetry' is neither apolitical nor a disguise for covert ideological polemics. Poetry about nature expresses the romantic poets' deepest political commitments, the profundity of which, ironically, has been obscured by 'new historicists' dismissing romantic descriptions of nature as mere 'displacements' of unconscious political motives. This approach falsifies the romantics' most intense, original, and enduringly significant discoveries of humanity's place in the natural world. (2)

While it is important to recognize the philosophic, political, and historic realities of Wordsworth, ignoring the materialist realities of his poems neglects both Wordsworth's intentions, which can be found throughout his other writing, especially his prose, and the way he was read by his contemporaries. Kroeber argues that these material realities make Wordsworth a prominent ecological poet and should be read as such.

Because Kroeber views Wordsworth as a complex figure with political, philosophical, and material motivations in his poetry, Kroeber decides to attribute the term "proto-ecological" to Wordsworth and other canonical Romantic poets (5). He argues that Wordsworth and other Romantic poets focused on environmental "experience[s]," which innately resist the "art for art's sake" concept (14). Basically,

Kroeber focuses on the idea that Romantic poetry encouraged human interactions with nature, which necessarily has a material component, even if ultimately it produces insights into the subjective ego of the poet and reader. *Ecological Literary Criticism* contextualizes the theoretical framework from which my study presents itself. Kroeber focuses on the canonical writers, and he attempts to reverse much of the contemporary critical analysis of these poets, arguing for a materialist element to their poetry. Conversely, my study begins from the opposite perspective by seeking out the most materialist and biologically accurate writers and promoting their work for further study. This distinction appears most clearly as Kroeber writes “[i]t is not my purpose to analyze the romantic poets’ knowledge of the theoretical and practical sciences of their day.” In contrast, the main point of my work is in determining which writers were prescient scientifically, while at the same time, producing distinctive literature.

A great resource for anyone venturing into the field of ecocriticism (especially the intersection between ecocriticism and Romanticism) is Greg Garrard’s book simply entitled *Ecocriticism* (2004). One of the pivotal parts of his book connected to this dissertation is sub-headed “Romantic Pastoral: Wordsworth Versus Clare.” Garrard begins this section by examining the change in perspective that industrialization created in the general population of England, and other industrialized societies with respect for their regard (or disregard) for nature. For instance, in the early nineteenth century, there was a growth of towns and suburbs immediately outside of cities that allowed workers to have a taste of country life, while being able to work in the city. At the same time, popular movements arose in order to protect animals and an enormous body of writing

was produced that encouraged both nature and animal sentimentality. Such sentimentality towards nature was being destroyed by industrialization, but as a resistance to these powers the popularity of nature poetry arose.

Garrard analyzes the disagreements among critics whether Wordsworth was truly a nature poet or not. He writes about Jonathan Bates's work on Wordsworth, which focused on Wordsworth as a complex figure who needs to be studied from a political, historical, and more natural materialist perspective. Garrard criticizes Bates's conclusion, arguing, "Wordsworth is, on the whole, far more interested in the relationship of non-human nature to the human mind than he is in nature itself" (43). In this argument, Garrard cites examples from Book Eight of *The Prelude*, "Michael," "Poems on the Naming of Places," and "Lines Written a few miles above Tintern Abbey" to prove his argument and then refers to critical essays including "The Uses of Dorothy" by John Barrell and Marjorie Levinson's *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems* (1986). While Garrard goes to great lengths to attempt to prove this point, the argument seems merely an attempt to justify his conclusion in the second half of the section, that is, that "John Clare ... has a much better claim to be the true poet of nature" (44). Garrard bases his argument on an essay by Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) entitled "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry" (44). Basically, the argument that Garrard appropriates from Schiller is the idea that the more alienated from nature a poet is, the less realistic their perceptions will be and the more "sentimental[ity]" will enter their writing (44). Because of this idea from Schiller, Garrard determines that Wordsworth is separated from nature by his education, relative economic stability, and social class. On the other hand, Clare was not

socially stable in any sense of the term and was continuously threatened and haunted by the loss of public land. Garrard writes that Clare often wrote in “desperation” and on occasion with “hopeless rage” (48). His argument is that because of Clare’s radical proximity to the land that was being transformed, he was able to write in a manner that Wordsworth could not.

Garrard’s contribution from the section of *Ecocriticism* entitled “Romantic Pastoral: Wordsworth Versus Clare” has little to do with Wordsworth and a lot to do with Clare. The section does not push forward the conversation on the placement of Wordsworth in ecocritical studies; instead, Garrard only contextualizes Wordsworth as a major figure. However, Garrard’s description of John Clare helps the reader to understand how important Clare is in the field. Very few Romantic writers, if any, are as physically close and physically affected by the drastic changes in the landscape, and Garrard analyzes the most captivating part of Clare’s writing, when he presents intense emotions that are directly caused by the loss of this land. Clare’s writing does not just represent sentimentalism of nature; it represents the reality of nature along with the literal pain of the loss of the land. The examples of anthropomorphism that I examine in chapter six of this study portrays Clare’s representation of the pain that nature experiences from modernization, but at the same time, it echoes the dislocation that he feels as well. This pain and dislocation appears throughout his oeuvre from his young, more idealistic poetry to his poems that he wrote from the asylum that are full of pain and sense of loss. Garrard captures what I try to show throughout my study: the idea that in many ways, Clare actually feels pain because of the destruction of the natural world.

In general, then, my study is deeply indebted to the work of Nichols, Mckusick, Galperin, Bate, Kroeber, and Gerrard, as they have helped me to situate my study in the general fields of ecocritical studies of Romanticism. Each critic focuses on specific aspects of natural history, Romanticism, and ecocriticism, and they have provided a general context in which I situate my study. Because canonization is inherently political, convincing educators, critics, and textbook companies to increase their focus on natural history writers is an arduous process and the only way that it can be accomplished is through gaining popular support across the field of eighteenth and nineteenth literature studies. This can only be accomplished through an onslaught of educators and writers who make the political argument for more inclusion of natural history in the canon. That is a central focus of this dissertation.

5. General Outline

The first chapter of this study serves as a contextual and historical analysis of natural history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and establish the context for the rest of the work. In chapter two, I examine a series of letters to the editor of the *Literary Weekly* (1791) where writers argue that learning botany would be a reasonable area of study for young women. Then, a series of letters by Jean Jacques Rousseau on the elements of botany provide a secondary resource for understanding the role of women in botany as well as some background on the epistemological shift occurring in the natural sciences. After these two works on women and botany, the third work that is elucidated is an article from the *Quarterly Review* (1818) that argues against the promotion of the natural sciences in the university.

The second section of the second chapter highlights the work of Elizabeth Kent, whose work *Flora Domestica* (1823) combines elements of botany, literature, history, and language study. Kent's work provides a good transition between prose and poetry because she artfully combines the two in her book and emphasizes the authors who use biologically accurate depictions of nature. The third section of chapter two compares and contrasts the work of Erasmus Darwin with that of Charlotte Turner Smith. Each of these writers combined poetry with the natural sciences in many interesting ways. The two writers appear as interesting foils for each other's work since Darwin's work originated in the scientific world and then moved towards poetry and the literary world; in contrast, Smith's work originated in literature and gradually moved towards incorporating science. The comparison of Darwin's and Smith's works is framed by an essay from the writer John Aikin entitled "An Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry" (1777). This essay is an effective lens through which to view these two authors work because it elucidates the common theme of poetry borrowing metaphors from previous poets and disconnecting poetry, through poetic conventions, from the biological realities of the world.

The third chapter of this study investigates the natural history writing of Gilbert White and John Clare. Both writers focused intensely on their hometowns as a basis for their writing, which allowed them to intensely investigate their local natural areas as opposed to the larger, more universalized natural history writing that was prevalent in their eras. Because of the locally-rooted nature of their writing, both men felt a tremendous loss as the land of their childhood was transformed through industrialization,

agrarian capitalism, and the Enclosure Acts that closed off large swaths of land for private property that had previously been public land. The narrow focus of White's and Clare's writing allowed them to illustrate for their readers the many systems that existed throughout their localities. Illustrating these systems in detail enabled them to have a more holistic view of the natural world than many of their contemporaries and see nature as a series of what would later be termed "ecosystems." A twenty-first century reader can easily see that these writers had a prescient grasp at basic ecology.

One of the most important aspects of White's and Clare's natural history writing is that they viewed plants and animals as individual agents. They attempted to deconstruct the anthropocentric mythos dominant in their culture, and they viewed humanity as just another part of the ecosystem. One method that they used to attempt this deconstruction was to examine the language of animals. While many natural history writers of their time referred to animal language, for the most part, these writers were referring to a metaphorical language. Clare and White actually attempted to transcribe and analyze the construction and meaning of bird communication, and their work would impress many contemporary naturalists. This focus on language will be examined in greater detail in chapter four of this work.

The fourth chapter of this work seeks to examine another natural history writer, John Leonard Knapp, who wrote in a manner similar to White and Clare, however, in examining Knapp's work, which emphasized descriptive and narrative sketches, my analysis draws out different aspects of Knapp. Knapp was inspired by Gilbert White's call for naturalists to work directly in the environment rather than experiment and dissect

animals in a laboratory. Because of this call, Knapp began intensely observing his environment and writing short sketches. These sketches often were of scenes that would connect the readers with animals or insects through common themes or motivations. Examples of these common themes include parental dedication to their children, scenes that showed animals in fearful situations that his human readers could relate to, and a general theme of the enormity of the world compared to any one person or animal. In order to connect the themes from this chapter to the previous one, a comparison between Knapp and Clare illustrates that these writers had a lot in common. The major difference between Clare and Knapp was that Clare believed that animals had the ability to think, and that they possessed individuality and personal agency, whereas, Knapp believed that animals did not have these abilities. This comparison helps to explain some of the many reasons why the work of Clare was unique among natural history writers and why these writers are important to study in order to understand many of the origins of our scientific thought.

In the final section of the fourth chapter, a work by Oliver Goldsmith, *History of the Earth and Animated Nature*, is presented as a foil to the work of Clare and White. Goldsmith's work is representative of the majority of natural history writing at the time, since, following the dominant trend, he focused on classification and universal explanations of nature whose scope aimed at a large portion of the world rather than an individualized, specific locale. The stark contrast between these three writers emphasizes the importance of Clare's and White's distinctive contributions to natural history writing.

At the same time, this examination builds a basis for understanding Clare's unique role as a natural history poet that will be examined later in this work.

Chapter five begins by tracing John Clare's interactions with James Thomson's *The Seasons*. Analyzing this interaction is consequential because it inspires Clare to emphasize his local surroundings in his poetry rather than generalizations and universals. At the same time, both writers criticized poetry that used metaphors passed down from other writers rather than using their own observation and creativity. Because of this, Clare and Thomson emphasized originality through intense observation and biological accuracy. The second and third sections of chapter five examine Clare and Thomson's natural history poems or what M. H. Abrams refers to as "loco-descriptive poetry."⁴³ More specifically, this section outlines Thomson's use of the genre and then how Clare refines it. Both writers remove the philosophic element that is usually present in loco-descriptive poetry, and instead, create more biologically accurate scenes. Similar to realist painters, the poet who writes realistic scenes chooses the order and method that the images are presented to the reader. This presentation affects the way we view the world and even ourselves.

The main concentration of chapter six is on personification that creates empathy and advocates for the natural world. The first section of this chapter looks at conceptual personification in the work of John Clare and James Thomson. Both writers use the personification of concepts such as labor, liberty, nature, and many others throughout their writing. Clare and Thomson also commonly used personification for environmental advocacy, which often appeared through the use of the pathetic fallacy as a way to create

empathy for parts of the natural world that did not normally evoke empathy. The final section of chapter six presents John Clare's enclosure elegies as representative of his unique method of prosopopeia, where the narrators of the poems are a quarry and a stream. This use of prosopopeia is especially powerful as the land and water complain in stark language about harsh treatment. These poems present to the reader some of Clare's most potent imagery and language advocating for the environment.

These six chapters provide an overview of natural history prose writers and poets whose work parallels the epistemological shift in the natural sciences. Through studying their work, we can better understand how the natural sciences have become an integral part of our educational system and society. Significantly, these writers wrote about both the holistic and descriptive qualities of natural science and the analytic and classificatory elements to provide a multi-layered portrayal of the changing world they lived in. Current studies in the natural sciences include both the analytic classification of Linnaeus and the more qualitative studies of many of the other writers examined in this study. This combination of both elements of natural science help us to understand the interesting and essential advances in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that are crucial in order to understand how our society and educational system has developed and changed.

Notes

¹ Clare entered the asylum for the last twenty-seven years of his life, from 1837-1864.

² William Galperin has written often about the problems with defining the Romantic period. For instance, in his article “What Happens When Jane Austen and Frances Burney Enter the Romantic Canon,” Galperin attempts to expand the number of texts that are considered Romantic, without “turning romanticism into a meaningless category, by making it all things to all people” (377). Galperin suggests a middle path, where “the identity of romanticism so that it is ... more encompassing and commensurate with a range of cultural productions in the period generally” (377).

³ For instance, *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature: Romantic Poetry and Prose* argues, “Romanticism resists its definers, who can fix neither its characteristics nor its dates,” and categorizes by author instead of theme (3). However, despite arguing that Romanticism defies definition and even organizing the anthology by author to avoid categorization by theme, in the introduction, the authors still divide the period into several main sections: “poetry of Sensibility,” poetry that focuses on “purgatorial figures” that “demand more love and beauty than nature can give,” “Emotional Naturalism” or “return to feeling, to folk traditions, to stories of the marvelous and supernatural,” “High Romanticism” focused on “revolution,” and writing that promoted “Organicism” (4-5). Interestingly, in this division of Romantic themes that Trilling and Bloom develop, they place John Clare as a “purgatorial figure.” While this is an apt description of Clare’s Asylum poetry, it does not encompass the thematic strains over the rest of his career.

Significantly, the categories listed in the introduction do all seem to address portions of Clare's writing.

⁴ Using *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* as a basis for categorization is hugely problematic; however, because it is one of the most widely used texts in the field, it provides a good general starting point for categorization. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* has sold over eight million copies since 1962 and consistently outsells its nearest competitors *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature* and *The Heath Anthology of English Literature* (Donadio).

⁵ For instance, Wordsworth muses on the differences between rural and city life, the past and the future, nature and humanity, and many of the other dualities that exist in nature. The poem particularly focuses on the power of memory and nature to console a person during difficult times regardless of how long it has been since the individual has been apart from the natural scene.

⁶ Nicholas Roe refers to Wordsworth's technique in "Tintern Abbey" as "introspective and universalizing" (200).

⁶ This will be discussed further in the conclusion to this work while examining the work of Hartman, de Man, Bate, and others.

⁷ Actually, I would argue that Clare's "The Village Minstrel" is comparable to "The Prelude" philosophically, and one of Clare's most famous poems "I Am" challenges ideas such as personhood, eternity, and humanities role in nature as well as most poems that are considered Romantic.

⁸ Clare had many delusions throughout his asylum years (1837-1864) including thinking that he was Lord Byron, William Shakespeare, and boxer Jack Randall (Bate 415, 439).

¹⁰ A few writers that come to mind that have focused on analyzing his work more than his life are: James Mckusick, Jonathan Bate, Sarah Zimmerman, Onno Oerlemans, and many others listed throughout my study.

¹¹ I later found an anthology by James Mckusick and Bridget Keegan that best fits this genre and Ashton Nichols's study *Romantic Natural Histories* that includes many of these authors.

¹²The natural philosophy of Aristotle has little resemblance to the natural history writing of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, his writing provided the general framework from which to view the natural world. While Plato viewed the essence of living things to exist outside of natural objects, Aristotle believed that the essence was located within the living thing. Therefore, in order to understand the essence of nature, one must understand the actuality of the natural world. Because of this, his works on natural philosophy focused on what would now be termed some of the basic laws of physics and attempts at universal generalizations, as well as, categorizations of the natural world.

¹³ This will be analyzed in further detail in chapter two of this study.

¹⁴ Alan Bewell writes about this in his article "Romanticism and Colonial Natural History" from *Studies in Romanticism* in 2004. Mary Louise Pratt writes about the impact

of colonialism on natural history in her 1992 book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*.

¹⁵ While Lutts's book *The Nature Fakers* mainly focuses on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there are many references back to the origins of the contemporary environmental movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For instance, he writes about how England in the first half of the nineteenth century many "anti-vivisection" groups and societies for the "prevention of cruelty to animals" (22).

¹⁶ For instance, James Bruce's travel natural history books published in the 1770's all sold out in their original printings very quickly, one of which within thirty-six hours (Bewell). David Elliston Allen writes in his book *The Naturalist in Britain* that the number of books written on natural history increased exponentially in the late eighteenth century, especially expensive "illustrated works" that needed wealthy "patronage" (30). Allen spends an entire chapter on listing and explaining the impact of dozens of these works. He also gives numerous anecdotal quotations from booksellers that say that natural history books "sell the best of any books in England" (32). In the same general time period, natural history museums began appearing throughout England in the eighteenth century with over 250 in existence at the turn of the nineteenth century (Alberti 291).

¹⁷ Although there were a scattered few professors of natural sciences in the seventeenth century and early eighteenth century, they did not become common in English universities until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the next chapter, a

debate on the legitimacy of creating entire natural science departments will be examined further.

¹⁸ The Linnaean taxonomic system reached other parts of the world quickly in the nineteenth century including many American naturalists by mid century.

¹⁹ Robert Freeman Butts writes about this in his book on the history of Harvard University *The College Charts its Course*. He writes, “A so-called ‘Ladies Course’ was presented” that included “mathematics, natural science, literature... French, drawing” and “omitting Greek and Latin” (141). The idea that the some of the natural sciences like botany were relegated to the domain of women will be examined more closely in the next chapter.

²⁰ Butts explains that in 1912 the college changes curriculum to focus on five core fields: “Philosophy, Science of Man, Natural Science, History, and Arts and Literature” (307). Of course, many natural science courses were taught previous to this, but they were not considered a core part of the curriculum.

²¹ Secord gives interesting anecdotal stories of some of these botanical groups that would meet in pubs and would often get in trouble with law enforcement because of the connection with too much alcohol and alcohol served within the “hours of divine service” on Sundays (380).

²² Both of these books were found in John Clare’s library according to Jonathan Bate’s biography of Clare.

²³ George Sampson writes in *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* about the influence of Thomson:

The influence of Thomson was strongly felt by the younger generation of poets-by Collins, who dedicated a beautiful ode to his memory, and by Gray, in whose work reminiscences of the elder poet can be traced. One writer... who took Thomson's blank verse as a model, is William Somerville... (518)

Sampson also lists John Philips, Richard Jago, and multiple other lesser known poets.

²⁴ See Chapter Five for more information on the influence of James Thomson on John Clare.

²⁵ Sarah Zimmerman and Michael Suarez write about Clare's sales successes at a time when poetry was not selling in their article, "John Clare's Career, 'Keats's Publisher' and the Early Nineteenth-Century English Book Trade":

The 1820s was a decade for novels, rather than poetry. Peter Garside, who--with Rainer Showerling--has documented the vast extent of fiction publishing from 1800 to 1829, notes that the production of novels 'rose by more than 25 per cent in four years' between 1820 and 1824... Clare himself perceived that he was working at a time when fiction sales were marginalizing the market for poetry... Taylor himself readily acknowledged that the popular market for poetry had become a thing of the past. Writing to Clare in November 1827, he assessed the situation:

‘...All the old Poetry Buyers seem to be dead, the new Race have no Taste for it’ (377)

Zimmerman and Suarez continue writing that for the first thirty years of the nineteenth century the only books of poetry to sell high volume were by Byron, Scott, Bloomfield, and Hemans (378). Most other poets had difficulty selling book in this period like Keats who did not have a single book “reach a second edition, and all lost money” and Shelley who only had one book reach a second edition (378). Because of the fact that most poets of this time period were lucky to sell a few hundred books, Clare’s sales were phenomenal: At least five thousand copies of *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* were sold (Chilcott 92) and approximately 2,000 copies of *The Village Minstrel* that was in two volumes (Suarez and Zimmerman 380).

²⁶ Alan Bewell argues in *Romanticism and Colonial Natural History* that British colonialism led to a reexamination of the natural world because of the new natural scenes and species that explorers were discovering across the globe. Once explorers found previously undiscovered plants or animals, the process for identifying them included comparisons with European species. Therefore, colonialism both yielded the discovery of new species and also the reexamination of species that were already present.

²⁷ See *Changing Scenes in the Natural Sciences, 1776-1976: Academy of Natural Sciences* for more information on how natural discoveries in the Americas led to the popularization and institutionalization of the natural sciences both in the Americas and across Europe.

²⁸ In her book, *The Eagle's Nest: Natural History and American Ideas, 1812-1842*,

Charlotte Porter argues that there was a tendency of Europeans to view American plants and animals as inferior versions of similar species found in Europe. She writes about how many Americans, most prominently Thomas Jefferson, developed a passion for proving their European counterparts wrong. Of course, the American naturalists were often successful as many of the species found in America could not be found in Europe and many of those that could were not inferior.

²⁹ See Ralph H. Lutts's book *The Nature Fakers* for more information about the increased popularity of nature writing in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in America and Europe.

³⁰ For instance, Charles Lyell's three volume *Principles of Geology* (1830-3) popularized uniformitarianism, which argues that changes in geology mostly occurred in minor minute variations that occur in the millions over many millennia. By the time Charles Darwin described transmutation and evolution in his *Origin of the Species*, uniformitarianism was commonly agreed upon by most of the scientific community (Slotten).

³¹ See chapter two of this work for more information about the rise of the natural sciences in English Universities.

³² Many early classification systems, including the Linnaean system, attempted to classify humans hierarchically according to race. For instance, Linnaeus divided humans into the categories: Africanus, Americanus, Asiaticus, Europeanus, and Monstrosus. Obviously,

we now understand that this classification is problematic because it is genetically inaccurate, as humans of different races often have a closer genetic makeup than those of the same race, but also because hierarchical categorization can reinforce racial stereotypes and possibly lead to horrific concepts such as eugenics.

³³ It is important to note that the tracing of natural history writing and poetry is distinctly different than William Gilpin's vision of the picturesque. While these writers do write about beauty, and perhaps at times verge on the sublime manner of the picturesque, the vast majority of their work concentrates on the intricate realities of the natural world surrounding them. Insofar as the sublime is reached, it would necessarily be as a result of the reader's interaction with the writing, not contained within. For instance, multiple writers give intricate details of bird's nests or communities of ants, which the reader may view as an incredible vision of the world, but the main purpose of the writing was to observe and catalogue in an artful manner, not to glorify. So, while the natural history writers may at time present similar themes as a writer of the picturesque, in reality, there is a vast difference between the ways that they write. This is not to say that none of these writers' work ever uses the picturesque, merely that their natural history writing is distinct from their picturesque writing. For instance, Timothy Brownlow wrote the book *John Clare and Picturesque Landscape* describing John Clare's use of the picturesque that, I argue, is distinct from his natural history writing, although they do often overlap.

³⁴ These connections between humankind and the animal world bring Darwin in his work *The Temple of Nature* to conclude: "The sum total of the happiness of organized nature is

probably increased rather than diminished, when once large old animal dies, and is converted into many thousand young ones; which are produced or supported with their numerous progeny by the same organic matter” (162). In other words, he establishes well ahead of the scientific thought of his time that the organic matter from previous life begets new life through centuries of decomposition and new growth.

³⁵ Recent studies by Patrick Murphy, Carolyn Merchant, Donna Haraway and other critics have all contributed to questioning anthropomorphism.

³⁶ The exclusion to this category is James Thomson, who was included because of his influence on the work of John Clare.

³⁷ One exception to this was Oliver Goldsmith, who was included to contrast the work of John Leonard Knapp and John Clare in chapter two.

³⁸ Crabbe is another writer that could have been focused on in this study, but was left out because of space.

³⁹ See endnote 43 for M. H. Abrams description of Wordsworth as a “meditative” poet.

⁴⁰ This is similar to Abrams claim that Wordsworth’s poetry was “meditative.”

⁴¹ I would agree with Bate that de Man does make this argument about Wordsworth’s poetry; however, Hartman’s analysis of Wordsworth is a bit more nuanced.

⁴² There are many critics that view Wordsworth from a more mixed or materialist viewpoint.

⁴³ In his famous essay “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric,” M. H. Abrams writes about the “loco-descriptive” or “topographical” poetry that rose to

prominence throughout the eighteenth century (212). Abrams lists examples of this kind of poetry that include: John Denham's "Cooper's Hill," John Dyer's "Grongar's Hill," Thomas Grey's "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College," and others. Abrams argues that nature poetry from Wordsworth, Keats, Coleridge, and other Romantics differs from the loco-descriptive poetry of the previous century by being more "meditative" (202).

CHAPTER II: FROM BOTANY TO POETRY: ELIZABETH KENT, JOHN CLARE, ERASMUS DARWIN, AND JOHN AIKIN

The natural sciences are currently held in high esteem in universities,¹ museums, and society in general, but this was not always the case.² Indeed, since the late nineteenth century, the sciences have provided an exemplary model for the disciplinary organization of the university. However, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many areas that are now considered natural science were viewed as hobbies or secondary areas of study rather than academic pursuits. Fields such as botany, zoology, and many other subjects were often demeaned as pursuits only worthy of women, the lower classes, or hobbies. Throughout this time period, there was debate on the status of these sciences and many respected members of society attempted to legitimize these fields, such as the members of the Linnaean Society, but the fields were not generally considered on the same level as philology, math, the classical languages, philosophy, and theology. The implications of this castigation of the natural sciences resulted in an abundance of popular literature, essays, and other writings on the subject.

In order to better understand and contextualize the relationship between literature and the natural sciences, this chapter will examine the field of botany and a group of writers that argued the subject should have a more prominent position in society. In particular, the texts that will be examined are Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Letters on the Elements of Botany: Addressed to a Lady* (1785), a series of letters to the editor of the *Literary Weekly Intelligencer* (1791), and a debate in the *Quarterly Review* (1818) about the place of the natural sciences in Cambridge University and education in general. This

framework will enable us to better understand the social, political, and educational factors that enabled natural history writers to rise to prominence and affect both social and institutional change in society. The final section of this chapter will examine two natural history poets, Charlotte Smith and Erasmus Darwin, who rose to prominence because of the natural history fervor that developed out of the social environment examined in the first two sections. In both examining the historical context and the work that arose out of that context, the reason that recognition of natural history poetry as an important aspect of Romanticism, science, and the need for interdisciplinarity between literature and science will become clear.

1. Botany and Natural History as a Respected Pursuit

In the “Introduction” to Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Letters on the Elements of Botany: Addressed to a Lady*, the author addresses what he views as the “misfortune[s]” of the subject of botany (1). The first problem that he identifies is that “from its very birth it has been looked upon merely as a part of medicine” (1). This perspective is problematic because it led to a field of study based on use-value rather than the study of the plants themselves, which limited the knowledge that was able to be gained about plants and made classification challenging. This limitation led to every “neighborhood” giving random names and values to the plants that were native to that area. Basically, the study of plants became fragmented and the individual plants found in a community were often thought of as a “universal panacea,” which gained many superstitious or mystical properties (2).

Rousseau argued that the biggest problem inherent in the study of botany was unraveling the superstitions and fragmentation surrounding the early era of plant study. He then emphasized the scope of this problem writing, “[i]t would have been all over with Botany if this practice had continued,” and that in order to save this field a “reformation” needed to occur (Rousseau 10). This reformation in the field of botany emphasized the fluidity of scientific study and the need for consistent reevaluation of the field both by scientists and outside observers (natural history writers and others) in order to maintain its efficiency and purpose. Rousseau traces the movement from the localized and superstition-laden thought still prevalent throughout his lifetime to a more universalized classification system (introduced by Linnaeus and others) that helped remove superstition and introduce a level of objectivity.

The introduction of a standard, Latinized, binomial, classification system revolutionized the natural sciences. At the same time, for all of the positive aspects that formalized classification introduced to the natural sciences, it also introduced many challenges. The universalized system tended to emphasize objectivity, distance (examination of organic material in a laboratory rather than in its own environment), and species-level characteristics, all of which deemphasized individual differences in local environments. Because of the biological reformation outlined by Rousseau, many natural history writers of the period consistently wrote about their local environments to provide a counter-balance to the more classification-based movements. The result of the reformation and the counter movements created a hybrid version of the natural sciences

that includes both binomial classification as well as more holistic ecological studies, both of which persist to varying degrees in contemporary biological studies.

In order to understand the entire context of Rousseau's *Letters on the Elements*, it is important to examine the sexist elements that appear throughout the text. This is significant because he relegated the field to the domain of women, which was a common sentiment in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Matter of fact, the main purpose of these letters was to demystify the Latinized field of botany for his cousin's young daughter:

[N]othing is more pedantic or ridiculous, when a woman, or one of those men who resemble women, are asking you the name of an herb or flower in a garden, than to be under the necessity of answering by a long file of Latin words that have the appearance of magical incantation; an inconvenience [sic] sufficient to deter such frivolous persons from a charming study offered with so pedantic an apparatus. (13)

The blatant sexism may appear shocking to the modern reader as Rousseau makes the bold assertion that women and "men who resemble women," both of whom he calls "frivolous persons," could not possibly understand the Latinized field. As sexist as these statements are, it explains the overall purpose of the work, to translate the complexity of the field for those who he believes would not understand. Through these actions, Rousseau is inadvertently exposing the stratification that appeared throughout the natural sciences in gender, class, and education by suggesting that botany should be in the domain of women, but the language primarily used was the language commonly used by

upper class, highly educated males. He then continues this reasoning as he explains that it is a worthy pursuit because it will keep his cousin's daughter from other "frivolous amusements" that could get her in trouble and it will keep the "tumult of [her] passions" in check. Basically, Rousseau argues that botany is a great hobby to keep young women out of trouble and from becoming sexualized beings. This perspective is important to consider, especially in terms of the growth of interest in botany among the lower classes and women at this period in history.³

The sexism inherent in Rousseau's collection of letters is significant as we move to the middle of the work where Rousseau begins to belittle the field of botany as a whole:

You must not, my dear friend, give more importance to Botany than it really has; it is a study of pure curiosity, [sic] and has no other real use than that which a thinking, sensible being may deduce from the observation of nature and the wonders of the universe. (72)

This sentiment that botany is mere observation and memorization is then repeated towards the end of the book, as Rousseau writes that he hopes that he has not "already imbibed a greater passion for botany than I wish you to have" to his cousin (Rousseau 486). This criticism was common of the natural sciences and conflicts with contemporary notions of biological sciences that involve a high level of critical thinking skills. After reading Rousseau's criticism of botany, it appears contradictory that he would write hundreds of pages outlining the process of classification to his cousin's daughter if it was truly of no consequence. However, he was addressing what he viewed as a dichotomy

between what botany should be used for and how it was being used at that time. In the next paragraph he reminds the reader why these beliefs are not contradictory, explaining that he hopes that botany will teach her “cheerfulness, regularity, and temperance” (487). In other words, botany is not a field of serious study that requires critical thought; instead, it is a hobby that can be relaxing, teach patience, and help a young woman stay away from physical temptations. Rousseau views botany as a subject that is in the realm of women and that men can dabble in for hobby or relaxation, but it does not require the higher thinking of other subjects like math, the classics, or philology. This belief is a direct contradiction to the way natural sciences are viewed in contemporary society as subjects that require intelligence, critical thinking, and creativity.⁴

Rousseau’s sentiments on the natural sciences and botany were considered quite normal at this point in history, as there was a tendency to want women to have only a limited level of education. It was important that they did not become too educated or they would be considered unsuitable for marriage. This sentiment appears throughout the magazines and journals of the time, for instance, an example appears in the *Bee, or Literary Weekly Intelligencer* from June to August of 1791, in a series of letters entitled “Sophia’s Letters to the Editor of the Bee, on the Subject of the Education of Young Ladies.” In a letter dated July sixth, 1791, the author, only identified as Sophia, writes:

I hope you will not take it amiss, if I tell you, that I think giving young ladies a learned education very preposterous, and may hereafter give you and my brother much uneasiness... [F]illing their mind with a smattering of learning, you will render them pedantic, troublesome, precieuses [sic],

disagreeable to the women, and troublesome to the men by their pretensions to superior knowledge. (313)

The article continues, arguing that readers should follow the author's prescription for educating young women, writing that although she thinks that even a "smattering of learning would be injurious to my daughters," and that she has developed a mode of education that would not be as threatening.⁵ This prescription for learning includes botany, along with "music, poetry, needlework" and other "amusements," which she considers safe and suitable, perhaps because of male writers like Rousseau who have deemed the field mere memorization and not involving higher thinking ("Sophia's Letters" 314). In order to persuade her male readership that this education is not a threat to men or society in general, she uses her daughter Alatheia as an example of a woman who after receiving education is "honourably and happily married" and that "nobody ever hears her prattle about science" ("Sophia's Letters" 316). The word play in these letters is notable because on the surface it is demeaning to women and disturbing to the contemporary reader. However, on a deeper level, the author is purposefully entering the dominant masculine discourse and attempting to subtly undermine the argument that women should not engage in education at all by convincing the readers that some education is not dangerous to patriarchal society. Sophia suggested that there were many subjects that were non-threatening, especially botany. Because of this, authors who were rural laborers, such as John Clare, Robert Bloomfield, and many others were able to participate in the dominant discourse in a non-threatening manner through botany and the natural sciences, which were considered acceptable subjects of study for all groups of

people.⁶ Because the natural sciences were widely viewed as amusements rather than serious fields of enquiry, an enormous number of authors from varied backgrounds wrote books, articles, essays, and poems in a wide variety of publications that encouraged and engaged a public sentiment that enabled the study of natural sciences to gain momentum.⁷

In an earlier letter to the magazine, Sophia makes her motivation clear as she writes that one of her main goals is to debunk “Dean Swift’s famous letter to a young lady on her marriage,” where he writes “women are incapable of becoming truly and logically learned, or of applying the fruits of study to the useful purposes of society” (“Sophia’s Letters” 226). Sophia’s response to Swift’s statement is that his sentiments have led to the “barbarous education of women in all ages as playthings” (226). In fact, she reverses the dominant idea that education causes women to have negative traits, by insisting that the opposite is true:

The faults that have been uniformly ascribed to our sex, as arising from the feebleness of our frame, our attachment to sensual pleasures in preference to those of the understanding, superstition, bigotry in religion, love of admiration directed to our personal charms only, impatience of contradiction, inability to give reasons for our moral or political conduct, attachment to the splendor of dress, excessive curiosity to discover secrets, and excessive desire of prying into the trifling business of our acquaintance... All these faults, Sir, are evidently the consequence of the want of substantial knowledge acquired by regular education, and are equally incident to ill educated men. (227)

Sophia reverses some of the arguments made by male writers against women attaining an education in this passage. Whereas, all of the personality traits that male writers argued were the result of education, Sophia insists that these traits come when women are not educated properly and that the same traits can be found in men that are not educated. If she only made this argument, it most likely would not have been viewed as acceptable, however, she then listed many areas where women could be educated without it being considered a threat to the patriarchal society, such as botany, needlework, poetry, and music, so her proposal became less frightening to the readers.⁸

As the discussion of women's education and botany appeared in letters and popular magazines, it was also occurring in more formal areas as well. For instance, many universities were attempting to determine how to incorporate the natural sciences into their curriculum and faculty structure. Botany was particularly a source of debate because of the kinds of arguments made by scholars like Rousseau. Should a subject that many believed was based on rote memorization have a chair of their own? An important discussion on this topic can be found in the *Quarterly Review* from July of 1818 as Cambridge University was discussing whether or not to have a chair of botanical studies:

The distinguished attainments which have deservedly placed Sir James at the head of the Linnaean Society are too well known to need the tribute of our acknowledgment. Nor are we disposed to deny to his favourite science that degree of consideration and respect which its intrinsic importance deserves. But neither do the talents or acquirements of any individual, however undisputed, justify unqualified self-recommendation; nor can any

pursuit, which demands so little exertion of the higher powers of intellect such as botany, justly claim that pre-eminent rank, which properly belongs to the nobler exercises of human reason. (*Quarterly Review* 433)

The author presents a powerful critique writing that botany requires “little exertion of higher powers of intellect” and does not belong with “nobler exercises.” This argument suggests that the branches of natural science are “useful” and require talent; although, he argues that an “extremely good botanist” only has a “moderate portion of intellect” and that he or she could never be a true professor or scholar. Considering that the natural sciences now hold a prominent place in the university and that scientists are viewed as highly intelligent members of society, this change in perspective depicts the epistemological shift that occurred in the recognition of natural science as a major field of critical enquiry.

The author then continues the argument against creating room for natural science professors, and in doing so, attempts to define the purpose of education:

[A]ccordingly, the world in general thinks more highly, and with justice, of those who have arrived at eminence in these departments of literature, than of one who can run through the whole nomenclature of Tournefort or Linnaeus... The great object of education is to discipline the mind, and to fortify its powers; to strengthen and improve its faculties by exercising them upon those objects which are best calculated to sharpen them by difficulty... We are therefore inclined to think that our universities do

right, in limiting the *essential* studies of their youth to a few of the most important branches of learning... (*Quarterly Review* 433)

The author argues that classical literature, philology, rhetoric and math fit better with the mission of the university than botany and what would later be termed biological classification. His argument is based on Rousseau's idea that botany is based on memorization and does not involve higher critical thinking skills. This castigation of botany and biological classification by scholars and universities created an opportunity for the general public to take the lead in the examination and elucidation of this field and produced an abundance of popular literature based on the biological sciences. The discussion is further narrowed to define what is considered the proper areas of study in the university and what is not in a quote from Professor Monk, who is presented as an authority on this subject:

It is impossible to assent to the propriety of botany becoming a primary pursuit among the youth of our university. The regular and established objects of study are the classics, the mathematics, and natural philosophy, a competent portion of metaphysic, and such an elementary knowledge of Divinity... It has been decided by long experience, that these studies supply the best and surest mode of forming the taste and cultivating the mind, during the most important season of life, of strengthening the reasoning and other faculties, particularly that of memory, of generating correct and liberal habits of thinking, and of storing the mind with valuable knowledge. They are, accordingly, the primary subjects of

academical instruction and to proficiency in them, the rewards and honours in place, in their gradations are attached. I consider the studies of chemistry, anatomy, mineralogy and botany, as useful, though subordinate, objects of attention... (*Quarterly Review* 434)

This explanation of the subjects that “cultivat[e] the mind” would be strikingly different from the mission of most modern universities. Professor Monk takes a strongly worded stand here writing that it would be “impossible to assent” to botany becoming a widely studied field in the university. Along with botany, he includes “chemistry, anatomy” and “mineralogy” as “subordinate” subjects that do not require the higher faculties of the mind. This view of the natural sciences as subordinate is in stark contrast to contemporary academia and the current societal view of the natural sciences.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were full of much discussion concerning the place of the natural sciences in literature, poetry, the university, and society in general. Because of this debate, and the often-made conclusion that many people did not consider the natural sciences a serious area of study, it created an opening for the general public to more easily engage in these areas without appearing to be much of a threat to the status quo. This opening allowed previously disenfranchised groups to gain an education, become prominent parts of the discourse, and begin to confront the gender and class boundaries of the stratified society. The emergence of this new class of natural science writers and scholars provided opportunities for many talented people that would not have been recognized otherwise. Elizabeth Kent, Gilbert White, John Leonard Knapp, John Clare, and Charlotte Smith are just a few examples of writers who may not have

been recognized to the degree they had been if it were not for the opening provided through the relegation of the natural sciences to a minor status.

The scholars and writers who consigned these fields to minor status did not usually mean to create this opening, and indeed, probably would have acted differently if they had known, but their derisive treatment of these fields created opportunities for writers that were waiting for them and an eager reading public. Also, it is important to note that writers like Sophia from the *Literary Weekly Intelligencer* bravely confronted blatant sexism in the best way that they could by encouraging biological study and subtly began disintegrating the boundaries placed before them. Then, writers like Kent, Clare, White, and Smith took advantage of these opportunities and proved that they were worthy of their recognition both as writers and minor naturalists. At the same time, they also helped to legitimize fields that are now considered foundational subjects in most present day colleges, universities, and by society in general.

2. John Clare and Elizabeth Kent: From Botany to Poetry

In a study of natural history writing Elizabeth Kent is an unusual addition. The sister-in-law of Leigh Hunt, she was an established writer and excelled at botany; however, she was not a naturalist in the sense of the term that will be examined in the following chapters. Her most famous book, *Flora Domestica*, (1823) is a guide and history of planted flowers and not a book on natural history writing like Gilbert White's *Natural History*, where he called for writers to record the Earth's natural occurrences. However, Elizabeth Kent's work provides a great bridge between the debates on natural history in the first part of this chapter, and understanding the importance of the natural

history writing and poetry in the following chapters. Her love of nature, especially flowers, allowed her to appreciate poetry in a way that differs from other writers and critics of poetry.

Throughout her work, Kent couples entries on different flowers with their Latinized names, the history of the name, a cultural context, and a list of multiple poets who have referred to the specific flowers in their poetry. She often included quotes from the poetry or entire poems in the entries. Kent included a large selection of John Clare's poetry, because she appreciated biologically accurate poems over poetry that uses flowers only metaphorically or symbolically. At the same time, she praises Clare for challenging established biological hierarchies, especially his contesting of which plants are viewed as nuisances (or weeds), and which are viewed as valuable by society.

One significant aspect of Kent's *Flora Domestica* is the vast range of material that she addresses from literature, history, botany, and other areas. Throughout this work, she emphasizes how important flowers are in many different societies' traditions, literature, and daily lives. For instance, as far as traditions, she notes that every country has an official flower and floral emblem (xxvi), and that they are used at funerals⁹ and festivals.¹⁰ At the same time, she writes about how the flowers have more than a decorative purpose, that many of them are integral resources for humans. In regards to plants utility, Kent writes about plants being used to detect time,¹¹ predict weather,¹² and for many medicinal uses. For example, she lists the many benefits of the aloe plant from multiple sources including Linnaeus,¹³ the *Bible*,¹⁴ other sources, as well as, the spectacle

of the plant itself (7-9).¹⁵ One of the most obvious uses for plants is providing human sustenance,¹⁶ which Kent addresses throughout her book.

In reference to the importance of flowers to literature, Kent quotes from and analyzes the work of many writers, including Ben Jonson, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, Virgil, Drayton, Dryden, Thomson, Cowper, Wordsworth, Byron, Hunt, Keats, Scott, Montgomery, Cornwall, and Clare. One of the reasons Kent covered so much ground was in order to prove herself as an established and a serious writer, especially in the field of botany that was often denigrated. Because botany was often belittled and Kent was trying to establish the importance of biological accuracy, she wrote an exhaustive study in order to gain prominence and respect as an author and for the field. This is in stark contrast to John Clare's presentation of himself, who had the moniker "The Peasant Poet": in the opening pages of his first book, he asked the reader to take his station in life into account as they read his work, which he consistently referred to as simplistic, explicitly using sympathy to garner attention.

Kent's work is especially important because she provides all of the extensive information listed above and intersperses appropriate poetry in each section of her work connecting botany directly to poetry. She was dedicated to her work, and it took a long time to compile all this information and find poems that matched her descriptions and histories. Kent explains the reason why she chose to intersperse poetry with the origins of plants, instructions for their care and other facts:

If flowers have so much beauty in common eyes, what must they be in the eye of a poet, which gives new charms to every object on which it gazes!

A poet sees in a flower not only its form and colour, and the shadowing of its verdant foliage—his eye rests upon the dew-drop that trembles on the leaf; a gleam of sunshine darts across, and gives it the sparkling brilliancy of a diamond. He sees the bee hovering around, buzzing its joyous anticipation of the honey he shall draw from its very heart; and the delicate butterfly suspended as it were by magic from its silken petals. His imagination, too, brings around it a world of associations, adding beauty and interest to the object actually before his eye. (Kent xxviii)

In this passage, she defines poetry as a magnifying lens for objects that are already beautiful, portraying aspects of nature that are nearly invisible to the individual viewer and then using imagination and associations to “add beauty and interest” to the scene. This is a powerful definition that emphasizes biological accuracy and intense observation, which explains why Clare, who was particularly talented in biologically accurate description, is one of the most quoted poets in the volume.

One writing technique that Kent used throughout *Flora Domestica*, is that she anthropomorphized plants and flowers. However, this anthropomorphizing is different in her work than what we will examine in the following chapters on Gilbert White or John Clare because she does not believe that the plants and animals actually have individual personal agency. Instead, she uses personification in order to garner empathy for plants that she cares deeply about. Clare and White actually viewed plants and animals as near equals, while Kent just tremendously appreciated plant life. Early in her preface she referred to herself as a “fond and mistaken mother” of plants and that because of the

guide to the care of plants that she is writing, that “henceforward the death of any plant, owing to the carelessness or ignorance of its nurse, shall be brought in, at the best, as plant-slaughter” (Kent xiii). Her emotional connection with plants leads her to equate the murder of a human to the killing of a plant, yet at the same time, it is clear that this is only a metaphorical comparison not an argument for biological individuality.

In her first reference to Clare, Kent writes about the metaphorical language that flowers have for many poets and especially Wordsworth, Chaucer, and Clare:

And flowers do speak a language, a clear and intelligible language: ask Mr. Wordsworth, for to him they have spoken, until they excited ‘thoughts that lie too deep for tears;’ ask Chaucer, for he held companionship with them in the meadows; ask any of the poets, ancient or modern... None have better understood the language of flowers than the simple-minded peasant-poet, Clare, whose volumes are like a beautiful country, diversified with woods, meadows, heaths, and flower-gardens. (Kent xxi-xxii)

Kent praises all three poets, but she argued that the diversity of plant-life in Clare’s poems put him in a different category than other poets. The metaphor of the language of flowers is especially noteworthy from an ecocritical perspective because Kent’s suggestion is that Clare understands the inner workings of nature better than other poets. While this is an arguable statement, it does emphasize the unique nature of Clare’s work. Kent praises the difference in sensibility between Clare and other poets because he

attempts to defy literary traditions by trying to represent nature as biologically accurate as possible and resists previous poetic descriptions of these flowers.

Next, Kent quotes Clare directly from his poem “Cowper Green,” writing about violets, cowslips, and daisies and many other flowers, herbs, and weeds:

Cowslips on thee dare to drop; / Still does nature yearly bring / Fairest
heralds of the spring: / On thy wood's warm sunny side / Primrose blooms
in all its pride; / Violets carpet all thy bowers; / And anemone's weeping
flowers, / Dyed in winter's snow and rime, / Constant to their early time, /
White the leaf-strewn ground again, / And make each wood a garden then.

(Lines 76-86)

In this section of “Cowper Green,” Clare writes about the coming of spring with a wide variety of plant-life. First he writes of cowslips, which he declares are the “fairest” flowers of the spring. Despite the plant’s useful medical reputation,¹⁷ for farmers, it was considered an “injurious weed” (Kent 107).¹⁸ The second flower mentioned in the poem is the close relative of the cowslip, the primrose. Interestingly, the primrose is just as injurious to crops, yet because it has a more pleasant smell it is not traditionally viewed as a weed (Knight 172). However, multiple books from the nineteenth century refer to the primrose as a flower of the lower classes and that it is “seldom worn by the fair,” except for those that are smitten with “swains,” which was a term generally used to imply a male servant or person of the lower classes (Knight 171). After the primrose, Clare refers to violets, which Elizabeth Kent claims is the most famous flower among poets with the exception of the rose (Kent 442). The violet was considered an emblem of faithfulness

and much more respected than the cowslip or primrose. Finally, in this section of the poem, he inserts the widely praised anemone, which could be found in most gardens of the wealthy in England at this time (Kent 23). Anemones were originally from the East and often viewed as exotic Orientalist trophies for the wealthier classes.

The beginning of “Cowper Green” traces these four flowers in order of how they were cherished by Clare. Clare presents the cowslip as the “fairest,” the primrose blooming in “pride,” while the violets merely “carpet” the ground and the anemones are “weeping.” It is clear from the order of the flowers and adjectives that Clare uses that he was challenging the established hierarchies of flowers in English society and literature. Clare often referred to the cowslip throughout his oeuvre and yet it is most commonly referred to as a destructive weed. In comparison, the most common poetic flower, the rose, makes very few appearances in his oeuvre and flowers like anemones and violets are much less common than the cowslip or primrose. Clare’s challenging of botanical hierarchies and resistance to literary tradition attracted Kent to Clare and was one of the major reasons that she often preferred him to the other major poetic figures in English history.

As “Cowper Green” continues, Clare praises dandelions, which are often thought of as destructive weeds, comparing them to the “sun” and praises harebells that are considered wild flowers as well (87-89). Wild flowers are the most referenced flowers in the poem like “cuckoo flowers,” “wild woad” (a common weed), and “mullein” (90-93). Clare writes that he “love[d]” the horehound herb, which throughout the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries were demeaned in nature guides, for instance, James Drummond writes:

[It] is sometimes called the *gypsy-herb*, 'because those strolling cheats called *gypsies* do dye themselves of a blackish hue with the juice of this plant, the better to pass for *Africans*, by their tanned looks, and swarthy hides, to bubble the credulous and ignorant by the practice of Magick [sic], and Fortune-telling, they being indeed a sink of all nations, living by rapine, filching, pilfering, and imposture.' (Drummond 240)

Despite the common derision of the horehound and other wild flowers, Clare praised them all, writing "the flowers of waste, / Planted here in nature's haste, / Display to the discerning eye / Her loved wild variety" (Lines 94-8). Throughout this poem, and his poetic oeuvre in general, wild flowers and weeds are viewed as more beautiful, because of their wildness, so Clare defies the traditional botanical hierarchy of society. More importantly, he defies poetic conventions and literary history by praising these plants more than their counterparts that are normally praised more often.

After quoting "Cowper Green," Kent selects another passage that shows Clare urging other poets to follow his example and cherish wild flowers and weeds, writing "Still thou ought'st to have thy meed, / To show thy flower, as well as weed," suggesting that weeds are equal to what are considered flowers. Next, she writes more about Clare's affinity for wild flowers, writing "[t]he King-cup is frequently introduced in Clare's poems; he delights in celebrating wild flowers. It is a curious fact, that notwithstanding the polished beauty of garden flowers, poetry generally prefers to celebrate the wild"

(Kent 351). Kent uses Clare as an example throughout this work because of Clare's view on plants and flowers that she deems unique. Given the vast number of authors she quotes in this book, as well as the many other resources, it is impressive that she dedicates over twenty-two pages to his work and often refers to Clare as the poet who best understands nature.¹⁹ Another reason that she quotes the work of Clare is that she claims that his poetry is densely filled with flowers and plant-life, writing "[t]he poems of Clare are as thickly strewn with Primroses as the woods themselves" (Kent 346). One important note to keep in mind is that Kent did not have access to Clare's entire oeuvre; in fact, she most likely had access to less than one-fifth of his entire output.²⁰ Kent's excessive appreciation of Clare showed how unique his work was among his peers.

As previously discussed, one of the major elements of Clare's writing that Kent was fascinated with was resistance to established hierarchies, in this case, between garden or floral flowers and those that are considered wild or weeds. She refers to this often in her book, and indeed, throughout Clare's natural history writing and poetry. Clare continually deconstructs the difference between these two arbitrarily defined distinctions in plant-life throughout his work. An example of this deconstruction appears in a poem, entitled "To An Insignificant Flower, Obscurely Blooming in a Lonely Wild," from Clare's book *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* that personifies individual plants in order to blur the lines between wild flowers and garden flowers. At the same time, this poem, like many of his other poems, uses the speaker's identification with a flower to challenge artificial divisions between humans and plants, while unsettling the binary between what societies often refer to as weeds and what are considered garden

flowers. In this case, the speaker begins the poem identifying with the auditor of the poem, the “weedling,” writing that it is “wild and neglected like to me, / [t]hou still art dear to Nature’s child / and I will stoop to notice thee” (Lines 1-4). The speaker continues this comparison by explaining that they both wear “humble garb” and that the “weed” is “as sweet as garden-flowers can be” (Lines 5-6). This comparison was especially powerful to his reading public, who were asked to consider Clare’s meager means and station as they read the book.²¹ Clare was therefore asking them to expand the empathy that they felt for the author to the wild flowers that he described through his text.

Clare attempted to connect this empathy to the wild flower that he cherished in hopes that the general public might begin to appreciate these flowers as much as he did. This connection is obvious in that in this short, thirty-line poem, he compares both himself and his daughter to a weed or wild flower directly fourteen times. Clare rhythmically repeats the phrase “like to thee” continuously to reinforce the comparison and the deconstruction of weeds as being seen as useless or a nuisance. Finally, in the powerful ending to this poem, he writes of his death: “Yet when I’m dead, let’s hope I have / Some friend in store, as I’m to thee, / That will find out my lowly grave, / And heave a sigh to notice me” (Lines 26-30). Clare, at this point, foresees dying without gaining fame and hopes that someone will discover him and give him the notice that he gives to these wild flowers. Of course, he does not know at this point that this book will claim wide recognition and that he will influence many readers to give another look to

the weeds and wild flowers that have been neglected both in poetry and in general enjoyment.

This theme of comparing himself to a weed or wild flower continues in his poem “To an April Daisy” from *Poems Descriptive*. Daisies were widely considered to be weeds and nuisances throughout natural history and flower guides of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. For instance, Ada Eljiva Georgia writes in the book *A Manual of Weeds* (1914) that:

Weeds cause a direct money loss to the farmer and to the nation In the first place the presence of weeds in such abundance as to attract notice reduces the selling value of the land A prospective purchaser who sees meadows thickly spangled with Daisies and Buttercups or looks over fields ... mentally subtracts the cost of cleaning the soil of these pests when estimating his offering price And this is as it should be for before a profitable crop could be obtained from such ground much careful thought and expensive labor must go to the subjugation of its enemies ... (6)

Georgia continues arguing that daisies and other weeds hurt the “fertility of the soil” refers to them as “pernicious plants” that “reduce the crop yield” (6).²² Despite the commonly held belief that daisies were harmful weeds, Clare begins “To an April Daisy” by strongly identifying with the daisy referring to it as his “old Comrade” (Line 1). As the poem continues, he “Hail[s]” the flower and then describes how it grows in an unremarkable space, a “dunghill’s side” (Line 6). So, regardless of where it grows or how it is viewed as a nuisance, he writes of his unabashed passion for this wild flower.

He repeatedly personifies the flower, referring to it as a “[v]enturer” who is “fearless,” a “messenger” who “smiles,” gets “frost-bit” during winter, and many other references as well. Then, as in the opening line, Clare identifies the flower as a friend, writing that they are “like old mates, or two neighbors” that part and “hope to meet another year” (Lines 20-21).

Finally, the end of “To an April Daisy” weaves together the identities of the narrator and the flowers through their common hopes and sorrows, writing that they will “mix [their] wishes in a tokening tear” (Line 23). This small, twenty-three line poem is powerful in that it personifies the wild flower that is often considered a weed, and shows that it is a very close friend to the narrator. Because the narrator identifies intensely with the flower, the poem challenges the social dictates that often portray it as insignificant or a nuisance. Clare is challenging the preconceived notions about wild flowers and because he ties it so tightly with his own identity, it becomes a metaphor for his own identity as a rural laborer / poet that resides in an unremarkable place. This metaphor suggests that often some of the most beautiful literature can be found in the most unusual spaces.

As writers who focused on biological accuracy in literature, both Kent and Clare dispelled many myths about the natural world. As will be discussed in the following chapters, Clare often dispelled myths by writing intricate details about plants, animals, and their habitats. One animal that he dispels multiple myths about is the nightingale. First, he argues that nightingales sing both during the day and at night, which is in conflict with many naturalists and poets who argue that the bird only sings after sunset. At the same time he argues that most “Londoners,” or city dwellers, confuse any bird that

they hear at the sunset with a nightingale.²³ Importantly, Clare also debunks the myth that the female nightingale does the majority of the singing, writing that he is “almost certain that the female... never sings”²⁴ (*Natural History* 37). He also dispels many local superstitions, including the idea that young frogs and fish “fall from the clouds in storms” (*Natural History* 69). Then, Clare challenges Shakespeare about the sound of a “moping owl,” which Shakespeare refers to as a “merry note,” but Clare argues that it has four notes, and that they are all sad tones (*Natural History* 98). Clare also, challenges naturalists’ ideas about cocks,²⁵ ants,²⁶ martins,²⁷ and many other animals. More myths and superstitions will be analyzed in the following chapters as Clare’s poetry begins to be analyzed.

Throughout *Flora Domestica*, Kent dispelled many myths such as the idea that as aloe plants bloom, they sound like a cannon,²⁸ that the plant only flowers once every hundred years,²⁹ and she even explains the origin of the myth.³⁰ In writing about the celandine, she discusses the misconceptions about how the plant was named.³¹ Kent also very boldly criticizes well-respected poets for not using accurate details. An example of her criticism is that she explains that Milton describes the eglantine and sweet-briar as two different plants, yet they are one and the same (211). In the middle of her book, she criticizes Percy Shelley for incorrectly referring to a flower as daisies that are actually campanula or bellflowers.³² The fact that she challenges a well established poet about biological accuracy in his poems shows both considerable confidence and also proves how important it was to Kent that poetry produce accurate portrayals of nature rather than falsely altered or imagined scenes. Even more significant, a bit later in the book as Kent

criticizes Linnaeus who claimed that the “Larkspur is the hyacinth of the poets” (245). She writes that this “opinion is unfounded” and refers to a professor Martyn and a botanist named Heyne to prove her point (245). Elizabeth Kent shows a remarkable brazenness, as she does not hesitate to criticize well known poets or scientists in order to prove her expertise in the field.

Elizabeth Kent’s work was detailed, precise, and covered a vast array of topics all connected to botany and flowers in some way. She cared about plants to the point that she believed the death of a plant could equate with the death of animals or even humans. Also, as other poets focused more on symbolism, metaphor, or archetype, Kent most often praised writers who presented flowers in a realistic manner rather than a fanciful manner so characteristic of many of her contemporaries. Because of this, Kent discerned that Clare was exceptional among his contemporaries and consequently gave his work a lot of attention.

3. John Aikin, Erasmus Darwin, and Charlotte Turner Smith

John Aikin (1747-1822) was a doctor, a religious leader, writer, editor and teacher.³³ His one-hundred and fifty page essay entitled, “An Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry,” primarily served as an indictment of nature poetry of his time and a call to writers for a more biologically accurate poetry. Erasmus Darwin, the grandfather of evolutionary scientist Charles Darwin was a physician, natural philosopher, inventor, and poet. While John Aikin was making a call for natural history poetry, Erasmus Darwin was taking his scientific work and translating it into the language of poetry. In the same time period, Charlotte Turner Smith (1749-1806) also

wrote natural history poetry, but had a different focus and audience than Erasmus Darwin. While Darwin came from the scientific community and attempted to begin writing popular literature from a scientific perspective, Charlotte Smith's experience had begun with popular Romance novels, her poems that were highly respected in the literary community, and then she became more focused on the natural sciences towards the end of her career.³⁴ By looking at the work of these three authors, three early methods for crossing the divide between poetry and science will be examined that had a major impact of the writing of the nineteenth century.

John Aikin, the brother of Anna Laetitia Aikin (later Barbauld, 1747-1825) attempted to bridge the divide between natural history writing and poetry throughout his career. Aikin was a friend of both Erasmus Darwin and Robert Southey, which gave him a unique perspective into seeing how poetry and science could interrelate (Nichols 52). In "An Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry" (1777) he describes what he viewed as a problem with nature poetry through a quote from the "Dedication" of Wharton and Pitt's translation of Virgil: "every painter of rural beauty since the time of Theocritus (except Thomson) has copied his images from him, without ever looking abroad into the face of nature themselves" (Aikin 5). Aikin continues describing this problem in detail:

An ordinary versifier seems no more able to conceive of the Morn without rosy fingers and dewy locks, or Spring without flowers and showers, loves and groves, than of any of the heathen deities without their usual attributes. Even in poets of a higher order, the hand of a copyist may be

traced much oftener than the strokes of an observer. Has a picturesque circumstance been imagined by some one original genius?³⁵ (Aikin 6)

The essay then gives examples from Shakespeare, Gray, and Collins to prove his point about images being borrowed rather than using pure natural descriptions. Aikin suggests a remedy for this problem:

[Poets only give a] cursory and general survey of objects without exploring their minuter descriptions and mutual relations; and is only to be rectified by accurate and attentive observation conducted upon somewhat of a scientific plan. As the artist that has not studied the body with anatomical precision, and examined the proportions of every limb, both with respect to its own several parts, and the whole system, cannot produce a just and harmonious representation of the human frame; so the descriptive poet, who does not habituate himself to view the several objects of nature minutely, and in comparison with each other, must ever fail in giving his pictures the congruity and animation of real life. (Aikin 10)

Aikin explicates a problem with the prominent poetry of his lifetime, and the relatively recent past, claiming that the images are so completely removed from reality that they are merely becoming a copy of a copy and moving so far away from reality that it is a disservice to poetry, the reader, and to naturalists in general.

Two poets who challenged the difficulties with creating original poetry that Aikin outlined were Charlotte Turner Smith (1749-1806) and Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802),

who both combined biologically accurate science with poetry. Both writers paid particular attention to dissection, experimentation, and classification and saw very few boundaries between their scientific work and their poetry. While they both focused on similar subjects, their approaches were very different. For instance, Smith's posthumously published *Beachy Head, With other Poems*, rivals the complexity of Darwin's *The Botanic Garden*, however, their approaches to incorporating the natural sciences into their writing were distinct. Darwin's main audience was the scientific community throughout his early career and then extended to the more liberal, literary community in the second half of his writing career. Charlotte Smith's audience also was the more highly educated, liberal, literary community, however, she also wrote many works dedicated to young adults and the popular reading public. This slight difference in audience affected the tone and structure of their works. Erasmus Darwin's poetry tended to be highly annotated and, in general, nearly impossible to completely understand without a vast scientific background,³⁶ while Charlotte Smith's work was complex, yet more accessible to larger groups of people.³⁷

In comparing the poetic/scientific works of Erasmus Darwin and Charlotte Smith, a thematic divergence between the two writers becomes obvious. Darwin's poetry tends to be reaching for larger concepts, universals, and discovering major conclusions about the natural world. Smith, who was influenced by Darwin, had an entirely different approach. Although her poetry did include history, classical allusions, and other poetic devices, her poetic/scientific writing focused more on intricate details, classification, and they were mostly local observations, and avoided the large generalizations and

conclusions that Darwin would make about the natural world. While Darwin's conclusions were ahead of his time and led to many theories that would be expanded on by future generations, Smith's more localized focus produced important findings as well. In order to examine this further, the rest of this chapter will compare Darwin's *The Botanic Garden* with Charlotte Smith's *Beachy Head and Other Poems* and a few of Smith's other works.

Erasmus Darwin's *The Botanic Garden* is comprised of two poems, "The Economy of Vegetation" and "The Loves of Plants," which are full of descriptions, natural discoveries, and he uses the poems to assert his scientific theories about origins of the universe and other scientific matters. While Darwin was highly respected in the scientific world, it was not until the publication of these poems that he received a popular literary following (*Monthly Visitor* 327). The *Monthly Visitor* dramatically writes of this work that "nature and art are ransacked for topics" describing the breadth of the work and that "[t]he Botanic Garden is the most scientific and poetic production that ever came from the pen of any human being" (328).³⁸ While these remarks are sensational, there is some accuracy to the claim that few, if any, poems have contained as much scientific theory as Darwin's. Of course, Darwin also had many detractors, especially as poetry began to change focus in the early nineteenth century. For instance, in 1809 Lord Byron argued that the neglect of *The Botanic Garden* was "some proof of returning taste" (qtd. in Chapin 82). Even Wordsworth, who had praised Darwin early in his career,³⁹ wrote an "Essay on Poetic Diction" that was a sustained criticism of Darwin's work (Chapin 82).

So, while Darwin was highly celebrated for the second half of the eighteenth century, the tide began turning on the popularity of his work in the early nineteenth century.

In the introduction to *The Botanic Garden*, Darwin states one of his main purposes for the work:

The Poem, which is here offered to the Public, does not pretend to instruct by deep researches of reasoning; its aim is simply to amuse by bringing distinctly to the imagination the beautiful and sublime images of the operations of Nature in the order, as the Author believes, in which progressive course of time presented them. (Darwin 5)

Darwin argues that his poetry is going to simply illustrate through words, images, and other poetic techniques the natural world for his reader. Because of the scientific nature of the text, the key word in the passage is “amuse,” which is a word that he uses seven times throughout the book in explanation of his goals for the work. His next use of the word “amuse” in a notation gives us a little better understanding of what he is trying to accomplish. Darwin asks why poetry cannot “at the same time explain many philosophical truths,” and both “amuse and instruct?” (Darwin 11). Darwin details a binary that he sees as poetry most often being used for amusement and science being used to instruct, so he simply wonders why poetry cannot be used for both purposes simultaneously? Simply stated, to amuse and instruct was the main mission of his poetic works.

Darwin’s scientific theories that he includes throughout his poems range from ideas coming close to presenting evolution, the origins of the universe, and a wide range

of other topics. His writings that present the origins of the universe are particularly notable: “Through all his realms the kindly ether runs, / And the mass starts into a million suns; / Earths round each sun with quick explosions burst, / And second planets issue from the first” (Darwin 11). He continues with this explanation of the origins of the Earth a bit later, writing:

When high in Ether, with explosion dire, / From the deep craters of his realms of fire, / The whirling sun this ponderous planet hurled, / And gave the astonished void another world. / When from its vaporous air, condensed by the cold, / Descending torrents into oceans rolled; (Darwin 26)

A comparison of this poetic explanation of the origins of the universe with the contemporary idea of the Big Bang theory shows how prescient Darwin was with his scientific theories.⁴⁰ First, Darwin claims that the universe originated from the “ether” and exploded into a mass of “a million suns,” then planets followed.⁴¹ In order to understand how vastly different this idea was from the dominant scientific mindset, it is important to note that the Newtonian idea of a mechanical universe was still the most popular conception of our scientific origins and the idea of an organic universe that could grow was relegated to a few scientists that were ahead of their time. So, the first place that Darwin mirrors the conception of the Big Bang theory is with the idea that the universe began through an explosion. Then, importantly, he claims that this explosion did not just result in the creation of the universe, but that it began an ever-expanding universe that was growing organically, not mechanically. The same prescience for an early

pseudo-description of the Big Bang theory also appeared in the form of many references to evolution that his grandson would take much further.⁴² The main point of highlighting this example here is to show that Darwin's natural history poetry went in a much different direction than Clare, Kent, Smith, and others that I examine in the following chapters. Darwin explored local examples of natural history like the other writers, but his main purpose was to reach for larger scientific theories and justifications.

The poem that Darwin wrote that was most in-line with the works that will be investigated in future chapters is the second half of *The Botanic Garden*, entitled "The Love of Plants," which is a poetic translation of the Linnaean classification system for plants. The organization of "The Love of Plants" is cyclical, describing many of the natural occurrences throughout a single day. Darwin's poem is a fascinating combination of mythological creatures like sylphs, gnomes, and fairies, with poetic language, and natural science. The poetic imagery and mythological elements do not take away from the natural science elements of the poem because of his intensely descriptive scenes that piqued the imaginations of Charlotte Smith, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and many other writers. A scene early in the poem sets up the animation of the natural world that will spread throughout the poem:

From giant oaks, that wave their branches dark, / To the dwarf moss that
clings upon their bark... / How snow drops cold, and blue eyed harebells
bend, / The love-sick violet, and primrose pale, / Bow their sweet heads,
and whisper to the gale... / Ye painted moths, your gold-eyed plumage

furl, / Bow your wide horns, your spiral trunks uncurl... (“The Love of Plants,” Lines 6-8, 11-13, 25-6)

Darwin begins his poem with a long list of trees, plants, flowers, and insects that all begin activity with the beginning of the day. He then uses three techniques to help the reader identify with the plants and animals in the scenes: first, he uses poetic descriptions that highlight what he is depicting;⁴³ then, he uses personification throughout the poem, which we will examine more thoroughly in chapters five and six of this work; and finally, his scenes are always full of animation or movement. The section of the poem that represents the morning, and beginning of the diurnal cycle of the day is full of many movements that emphasize the life inherent in the natural world. All of these techniques help the reader see the natural world as full of life and vitality and encourages them to see humans as just another part of that moving scene.

From the beginning of “The Love of Plants,” one of the most obvious facts is that Darwin hyper-sexualizes nature. He writes that the violet is “love-sick,” the lily is a “virgin” that has “secret sighs,” cowslips are “jealous,” roses have “honey’d lips” and are “enamour’d,” and the roses “clasp with fond arms” with the woodbines and “mix their kisses sweet” (Lines 13, 15-20).⁴⁴ The sexual imagery continues as he writes that a kind of stargrass “two virgins share,” compares genista and myrtle to “ten fond brothers” who “woo the haughty maid” (Lines 47, 57-8). The Iris is described as having a “fiercer flame, three unjealous husbands wed the dame” referring to the plant’s three sepals (male), which are used for classification, and its one ovary (female) (Lines 71-2). In referring to the Cupressus, Darwin writes that he “disdains his dusky bride, / one dome contains

them, but two beds divide” illustrating the male and female parts of the flower that are divided, but come together to procreate (Lines 73-4). The description of this procreation is especially worth examination as he uses a Shakespearian reference from “Othello” to describe the procreation of the Osyris plant:⁴⁵

Yet with soft love a gentle belle he charms, / And clasps the beauty in his
hundred arms. / So, hapless Desdemona, fair and young, / Won by
Othello’s captivating tongue, / Sigh’d o’er each strange and piteous tale,
distress’d, / And sunk enamour’d on his sooty breast. (Lines 77-84)

Darwin’s comparison between “Othello” and the Osyris plant is worth noting because it enables his readers to envision these plants as if they were closer to human beings. While thinking of plants and flowers as male and female seems normal to the average reader now, this was not the case as Darwin wrote. The sexualization of plants is merely using metaphorical anthropomorphism in order to explain or understand plants better. In other words, when Linnaeus created his system to elucidate the parts of plants and the way that they reproduce, he needed a metaphor to explain this system and the metaphor that he chose was human sexuality. For instance, it is not necessary to believe that stamens, pistils and other parts of plants are sexual organs, but it was a simple metaphor for understanding plants that has become so much a part of our culture that it is now difficult to understand the way that plants work without this metaphor.⁴⁶

Charlotte Smith, who was influenced by Erasmus Darwin, wrote the poem “Beachy Head” early in the nineteenth century, and it was published after her death. “Beachy Head” is a tour de force that resembles and rivals the breadth of William

Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey." Smith's choice of a subject for this poem illustrates a major distinction between this work and the work of John Clare and James Thomson that will be examined in the following chapters. Like Wordsworth, with "Tintern Abby," Smith chooses a remarkable place as the main subject of her poem. Beachy Head is a beautiful set of chalk cliffs, the highest in Britain, that is a famous site of a major battle in the Nine Years War (1690), a prominent landmark for sailors on the English Channel, and also famous for the enormous number of suicides that occur there each year⁴⁷ (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).⁴⁸ Of course, both Wordsworth and Smith have produced many poems about more ordinary places, but "Beachy Head" and "Tintern Abbey" provide an interesting contrast to the poems that will be the main focus of the rest of this work in order to emphasize the importance of recognition of unremarkable scenes in Romantic poetry.

The fact that "Beachy Head" and "Tintern Abbey" occur in remarkable places means that in order to experience the same sentiments the reader would need to travel to those places. While the poems can be appreciated without traveling to the sites referred to in the poems, it is not completely sustainable as those places can be destroyed or the readers can be prevented from visiting them. In the writing examined in the following chapters, writers like Gilbert White, John Leonard Knapp, John Clare, and others write mainly about places that can be easily reproduced in many places throughout the world. For instance, they may write about a field of wild flowers that exist in their hometown, but that field, while individual and specific, is easier to reproduce all over the world than singularly famous cliffs or place specific ruins. Readers can relate to the scenes in their

own parks or landscapes in their local areas and produce a sustainable and repeatable process of discovery, observation, and translation into writing. The focus on reproduction and sustainability is what makes poetry about relatively unremarkable scenes an important contribution to Romantic poetry. Of course, poetry about extraordinary scenes is significant to examine as well in order to encourage imagination and historical discovery.

While “Beachy Head” focused on an extraordinary landscape in its totality, what makes the poem exceptional is that Smith included intricate local descriptions that are both biologically accurate and reproducible because of the intense focus on organic systems within the scenes. Smith’s “Beachy Head” is full of depictions of the natural world that are as good, if not better, than most of the natural history books of the time. For instance, her depiction of the wood sorrel is both poetic and in-depth enough for the naturalist to determine what species she is writing about:

Who, from the tumps with bright green mosses clad, / Plucks the wood
sorrel, with its light thin leaves, / Heart-shaped, and triply folded; and its
root / Creeping like beaded coral, or who there / Gathers, the copse’s
pride, anemones, / With rays like golden studs on ivory laid / Most
delicate: but touch’d with purple clouds, / Fit crown for April’s fair but
changeable brow. (Smith 25)

Smith’s textual illustration of this flower addresses the habitat surrounding the wood sorrel, the shape and color of its leaves, and its roots, all in a thorough and close-up examination of the flower. She gives the exact details that a naturalist would need to be

able to classify the flower. Consider the description of the wood sorrel from the book *Wild Flowers Worth Knowing*, for example, written by Neltje Blanchen, et al in 1917. The author writes that it has “clover-like” leaves, a “creeping rootstock,” and “conceal” themselves in the “moss from which they spring” (72). With the slight differentiation between their depictions of the leaves, which I would argue Smith more accurately depicts, their entries on the wood sorrel contain similar information, with Smith providing a bit more color and intricacy. Most importantly, the flowers that Smith writes about are more often than not considered wild flowers. In a similar manner as Clare, Smith writes that she was “An early worshipper at Nature’s shrine, / I loved her rudest scenes” (“Beachy Head” 24). Like Clare and Kent, Smith loved the “rudest” or uncultivated scenes much more than those that were in gardens or manicured.

The scene from “Beachy Head” is powerful beyond Smith’s intricate naturalist’s eye because of the scenes that she chose to highlight. Like Clare’s “Cowper Green,” Smith highlights a mixture of wild flowers and more exotic fare. At the same time, she is attempting to combine botanical analysis with poetical verse in a way that resists literary tradition and poetic conventions. For instance, in writing about the wood sorrel, Smith uses biological terminology, yet a few lines later she writes about anemones and poeticizes them, writing that they have “rays like golden studs on ivory” and are a “fit crown for April.” The mixing of bright colors in this section (bright green, golden, ivory, and purple) is also poetic as she verbally paints the landscape for her readers. The intertwining of poetic imagery, similes, metaphors, and biological classification is impressive, however, it is important to note that Smith poeticizes the exotic flower

(anemone) and keeps the more common flower (wood sorrel) less poeticized.⁴⁹ Judith Pascoe argues that Smith's description of the wood sorrel comes almost word-for-word from a book in Smith's collection, *Arrangement of British Plants*; whereas, the description of the anemone is both botanically accurate and poetically unique. Smith creates a botanic literary aesthetic that is impressive, but does not challenge the hierarchical organization of plant life in the same way that occurs in "Cowper Green."

"Beachy Head" does not just focus on magnifying small scenes like the one listed above; rather, the magnified scenes are the strongest part of Smith's writing. In these scenes, she not only shows the reader the classification points of flowers and plants, she also gives an intimate glance at the inner workings of these plants. Her poetry shows that nature can be presented in a poetic manner that can help us learn about both biology and larger philosophical concepts simultaneously creating a botanical literary aesthetic. Early in "Beachy Head," Smith writes about a scene with a finch and a linnet that depicts their actions in great detail ("Beachy Head" page 16-7). Her writing shows where the birds eat, how they interact, the dangers they face, how they care for their eggs, a strange activity that they do with stones, among many other details. The reader is presented with an intimate examination of how birds interact that is as detailed as a naturalist's description, but at the same time, it is written in a poetic manner with similes, metaphors, alliteration, and examines philosophical ideas such as the fragility of life, cultural differences,⁵⁰ and family associations. Then, in a flurry of description, Smith describes the ecosystem surrounding a brook in the area:

warrens, and heaths, / And yellow commons, and birch-shaded hollows, /
And hedge rows, bordering unfrequented lanes / Bowered with wild roses,
and clasping woodbine / Where purple tassels of the tangling vetch / With
bittersweet, and bryony inweave, / And the dew fills the silver bindweed's
cups- / I loved to trace the brooks whose humid banks / Nourish the
harebell, and the freckled pagil; / And stroll among the o'ershadowing
woods of beech. ("Beachy Head" 24)

Smith glosses many of the flowers included in the above passage with their Latin classifications combining poetic verse with biological classification to produce a beautiful and instructive botanic aesthetic in poetry. This passage of the poem is especially impressive because of the emphasis on the minute details of the scene. In most pastoral poetry, larger scenes are often depicted in more general, sweeping language that does not reach for the exacting details that Smith uses. For instance, Smith begins "Beachy Head" from a high vantage point, with larger characterizations of the landscape and then, as Stuart Curran points out, the speaker becomes so radically close to nature that it presents an "uncanny particularity" with the minute features of the natural world (Curran xxvii). At the same time, she uses poetic tools like alliteration to poeticize the biological terms. For instance, in this passage, the "tassels" are "tangling," the "bryony" is "bittersweet," and the "dew" fills the "bindweed," so that as the scene is naturally tangling, and the words are tangling together through alliteration and the natural rhythm of Smith's writing.

Smith intersperses over a dozen different wild flowers, multiple trees, and vines in this section of the poem. Most of the plants and flowers that she chose to highlight are considered wild or weeds and would have been ignored by most poets. Another important aspect of this section of the poem is Smith's contrast between light and dark part of the scene and that she highlights areas that are normally hidden from humanity. The section begins hidden in the "warrens and heaths" and the "birch shaded hollows," indicating both areas that are dark and hidden from humanity. The dark areas are contrasted with the "yellow commons," but ultimately the end of this section returns to the darkness in the "o'ershadowing woods of beech." Throughout "Beachy Head," Smith depicts spaces that are removed from humanity and these descriptions are both sustainable and reproducible in a way that makes her poetry reach many audiences.

One important note about these hidden spaces that is distinctive from some of the authors in following chapters is the presence of the speaker of the poem. Throughout "Beachy Head" the pronoun "I" is often used. For instance, in the beginning of the poem Smith wrote "o'er the channel rear'd, half way at sea ... I would recline; while Fancy should go forth" connecting the speaker to the high vantage point and the beginning of her imagination (Lines 2-4). Then, as the scenes become more intricate, the speaker indicates that she "once was happy," "love[d] these upland solitudes," and that she "loved to trace the brooks" ("Beachy Head" 20, 24). In each of these instances, the speaker uses the pronoun "I" to connect her consciousness with her love or passion for nature. The speaker also uses the pronoun "I" as her memory "contrast[ed]" and "compar'd" the "polluted smoky atmosphere," with what she had known previously. Throughout most of

the poem, the consciousness of the speaker is in the foreground comparing the natural realities before her with her imagination and memory. The presence of the speaker here contrasts directly with what we will find in future chapters from other natural history authors.

The natural scenes found in “Beachy Head” are not unique in Smith’s work. Throughout the rest of the book and in other poems throughout her career these localized and intricate scenes appear consistently. She also introduces taxonomy throughout many of her poems. For instance, the poem “Flora” has dozens of Latinized names of plants and flowers, yet still maintains its poetic identity (*Beachy Head* 84). While this poem is not as rich in description, it still is instructive in taxonomy and the enormous variety in the natural world. The poem provides names and short descriptions of the enormous variety in the natural world. The same focus on variety appears in her poem “Studies by the Sea.” Smith focuses on the richness of sea life and the many unusual aspects not often examined in poetry. The poem “Horologe of the Fields” is another survey of the many species of plants that appear throughout the fields and gives many details that usually do not appear in poetry. For instance, Smith describes Goatsbeard as spreading “its golden rays, / But shuts its cautious petals up, / Retreating from the noon-tide blaze” (Smith 113).⁵¹ This image of a flower shying away from the sun each day shows the dichotomy of a flower that needs the sun to survive, yet each day it must shy away as its rays become too intense. These images appear throughout this book and her earlier book of poetry *Elegaic Sonnets* as well.

Overall, Smith's poetry originates from a popular and literary perspective and attempts to incorporate scientific messages into the poems both to produce a more biologically accurate poetry and to serve a didactic purpose for her readers as well. This didactic function can most clearly be viewed by examining Smith's work outside of her poetry, as she also had a number of works dedicated to educating young people. In particular, four of her works were focused on helping young people learn natural history and botany. One of these works, *Dialogues Intended for the use of Young Persons*, portrays her desire that young people should take an interest in these fields and that older people should make steps towards mentoring them. In this way, it is similar to the letters that Sophia wrote to the editor of the *Literary Weekly* (in the previous section of this chapter) where Smith uses a non-threatening subject in order to advocate the education of young women.⁵² In fact, there is a section of Smith's *Dialogues* that sounds nearly identical to the discussion that Sophia had in the letters to the editor in regards to her daughter's education:

Caroline: I hope she won't torment all the world with her knowledge, as Mrs. Tanfy does; who has been reading botanical books, till she fancies herself able to talk of such things with everybody, and worries one with something about petals, and styles, and filaments, and I know not what jargon.

Mrs. Woodfield: It would not be jargon, if she understood it herself, and addressed it too; but, unhappily, neither of these is the case. She talks, as many other people do, in the hope of being thought wise; but of those to

whom she happens to address herself, some suspect that she is mad, and all are sure she is tiresome... (*Dialogues* 85).

Charlotte Smith's dialogue between Caroline and Mrs. Woodfield serves the same function as Sophia's letters to the editor, except with one important modification. Instead of trying to convince her audience that women can study subjects like botany and not "torment all the world with her knowledge" as both Sophia and here Caroline suggest, Smith makes a bolder claim, that if more women are educated and understood the language of these fields, then they would want to talk about it and could intelligently. Smith may have been able to make this assertion because her audience was more female than that of the *Literary Weekly* or it may have just been a more assertive argument.⁵³ Either way, Charlotte Smith takes the same argument that Sophia made in the *Literary Weekly* and attempts to push it a bit farther than her predecessor.

As with most of Smith's books for young women, *Dialogues Intended for the use of Young Persons*, are in narrative form with extended didactic dialogues. While at times the dialogue seems forced, it is still a much more entertaining way for children to learn natural history than a straight textbook. Here is an example of some of the didactic dialogue in the early part of this book:

Henrietta: Mamma! Do you know, that, in my garden, there is a plant coming out, full of deep red blossoms; there are even one or two little flowers blown, and they smell delightfully.

Mrs. Woodfield: It is the Mezerian; and is of the same species of plant as that beautiful Daphne Noruna, or garland...

Henrietta: So it is mamma; I declare now I recollect they are very much alike. Oh! how delightfully every thing begins to spring in the hedges.

Here are the golden cups!

Mrs. Woodfield: No; it is a Pilewort. If you observe the leaves, they are more pointed than the flower you call a golden cup... (*Dialogues* 31)

This banter that occurs between Henrietta and Mrs. Woodfield is highly educational from identifying and classifying plants from the color and shape of their leaves, to identifying species that are the same. While the dialogue is simple, important information is transmitted from writer to reader through a lively discussion. This form of didactic dialogue encourages a sharpening of the mind's power to make distinctions in many subjects including natural history and provided invaluable lessons for young adults.

Throughout *Dialogues*, Charlotte Smith uses conversation to classify dozens of flowers, identify aspects of their habitats, cultural differences involved in problems with classification, and many other natural history lessons. In general, the didactic writing helps young readers begin the process of sharpening their minds to make distinctions about nature and other important concepts. Like Clare and Kent, Smith also examines the distinctions between flowers that are considered wild or weeds, writing "all flowers are wild in some quarter of the world" and that "many of the most curious and beautiful plants" are considered wild (*Dialogues* 33). Smith deconstructs the idea of the wild and suggests that often those that are considered wild are the most beautiful flowers. In between her nature lessons, many lessons about history⁵⁴ and morality are interspersed,⁵⁵ which was common in this genre of didactic children's literature. Also, similarly with

Kent and Clare, Smith dispels many myths regardless of the source. One example of this is her criticism of Thomson, who writes that the nightingale does not sing during the day. Smith counters this assertion, writing that it “is not quite true; for it is certain that the nightingale sings like other birds during the day, but is then not distinguished for much from the rest” (*Dialogues* 53).

The writers discussed in this chapter and in the coming chapters, Smith, Kent, Clare, Darwin, Thomson, and others, mix natural history and poetry together through many methods. Although each has their own unique perspective and adds their own expertise to the genre, they all contribute to intricately weaving natural history into poetry in a manner that illustrates how interdisciplinarity between the arts and the sciences can be both beautiful and instructive. At the same time, their high regard with the reading public popularized natural history in a manner that encouraged many more writers and scientists to delve into the field.⁵⁶ Thus the popularity of the natural science influenced the scientific world, popular literature, the education of women, and the incorporation of the natural sciences into the university.

Notes

¹ The term natural science refers to chemistry, botany, physics, astronomy and what would eventually be referred to as biology.

² This can be seen throughout interactions between John Clare and his editor, John Taylor, as discussed in chapter three. Clare excitedly writes Taylor about his natural history pursuits and Taylor suggests that it is a good hobby or distraction. Margaret Grainger suggests that Taylor wanted Clare to pursue natural history in order to distract him while Taylor was attempting to edit *The Shepherd's Calendar*.

³ See chapter one for more background on the popularity of botany among the different classes of English society.

⁴ An enormous body of work addresses the necessity of critical thinking and creativity in the natural sciences. One work that addresses this importance in the field of ecology is Bryan G. Norton's essay "Change, Constancy, and Creativity: The New Ecology and Some Old Problems." Norton discusses how scientific thought aims towards universality and constancy, but the reality of the natural sciences is that the most important aspect of science is that it is in a constant state of "change, disturbance, and dynamism" (329). He uses examples of how ecology has changed over the course of its history and that creativity and critical thinking were necessary parts of those changes to prove the importance of critical thought in the natural sciences.

⁵ A similar argument is made by the writer Anna Laetitia Barbauld, who also wrestled with the issue of what subjects were appropriate for women to study and came to the following conclusion in an essay entitled “On Female Studies”:

... men study in order to qualify themselves for the law, for physic, for various departments in political life, for instructing others from the pulpit or the professor’s chair. These all require a great deal of severe study and technical knowledge...Now as a woman can never be called to any of these professions, it is evident you have nothing to do with such studies. A woman is not expected to understand the mysteries of politics, because she is not called to govern; she is not required to know anatomy, because she is not to perform surgical operations...Men have various departments in active life; women have but one...to be a wife, a mother, a mistress of a family. (Barbauld 236)

Like Sophia from the *Literary Weekly*, lists many areas that are forbidden for women to study and then includes natural history and botany as areas that women can study because these subjects focus on “sentiment” rather than “abstract calculations or difficult problems” (241). There are an enormous amount of similar sentiments from male and female writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

⁶Of course, there are many difficulties in making equivalencies with gender and class biases, but in this area both women and the lower classes found similar avenues for challenging the dominant mindset.

⁷ See chapter one for more information about the drastic increase in natural history writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

⁸ In reading the next twelve issues of the *Literary Weekly* there were only two letters responding to Sophia and both were mostly positive of her letters.

⁹ Elizabeth Kent writes, “In several parts of the north of England, when a funeral takes place, a basin full of sprigs of Box-wood is placed at the door of the house from which the coffin is taken up; and each person who attends the funeral ordinarily takes a sprig of this Box-wood, and throws it into the grave of the deceased” (Kent 75).

¹⁰ Kent quotes Linnaeus writing, ““this splendid flower... adorns the pavement of the rustics on festival days.’ It is a bright yellow flower, blowing in May and June. ‘In Westmoreland these flowers are collected with great festivity, by the youth of both sexes, at the beginning of June; about which time it is usual to see them return from the woods in an evening, laden with them, to adorn their doors and cottages with wreaths and garlands’” (Kent 178).

¹¹ Kent writes, “Linnaeus has observed, that the Marygold is usually open from nine in the morning to three in the afternoon” (Kent 272).

¹² Kent quotes Thunberg, writing ““Those who are but in a small degree acquainted with botany... need not-be told that, by the opening and closing of flowers, one may frequently know with certainty, as from a watch, what hour of the day it is, as well as if the weather will be fine or rainy’” (qt. in Kent xi).

¹³ Kent notes that “Every part of this plant has been considered as a useful medicine, but Linnaeus affirms that, from his own knowledge, children have lost their lives by an over dose of it. That might, however, be the case with some of our best medicines” (Kent 116).

¹⁴ Kent refers to the Bible writing, “The great antiquity of the use of Wood-aloë as a perfume is shown by the Bible: ‘All thy garments,’ says a passage in the Psalms, ‘smell of myrrh, and aloes, and cassia’ and Solomon, addressing the object of his love, says, ‘thy plants are an orchard of pomegranates, with pleasant fruits’” (Kent 15).

¹⁵ Kent writes, “The elegance of the flower, and the rarity of its appearance in a cold climate, render it an object of such general curiosity, that the gardener who possesses the plant announces it in the public papers, and builds a platform round it for the accommodation of the spectators” (Kent 8-9).

¹⁶ Kent writes, “We are told by Linnaeus that the Swedes prepare a beer from them, which they consider very efficacious in scorbutic cases; and that for the same purpose the Laplanders drink an infusion of them, as we do tea or coffee. Juniper wine is sometimes made, and is said to be a very wholesome one” (Kent 242).

¹⁷ Cowslips had long been viewed as an herbal remedy to “ease pain” and “cause sleep” and it was eventually determined that they contain a sedative which explained this reputation (Knight 273).

¹⁸ Henry Phillips writes in his *Flora Historica* that the cowslip is considered an “injurious weed that occupies a space which clover or other nutritious plants should fill.

¹⁹ This page count referred to here is compared to six pages about Shakespeare, twelve on William Wordsworth, fourteen on Ben Johnson, nineteen on Milton, twenty-two on Keats, twenty-three on Chaucer, thirty from Spenser, and thirty-six from Virgil. Clare is clearly one of the most addressed poets in this book, and because of this, Kent is making a statement about Clare's importance in the field.

²⁰ This number is a rough estimate derived from the fact that Clare's final book, *The Rural Muse*, had not been published yet and that over two-thirds of Clare's works were not published until the twentieth century. While one-fifth is not in any way demonstrably provable, I believe that it is a believable estimate.

²¹ The dedication of *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* referred to Clare as a "peasant-poet" and asked the reader to consider his humble station as they read through the book. The reading public, at this time, often bought books that invoked empathy for the writer and could be considered an act of charity in buying it. However, it was always important that the writer clearly explained that they had no ideas of rising above their station, that they merely wanted help with day-to-day living as written by his editor in the preface to the work.

²² Joan Thirsk and Edward Collins write about daisies being considered insidious weeds in their book *The Agrarian History of England and Wales* writing, "[m]ost agricultural textbooks give long lists of weeds ... thistles, ragwort, docks, rushes, and ox-eyed and common daisies as weeds of the pasture" (549).

²³ John Clare writes, “I forgot to say in my last that the Nightingale sung as common by day as by night & as often tho its a fact that is not generally known your Londoners are very fond of talking about this bird & I believe fancy every bird they hear after sunset a Nightingale” (*Natural History* 36).

²⁴ Grainger writes that Thomson and Shakespeare both write about the female nightingale singing, but Clare dispels this theory.

²⁵ Clare writes, “It has been supposed by naturalists who are more fond of starting new theories then proving old facts that our yard fowl the Cock was originaly [sic] from the wild pheasant but I think this is a wide supposition as the yard cock always claps his wings & then crows while the pheasant cock always crows first and claps his wings afterwards” (*Natural History* 110).

²⁶ Clare writes, “It has been commonly believed among such naturalists that trusts to books & repeats old error that ant hurd up & feed on the curnels [sic] of grain such as wheat & barley but every common observer knows this to be a falsehood I have noticed [sic] them minutely.... They always make one track from their nest & keep it & will go for furlongs away from their homes... fetching bits of bents & others lugging away with flyes [sic] or green maggots which they all pick off of flowers & leaves” (*Natural History* 111)

²⁷ In his description of the martin, Clare discusses how town people deem the bird “sacred” and a “good Omen” (*Natural History* 147-8). He then methodically deconstructs

the image of the bird that the town's people have and gives an in-depth biological description of the bird and its habitat.

²⁸ Kent writes, "The popular opinions, that the aloe flowers but once in a century, and that its blooming is attended with a noise like the report of a cannon, are equally without foundation" (Kent 15).

²⁹ Kent writes, "With us, I think, it is vulgarly reckoned (though I believe falsely) that they only flower once in a hundred years. Here I was informed, that, at the latest, they always blow the sixth year, but for the most part the fifth. As the whole substance of the plant is carried into the stem and the flowers, the leaves begin to decay as soon as the blow is completed, and a numerous offspring of young plants are produced round the root of the old one" (Kent 10).

³⁰ Kent quotes a naturalist named Miller, writing that he "suggests a curious and not improbable origin of this error with regard to the Aloe. 'I suppose,' says he, 'the rise of this story might proceed from some persons saying, when one of these plants flowered, it made a great noise; meaning thereby, that whenever one of them flowered in England, it was spread abroad as an uncommon thing, and occasioned a great noise among the neighbouring inhabitants; most of whom usually repair to see it, as a thing that rarely happens, and as a great curiosity'" (Kent 9).

³¹ The celandine is named after the swallow, however, Kent explains that most people believed that it was named because it blooms as the swallows returned each year, but she

argues that the truth is that it was named after swallows because the birds used celandine to rub on their youngs' eyes to encourage sight (92).

³² Kent writes that “Mr. Shelley has a beautiful idea of pendant bell-shaped flowers, as forming pavilions for the Glow-worm: this passage would have applied more properly to the Campanula,” but he refers to them as daisies (Kent 169).

³³ He wrote many pamphlets, a series of books entitled *Evenings at Home* (1792-1795) that gained enormous popularity, a ten volume *General Biography* (1799-1815) that encompassed a wide variety of subjects, multiple novels, and edited *The Monthly Magazine* (1796-1807) and the literary magazine *The Athenaeum* (1807-1809).

³⁴ While this is too over generalized, her most scientific writing comes at the end of her career, in particular with “Beachy Head and Other Poems” in 1807.

³⁵ The quote continues, amplifying Aikin’s point:

Every succeeding composer introduces it on a similar occasion. He, perhaps, improves, amplifies, and in some respect varies the idea; and in so doing may exhibit considerable taste and ingenuity; but still he contents himself with an inferior degree of merit, while the materials are all before him for attaining the highest. (Aikin 6-7)

The comparison of poets mimicking composers that interpret previous composers’ work is apt because although they produce a new and different work, it is based on the previous composer’s work instead of being an original piece.

³⁶ A quick examination of Darwin's oeuvre finds a series of intricate scientific works meant for a small audience, such as aforementioned *The Botanic Garden* (1791), *A System of Vegetables* (1785) and *The Families of Plants* (1787) published by the Lichfield Botanical Society, *Temple of Nature* (1803), and his most famous work, *Zoonomia* (1796). The two works published by the Lichfield Botanical Society were written for other scientists involved in the organization, Linnaean taxonomists, and other people who delved deeply into this field. Darwin's two books of poetry, *The Botanic Garden* and *Temple of Nature*, gained his broadest readership, as they were popular in literary society, but they were only accessible to those with a high level of education as they were complex, highly annotated, and full of theories that would be incomprehensible to those without education. *Zoonomia*, perhaps his most important work, had a reasonably small, but important audience of mainly medical researchers and scientists. Erasmus Darwin's works were highly influential in the medical field, science related fields, and literary society, but his works did not have the following of the wide reading public that Charlotte Smith attained.

³⁷ In examining Charlotte Smith's oeuvre, it is obvious to see that Smith was a prolific writer, poet, and sonneteer who, over the course of her career published three books of poetry, four children's books, ten novels, and many other works. Her first published work, *Elegiac Sonnets*, was successful both in sales and in terms of recognition by most of the literary world. Her ten novels were written in the genre of the popular romances of the time, as was expected for women's writing, however, she incorporated political and

social commentary, many messages about the horrifying experiences that women face in patriarchal society, and generally presented arguments, through narrative, for women's rights. These writings are drastically different than the genres focused on by Erasmus Darwin, but many of her later works intersected more directly with the similar genre. The works that are the most similar are Smith's posthumously published *Beachy Head and Other Poems*, *A Natural History of Birds*, many of her sonnets, and her instructional books for young adults. These works overlap with Darwin, but the trajectory of their careers made their focuses distinctive. Darwin was coming from a narrow scientific community and attempting to gradually enlarge his readership through the medical field, different branches of science, and literary society. Smith began from the exact opposite direction forced to write popular literature to earn a living and then slowly focusing her texts more scientifically.

³⁸ Of course, Erasmus Darwin also had many detractors, including an article from the *Annual Review and History of Literature* that argues that "Dr. Darwin does not bring a single argument, or even analogy, in support of his hypothesis" (592). The criticism gets even harsher as the author writes, "we are disgusted by perpetual repetitions, and no author ever so strikingly exemplified that odious fault of imitating himself [and] the structure of the verse too is remarkably monotonous and destitute" (594).

³⁹ Duncan Wu writes about the influence of *Zoonomia* on Wordsworth's "Goody Blake and Harry Gill" from *Lyrical Ballads* in his book *Wordsworth: An Inner Life* (97-8).

Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Charlotte Smith were two other, of many, poets that regard Erasmus Darwin as a major influence on their work.

⁴⁰ The modern idea of the Big Bang theory developed in the early twentieth century from the work of Vesto Slipher, Alexander Friedmann, Edwin Hubble, and Georges Lemaitre. Each of these men contributed important aspects of the comprehensive theory.

⁴¹ It can easily be argued that this creation story is not really a forbearer of the Big Bang theory; instead, it is a re-envisioning of Ovid's creation story from *Metamorphosis*. I would argue that Darwin is both paying tribute to Ovid and also presenting a prescient vision of the Big Bang theory. Basically, there are elements of the text that resemble Ovid, however, Darwin's description of creation presents many more accurate details as to what scientists now believe are the origins of the universe than Ovid or other works from Darwin's era. Perhaps, Darwin's prescience has more to do with the organicism beginning to appear in philosophical texts of the time, but his predictions are so accurate that they are difficult to ignore.

⁴² The most noted section of Erasmus Darwin's work on evolution is from a note on curcuma from *The Botanic Garden*:

There is a curious circumstance belonging to the class of insects which have two wings, or diptera, analogous to the rudiments of stamens above described; ie. two little knobs are found placed each on a stalk or peduncle, generally under a little arched scale; which appear to be rudiments of hinder wings, and are called by Linneus halteres, or poisers,

a term of his introduction... *Other animals have marks of having in a long process of time undergone changes in some parts of their bodies, which may have been effected to accommodate them to new ways of procuring their food.* The existence of teats on the breasts of male animals, and which are generally replete with a thin kind of milk at their nativity, is a wonderful instance of this kind. *Perhaps all the productions of nature are in their progress to greater perfection?* [Emphasis Added] (138-9)

This work and others by Erasmus Darwin, especially *Zoonomia*, highly influenced his grandson, who wrote the defining work on the subject of evolution. Of course, Erasmus Darwin was not the first to hint about evolutionary transmutation, but he was an open advocate of it at a time when it was not widely accepted.

⁴³ For example, when writing about moths, he uses the flowery language “gold-eyed plumage” instead of simpler, scientific language.

⁴⁴ *Calystegia sepium*.

⁴⁵ Also known as Sandalwood or Santalaceae.

⁴⁶ The explanation of the sexualization of plants is discussed in detail throughout the book *Botany, sexuality, and women's writing 1760-1830: from modest shoot to forward plant* by Sam George.

⁴⁷ Approximately twenty suicides occur there each year since 1965 and there have been an enormous number of documented cases reaching back to the 1600's. “Suicide jump child ‘already dead’” (BBC).

⁴⁸ Beachy Head is also famous as the site where German philosopher Friedrich Engels ashes were scattered (Surtees).

⁴⁹ The wood sorrel is compared to the primrose in stature in many botanical works of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For instance, Dorothea Lynde Dix writes about the wood sorrel in her early nineteenth century work *The Garland of Flora*, “the delicate and elegant plant grows in the shade and woods and thickets. It is found in almost every country ... from China ... to New England” (181).

⁵⁰ It is debatable whether animals can be considered to have a culture or not, but recent research has argued that it is possible. An example of this can be seen in the award winning PBS documentary named “Ape Genius” that deconstructs the idea of culture with a team of MIT scientists and other researchers.

⁵¹ *Aruncus dioicus*.

⁵² In this case, Smith suggests that the work is for the education of girls that are “twelve or thirteen” (“Dialogues” iii).

⁵³ This is pure speculation, but I think it is a fair judgment to make based on the subject matter of their material. It seems obvious that Sophia, from the *Literary Weekly* is trying to convince men that women will not become dangerous or ruined for marriage if they are educated, whereas Charlotte Smith appears to be making her argument to women, that if they all focus on education, then they will be able to understand each other.

⁵⁴ One example can be found on page forty-seven as Henrietta and Mrs. Woodfield discuss the Reformation.

⁵⁵ On page thirty-four, Henrietta and Mrs. Woodfield discuss an encounter with a “beggar.” Henrietta tells her mother that she is “afraid” and her mom explains that it is important to help those who are less fortunate and they stop to speak to him. Then, on page fifty-five, Mrs. Woodhouse’s niece Caroline speaks about the cruelty of the “lower people” to animals. While this blatant class bias is striking, the morality portion of the argument is about treating animals well, which Mrs. Woodhouse confirms in the next sentence quoting from Cowper about caring for animals. There are many other examples of morality teaching throughout her work dedicated to the education of young people.

⁵⁶ Many writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries listed these writers as major influences that stirred their interest in natural history. The most obvious example is Charles Darwin who was tremendously influenced by his grandfather’s work, but there were many others including the ornithologist Jeffery Boswell, who we will examine in the next chapter, that credited Gilbert White as one of his biggest influences.

CHAPTER III: JOHN CLARE AND GILBERT WHITE: NATURAL HISTORY

WRITING TOWARDS A BASIC ECOLOGY

In June, 1793, the naturalist Gilbert White died in Selborne, Hampshire. A month later the poet John Clare was born approximately one hundred miles away in the little town of Helpstone,¹ Northamptonshire. These two men could not have been more different in opportunity or wealth, yet they shared a great deal in their philosophies of the natural world and natural history writing. White had a well-documented lineage with an ancestor who was knighted and many who were held in high esteem. He was educated by a private tutor, attended Oriel College Oxford, became a deacon, and, eventually the dean of Oriel College (Dadswell 12). His life included many advantages and, by most accounts, was very successful.

John Clare, on the other hand, had mostly the opposite experience. Clare, known as a peasant-poet, was born the son of a farm laborer, and his grandfather was an itinerant laborer whose lineage was a mixture of laborers, farmers, and clerks. Born in a simple cottage,² his formal education was limited to classes in a church until the age of twelve, and he was self-educated after that.³ Most of his life, he was a laborer who wrote poetry in his time off from work, including those times he found ways to avoid work.⁴ He did achieve some fame for his writing, but this formally lasted approximately three years,⁵ and then the rest of his life was spent in financial struggle and despair.⁶

Ultimately, Clare spent the last two decades of his life in an asylum, a tragic ending to a hard life. Despite the drastic differences between their opportunities and life stories, the two writers maintained similar views of the natural world. The origins of

Clare's poetry rests in his natural history writing, so in order to understand his poetry, we must first examine how much of his philosophy derived from his natural history background. In that context, Gilbert White's natural histories influenced both Clare's natural history writing and his poetry as well. For instance, after reading White's *Natural History and Antiquities of Selbourne* (1789) in his teenage years early in the nineteenth century, Clare decided to write a similar natural history of his hometown, Helpstone (*Natural History*). The disparity between the two natural histories is vast: White's was thoroughly formed, published, and became one of the most popular selling books of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while Clare's ended up no more than a scattered series of fragments and letters that were not comprehensively assembled until Margaret Grainger compiled them in 1983.⁷ However, the themes that run throughout both natural histories show similar writing philosophies and these connections demonstrate the influence that White had on Clare.

The major themes that White and Clare held in common in their natural history writing were an intense focus on detail, privileging the local over the universal, and envisioning parts of nature as individual agents rather than merely inanimate objects. The idea that many parts of the natural world had individual agency led both of them to believe that animals were able to communicate with one another, and perhaps even share a complex language. These philosophic beliefs about nature led to a more inclusive and holistic view of the natural world, which led them to what we might now call a basic ecology based on the inner workings of the infinite number of ecosystems located in their home towns, long before ecology was an official field of study⁸ or recognized by the

majority of nature writers and poets.⁹ While both writers had similar philosophies of the natural world, there was one particular area where they held drastically disparate opinions: classification and experimentation. White adhered to the Linnaean classification system,¹⁰ which used dissection and experimentation to categorize the natural world. At times he was critical of the system, arguing that localized qualitative analysis was more effective; however, on the whole, he did believe in and actively used the system.¹¹ John Clare, on the other hand, abhorred this classification system because it supported killing plants and animals in order to classify them, and he was against any experimentation that led to dissection and death.¹² While Clare did some minor amateur experimentation, it was nearly always in a manner that would not harm the plant or animal, or at least it concentrated on doing the least harm possible. On their greater natural philosophies, these two men mostly agreed, with Clare learning a great deal from White that influenced both his prose writing and his poetry.

In the three sections that follow, I will first examine in more depth two main ways these authors views were similar, and then I will contrast this with one major difference that helped Clare create his own niche among the natural history writers of his day.¹³ The first section will focus on the choice that each writer made to focus on his local district rather than a more universal perspective; the second section will examine the way that each writer viewed animals as individual agents with linguistic abilities; and the third section will elucidate the main difference between these two writers; mainly, that White accepted some parts of Linnaean classification and dissection, whereas, Clare rejected these ideas.¹⁴ This distinction may appear minor, but it affects the entire outlook and

philosophy of their writing in many ways. Mainly, an adherent of Linnaean taxonomy tends to view the natural world as more systematic, fragmented, and rigid, whereas Clare tended to view the world more holistically and rejected the more systematic view of the world. This philosophical distinction appears throughout Clare's poetic oeuvre and explains why his work is thematically different than many of his peers. The main importance of this chapter is to illustrate how Clare's natural history writing informed his poetry and how natural history poetry should be recognized as an integral genre in Romantic studies.

1. Privileging Local, Qualitative Observation over a More Universal, Analytic Classification¹⁵

One shared theme throughout both Clare and White's natural histories was a focus on detailed observation of the natural environment. Both writers felt strongly that recording the intricate details of the natural world was integral in order to preserve the natural history of their hometowns that were drastically affected by human and governmental intervention including, but not limited to, the Enclosure Acts.¹⁶ This common thread between Clare and White resulted in them both being deeply invested in their home districts. The threat of the loss of their childhood lands and way of life helped provide an intense focus and rootedness to their writing that many other nature writers lacked. While White traveled a bit more than Clare,¹⁷ his main love and the focus of his writing remained in Selbourne. Clare never left England and only traveled outside of a ten-mile radius of his hometown on four occasions (*Natural History* xxxviii).

Both Clare and White argued that by recording nature as accurately as possible, they would better understand their environment and act as witnesses to help future generations comprehend the changes in the natural world that would be altered for the generations after them. In a period of history that was defined by revolution (political, economic, industrial, religious, poetic, and many other areas), both the literal earthly landscape and the landscape of ideas were dramatically changing. These two writers felt that if nature as it currently appeared was not recorded, it would disappear forever, and this fueled their passion for detail. Because of this, the act of bearing witness to the destruction is a political and poetic act that serves an important role in their natural history writing.

The concept of witness literature is most common in studies of the Holocaust with Elie Wiesel conveying that “the literature of testimony” is the “literary invention of our time;” although, there has been a long history of witness literature involving many topics and spanning thousands of years (Engdahl ix). For instance, Horace Engdahl wrote in *Witness Literature*, a book produced on the one hundredth anniversary of the Nobel Prize, that witness literature can be traced back to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and the myth of Philomela. After Tereus rapes Philomela and cuts out her tongue, her revenge is to weave together a testimony to the crime perpetrated on her. Engdahl explicates the scene as an act of bearing witness, writing:

Ovid pictures an extreme situation in which testimony is nearly stifled, succeeding only thanks to the fact that speech, its usual medium, can be replaced by writing ... One can imagine how Procne, when she receives

the white vestment, sounds the words to herself so that her silenced sister's cry is heard through her ... [T]estimony is more than merely a true story; that it has a direct connection with the event and with the victim; and that it is a sequel of an evil deed, like revenge. (2)

Wiesel and Engdahl suggest that bearing witness is not a passive action; instead, it is a purposeful action that involves recording the event witnessed and then actively providing a testimony of the event. This testimony often involves risk because it challenges the dominant discourse and supports a rethinking of the steps that led up to the event that was witnessed. In the case of natural history writers, they challenge the dominant discourse that enables nature to be wantonly used or destroyed. Writers like Clare and White confront the impending enclosure of their land, which many thought of as a positive act that provided jobs and wealth to large groups of people, and suggest that it will destroy nature, the communal aspect of the commons, and the traditional way of life that their families had experienced for generations. This testimony takes shape throughout their writing by providing a written record of the scenes that they loved.

An integral part of bearing witness to natural destruction is recording and preserving what the affected land was like prior to the act or acts that altered it. In order to accomplish this, the recording must be focused and detailed in order to gain a full perspective of what was lost. The argument for a recording of the natural history on the more narrow local level and not in a universalized manner is explained in the front advertisement for White's *Natural History of Selbourne*:

The Author of the following Letters takes the liberty, with all proper deference, of laying before the public his idea of parochial history, which, he thinks, ought to consist of natural productions and occurrences as well as antiquities. He is also of opinion that if stationary men would pay some attention to the districts on which they reside, and would publish their thoughts respecting the objects that surround them, from such materials might be drawn the most complete county histories, which are still wanting in several parts of this kingdom. (White 5)

The stated mission of this work is to escape the generalized observation that dominated scientific research at the time, and, in contrast, to make a plea for more writers who focus on local, qualitative descriptions in order to record the land before it is changed by modernization or enclosure.

The wording of this advertisement is especially significant because it suggests descriptions of the “natural productions and occurrences” as an integral aspect of parochial history. The term “parochial” denotes a small locality, and White called for a focus on the “productions and occurrences” within that locality. He believed that the individuality of these small locations exhibited an inherent value especially in what was produced or occurred there naturally and that his depictions of the scenes acted as a form of testimonial about the land before it was altered. Since he placed the emphasis of his work on the environment, he consistently referred to what nature produced and the millions of occurrences within that production. This extreme focus on the detail, occurrences, and productions of the local area corresponds with what in the twentieth

century will become one of the beginning points for the study of ecosystems, or the field of ecology.¹⁸ White is not normally recognized as a forerunner of the field of ecology, though he is mentioned in many books on this topic,¹⁹ but the popularity of his writing certainly encouraged the public to become more interested in the field that would eventually develop over one hundred years later.²⁰ At the same time, he produced a permanent record of many natural areas that have since disappeared or been destroyed.

John Clare's mission in regards to his natural history was similar to White's, yet much less well known. He answered White's call for "men that would pay some attention to the districts on which they reside" in both poetry and prose. In Clare's "Natural History Letter VI," he described how his observational prose helped him build a more realistic and descriptive poetry:

I think an able Essay on objects in nature that woud beautifye [sic] descriptive poetry might be entertaining & useful to form a right taste in pastoral poems that are full of nothing but the old thread bare epithets of 'sweet singing cuckoo' 'love lorn nightingale' 'fond turtles' 'sparkling brooks' 'green meadows' 'leafy woods' & c & c these make up the creation of Pastoral & descriptive poesy & every thing else is reckond [sic] low & vulgar... in fact they are too rustic for... the fashionable or prevailing system of rhyme till some bold innovating genius rises with a real love for nature & then they will no doubt be considerd [sic] as great beautys [sic] which they really are. (*Natural History* 51)

Clare criticized more traditional poetry for relying on metaphors and allusions to literary nature, false perceptions that had been passed down for generations and not the real concrete details of the natural world. He argued that more biologically accurate depictions of the natural world would enrich and beautify poetry, and that it would take an “innovating genius” to accomplish this feat. Both Clare and White argued that the job of nature writers was to dispel superstition and myths about the natural world in order to come closer to biological reality. They believed, similar to Charlotte Smith, that through a qualitative, didactic, and more biologically accurate poetry that relies less on superstition and dispelled facts, therefore readers would have a better understanding of the world that surrounds us. At the same time, more biologically accurate poetry would strengthen and alter the poetic world by creating a new kind of nature-based poetics that would act as a testimonial to nature that was at risk of being destroyed. Of course, this movement would have needed to achieve popular appeal and this did not directly occur, but in analyzing and introducing their poetry to contemporary readers a new opportunity appears for instituting this alternate poetics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The act of recording and preserving biological details as an act of bearing witness represents a common thematic element between Clare’s work and that of Gilbert White that needs further examination.

One of the areas where John Clare’s observation and recording of the natural world excelled was in his depictions of birds, especially their nests. His descriptions are far more detailed and exacting than any of his contemporary naturalists. The details are striking, for instance:

[t]he gold finch... builds its nest on the eldern or apple tree & make its [sic] outside of grey moss like the pinks which it greatly resembles but its lining is different & instead of cowhair it prefers thistle down it lays 5 pale eggs thinly sprinkled with feint red spots. (*Natural History* 45)

In this passage, he wrote about where the nest was found, what it looked like, what it was made of, and what lay inside of it. After reading Clare's observations, it would be easy to distinguish the nests of the dozens of birds that reside in and around Helpstone. In this case, if you looked at the apple tree immediately outside his cottage, there most likely would be a gold finch's nest. While most writers would see these nests as similar, or at least, not be able to distinguish the differences between them in such great detail, Clare studied them to the point that he could identify the bird just by seeing their nests. Most importantly, Clare saw intrinsic value in studying animals within their habitat, whereas the Linnaean naturalist normally killed the plant or animal and took it out of its habitat in order to dissect and classify it. This is an important distinction between the work of Clare, White, and other naturalists because studying animals in their natural habitats is an integral part of ecology. They both painstakingly recorded their environments to make a record of the plants and animals that could not write their own histories.

As Clare recorded the details of a multitude of birds' nests, he explained many reasons why some of the birds built their nests in the areas that they did. For instance, the robin "builds its nest close to [a] cottage... hovel... or behind the wood bine" to avoid all of their natural predators except for cats "whom its confidence of safety often falls prey" (*Natural History* 52). In this passage, Clare portrayed the robin in terms of having a

human-like reasoning ability, explaining that it built its nest near humans for protection, and at the same time, wrote that it has the human attribute of overconfidence that often led to its demise. He observed the wren having a similar habit of making their nest near populated areas for protection against its main predators. The wren appeared more visibly fearful than the robin. The level of personal agency that Clare observed in these birds and their homes appears throughout the large number of pages he dedicates to their nests. Similarly, he noticed the house sparrow making the choice to live in and near cottages:

I believe the reason of their choosing such an odd place to build their houses was the frequent robbery[sic] that was made on their homes in the cottage below were [sic] a nest never escaped their pilfering tho I always denied [sic] their intrusions on my part of the house yet they would [sic] watch opportunity[sic] & take them at night after I was in bed-I always thought it a very cruel practice for the overseers of the parish to give rewards to boys to kill sparrows as they often do it very cruelly & cheat the overseers ignorance a many times in taking other harmless birds to pass them for sparrows to get the bounty. (*Natural History* 137)

The house wren made every attempt to seek the protection of human cottages to protect them from both predators and the weather. In this scene, Clare's empathy for animals that appears throughout his writing emerged as he decried the act of placing a bounty on the birds' lives for the children of the town. This compassion echoes throughout his poetry and prose especially for animals that had a bounty placed on their lives like sparrows and

hedgehogs. Clare's writing on behalf of these animals and arguments against cruelty to them serves as an aggressive advocacy for treating them in a more humane manner.

Clare's empathy cut across the cultural norms of his hometown as he was often viewed as an outcast and wrote against many of the town's traditions in regards to animals.²¹ While many famous authors made similar pleas for compassion for animals, for instance Shelley's vegetarianism,²² Rousseau's plea for empathy for insects in *Emile*, Coleridge's comparison of the treatment of animals to slaves, and Wordsworth's writing against hunting, for Clare, his ideas represented an extreme view in the social circles of his more rural hometown. These ideas were much more acceptable in more metropolitan cities, whereas Clare was intentionally writing ideas that would ostracize him in his hometown. Despite consistently being viewed as an outcast, he persevered with his natural philosophy and advocacy on behalf of nature. These origins of Clare's natural philosophy are integral to understand in order to fully comprehend the distinctions between his poetry and other nature poets.

In making their nests, Clare observed that the nightingale always uses "dead oak leaves;" the pettichap makes its nest so small that they cannot get in without stretching the opening and Clare hypothesized that both the male and female birds sit on the eggs because they are so large that one would not be able to cover it (*Natural History* 69, 80). The thrush builds its nest near "large tree[s]" for protection, with "twigs," "water grains," "dead grass moss," "cow dung," mixed with "wool" and a "finer grass" lining (*Natural History* 47). In each of these examples, Clare used the common colloquial name of the bird rather than the Latin, in the case of the thrush, *Turdus philomelos*. He utilized the

colloquial name throughout his natural history writing as a purposeful rejection of the Latinized systemic classification. While an argument could easily be made that Clare used this philosophical rejection in order to avoid learning the Linnaean system, throughout his life he proved that when he had the will to learn even very difficult concepts, he would easily do so.²³ Clare's interest in exacting biological detail in his natural history writing helped him develop a talent for observing intricate details of the biological world that will later appear in his poetry. In order to understand the philosophy of a natural history poetics, it is important to illustrate how dedicated Clare was to presenting the natural world accurately and recording details that most writers and poets would ignore.

The detailed example of the thrush's nest represents the extent of Clare's obsessive recording of every minute detail in the surrounding area. Currently, the thrush remains common throughout Europe; however, even if the thrush had become extinct, we would have intricate depictions of its song, habitat, nest, and behavior thanks to Clare's work and other natural history writers that were dedicated to recording and preserving nature that might eventually disappear. These depictions are even more in depth than most contemporary naturalists. For instance, Clement, Hathway, and Wilczur in their book on thrushes write that they have "a neat cup-shaped nest lined with mud and dry grass in a bush, tree or creeper, or, in the case of the Hebridean subspecies, on the ground" (394). While this description is sufficient, it does not have the many layers that Clare's writing has, which is a result of his extensive observation and his talent for poetic prose. The thrush has a long tradition in literature dating back to Homer, and in England,

Chaucer, but after reading Clare's descriptions, there is no doubt that few other poets had a fuller understanding of the bird than he. There may have been naturalists who had similar knowledge of the thrush; although, they could not express their understanding as artistically and thoroughly. Because Clare presented these birds, and the natural world in such detail, no other writer of the nineteenth century straddled the naturalist and poetic divide more aptly than Clare. This is noteworthy because Clare viewed natural history poetry in a unique manner as a vehicle for recording and bearing witness to the natural world that may disappear. Many natural history writers advocated for nature in this manner, but few poets attempted to use poetry as a medium for natural advocacy and testimony for plants and animals that could not speak for themselves.

Similar to Clare, Gilbert White suggested that the natural history writer relies on their senses and observational abilities more than other writers. He explained that nature writers take the composite of all their senses and combine them into a picture that will stimulate the reader's mind. White wants his readers to picture his intricate natural scenes and contemplate their place in the world and their relationship with nature. Because of the importance of presenting an accurate scene for the reader, White takes great care in every minute feature, including his verbal illustration of two intersecting roads:

These roads... are, by the traffic of ages, and the fretting of water, worn down through the first stratum of our freestone, and partly through the second; so that they look more like water-courses than roads... In many places they are reduced sixteen or eighteen feet beneath the level of the fields; and after floods, and in frosts, exhibit very grotesque and wild

appearances, from the tangled roots that are twisted among the strata... and especially when those cascades are frozen into icicles, hanging in all the fanciful shapes of frost-work. These rugged gloomy scenes affright the ladies when they peep down into them from the paths above, and make timid horsemen shudder while they ride along them; but delight the naturalist with their various botany, and particularly with their curious filices with which they abound. (White 15-6)

Significantly, White chose a scene where humans have interacted and affected the land for centuries. Basically, humans have altered the ecosystem of this land and these alterations have now become a part of the landscape. The thorough details in the scene include both natural (flowing water) and the human impact on the land. This scene illustrates White's artistic eye as he traces the scene from the surface through each level and every jagged edge between. Then, White wrote about the difference between people who view the world through a normal lens and naturalists. He depicted the scene as "grotesque," "wild," "tangled," "twisted," "rugged," and "gloomy." For the average observer, White writes that they would "shudder" at this scene or it would "affright" the average "lad[y]" viewer. However, for the naturalist, this scene is a "delight" and abounds with curiosities. This landscape provides a wealth of discoveries when one views it through the frame of a naturalist and a horror scene otherwise.

Gilbert White used many intricate details to depict the landscape of Selbourne and listed many individual features of animals, insects, and vegetation. For the most part, he wrote in intense detail each of the characteristics of these individual plants and animals of

the ecosystem, but rarely did he tie them together in a composite sketch as he did in the scene of the two roads. White recorded a multitude of individual parts of the ecosystem and on a few occasions connects the parts, but for the most part he let the reader combine all of these parts to make an amalgamation of the whole. Instead, White focuses on rainfall, vegetation, animal life, and details of village life such as the number of poor people that reside there, average baptismal age, the type of houses the people live in and many other random facts. The focus of John Clare's natural history writings is slightly different as he emphasized the interactions that occur between the plants, animals, insects and their environment. Clare investigated similar subjects as White; however, his focus on landscapes tied together the scene in a way that White rarely did. When the readers are presented with animals, insects, and even humans in their environment and the interactions between them and their environment, they understand the ecosystem as a holistic entity, not just discordant parts. Clare's writing fulfills White's quest for the composite image of the entire system of the natural world providing the reader with not just a series of incoherent parts, but instead, an organic, holistic vision of nature that will influence the way that he wrote poetry as well.

Clare's landscapes are both detailed and poetic. When he portrays a scene, it is thronging with life, with plants and land just as alive as the animals in the scene:

The tall poplars peeping above the rest like leafy steeples the grey willows
shining chilly in the sun as if the morning mist still lingered on its cool
green I felt the beauty of these with eager delight the gadflys noontday
hum the fainter murmur of the beefly 'spinning in the evening ray' the

dragonflys in spangled coats darting like winged arrows down the thin stream . . . I lovd [sic] to see the heaving grasshopper in his coat of delicate green bounce from stub to stub I listend [sic] the hedgecriccket with rapture. . . . (Robinson 25-6)

In this scene, the trees come alive “peeping” and the “murmur” of dragonflies mix with many other sounds to create a symphonic sound that penetrates through the scene. Clare illustrated, through his writing, a living and breathing ecosystem that was not a series of individual parts; instead, all the sounds combined to make an organic, living world that thrived around him as he enjoyed the experience. He recorded the scene in a manner that reflects the interconnected nature of the environment and portrayed the significance of all the elements of the ecosystem working together. If any part of the ecosystem is destroyed it will affect the entire system.

Many other writers influenced John Clare that led to his descriptions of nature as holistic ecosystems. For instance, in reading James Thomson, Clare pulled out his favorite passage from “Winter,” which, according to Grainger, he misremembered, but was close to accurate: “-rapid & deep / It boils & wheels & foams & flounders through / Snatchd in short eddies plays the witherd leaf / & on the flood the dancing feather floats” (*Natural History* 201). The fact that Clare emphasized this passage is striking because of the similarity to his writing as the scene is teeming with life, sound, and movement. The reader feels drawn into the scene and its physicality. Thomson’s writing focused on animation, movement, and vitality, which influenced Clare enormously. Clare wrote in his “Essay on Taste” that taste is “a uniformity of excellence-it modifys expression &

selects images-it arranges & orders matters & thoughts” (*Natural History* 267). This definition of taste defined both his nature writing and his poetry. He argued that the writer’s job is to “select images,” “modify,” and “arrange” them. In his nature poetry, Clare did not attempt to lift imagination to a higher level, or create a subjective filter to view nature through. Instead, he viewed the job of a writer like that of a realist painter: to attend carefully to accurate, non-idealized representations of the natural world. Of course, it is impossible to completely present the scenes in a realistic manner, but that was Clare’s lofty goal throughout his natural history oeuvre. Because of this, his poetry is didactic in the way it illustrates biological details for the reader. Examples of the influence of Thomson and other writers that influenced Clare will be expanded on in later chapters of this work.

2. Animals as Individual Agents: A Study of the Language of Birds

Because White’s *Natural History* and Clare’s natural history letters both examine the natural world that surrounded them through a radically close lens, they focused on many individual biological organisms, their habitats, and the relationship between the organism and their habitat. At the same time, they established a form of authorial humility in their writing, where the speaker of the poem tends to be almost invisible or in the background that that directly contrasts with poems like “Beachy Head” and many other poems where the speaker is in the foreground. While many authors had the speaker in the foreground of their writing pushing the narrative or description, Clare relegated the speaker to the background of the poem. The term authorial humility, in this context, refers to the idea that Clare produced writing that attempted to present the natural world

as biologically accurately as possible, not through the filter of imagination. While it would be impossible to completely accomplish this feat, it is significantly distinct from the overt role of the imagination in the presentation of nature in much of the poetry of the time.²⁴ Clare and White focused their writing on the actual experience of listening to a bird or watching an owl in danger and attempted to present this scene with as little of a subjective filter as possible. Of course, it is impossible to completely eliminate the filter of the imagination because language itself is an art of the imagination, but they made an honest effort to concentrate on biological details.

In taking this approach to writing, Clare and White attempted to bridge a gap between biological science, which began to be formalized in this period,²⁵ and literary writing. While the way that they recorded and presented the scenes were both subjective and artistic, it was also realistic to the point of biological accuracy and allowed the reader to view interactions that they may not have previously noticed. In many cases, through their qualitative observation, they made insights or findings that the scientific world had not yet discovered,²⁶ or they made similar discoveries, but with fewer instruments or access to other natural historians work. This insertion of biological detail and accuracy challenges our preconceived notions of poetic discourse through limiting subjectivity and privileging a more objective scientific accuracy. At the same time, these authors used many literary devices such as personification, similes, and metaphors, along with qualitative descriptions in order to promote the individuality and agency of animals that helps readers understand a more holistic view of the natural world through deconstructing many anthropocentric concepts.

One method that Clare and White employed to understand the intricacies of the natural world was to begin viewing plants, animals, and bodies of water individually, as agents that may be understood by humans if observed closely with patience and humility. What these writers found in listening intensely to the natural world and examining different parts of nature as individual agents enabled them to make more associations between humans and nature that gave them a better ecological understanding of the interactions of the numerous parts of the ecosystem. Clare and White saw many parts of nature through the lens of being their equals. In order to understand this connection to nature that writers like Clare and White discovered through close observation, it required examining and listening intensely, with humility, to nature for much of their lives in an effort to understand the world and their interactions with it more comprehensively. Although viewing plants and animals as equal to humanity represents a radically conservationist mindset, it enables the writers the ability to convey the significance of caring for the environment and the consequences of its destruction.

As part of viewing animals as individual agents, Gilbert White, in his *Natural History*, examined the idea that animals had a literal language and the possibility that they were able to communicate. While many authors and poets personified nature metaphorically, White did not view this as a metaphorical language; instead, he believed that animals were actually able to communicate, even if on a very instinctual level, and he often suggested that they did have personal agency. White's letter on the "language of birds" illustrates this continual attempt to understand the language of the animals in the natural world around him:

From the motion of birds, the transition is natural enough to their notes and language... Not that I would pretend to understand their language... but... many of the winged tribes have various sounds and voices adapted to express their various passions, wants, and feelings; such as anger, fear, love, hatred, hunger, and the like. All species are not equally eloquent; some are copious and fluent as it were in their utterance, while others are confined to a few important sounds: no bird, like the fish kind, is quite mute, though some are rather silent. The language of birds is very ancient, and, like other ancient modes of speech, very elliptical; little is said, but much is meant and understood. (White 203-4)

The last sentence of this section is especially powerful, likening the language of birds to “ancient modes of speech” suggesting that perhaps human language was once modeled similarly to birds, and perhaps we would be able to understand early modes of communication through studying their language. White also gave birds human attributes such as “passions, wants, and feelings... anger, fear, love, hatred, [and] hunger.” He used personification as a writing technique that enables the reader to empathize with the animals, yet there is also sincerity in White’s empathic depictions. He believed that if we listen patiently to these creatures, we might be able to understand and possibly communicate with them. An integral part of literature of witness is that the author must use many different techniques to enable readers to identify with the figures that are being destroyed. In this case, because of White’s radical conservationist philosophy, White enables readers to empathize with birds as fellow creatures and equals.

Of course, in our contemporary society the idea of animals communicating linguistically is not unusual as chimpanzees use sign language and their noises have often been able to be translated for meaning. Scientists have been able to communicate with dolphins,²⁷ understand whale songs,²⁸ interpret the dances of bees,²⁹ and hundreds of other insects and animals. However, two hundred years ago this idea was more radical and the idea of literally communicating with animals had, and continues to have, many philosophic humanistic implications. For instance, it questions the idea of human exceptionalism in the world,³⁰ creates a new understanding of the interconnections of the ecosystem, and challenges the idea of industrial progress because of the environmental degradation that results from this industrialization. The empathy for nature and the realization of the individual agency of plants and animals would create a moral quandary that would be difficult to reconcile with the industrial revolution and religious dogmatism that preaches human exceptionalism, especially for sympathetic writers such as Clare and White. For instance, if we were to follow their radical conservationist ideology about animals being viewed as near equals, it would be nearly impossible to build buildings because of their impact on the ecosystem, extremely difficult to eat in a responsible manner, and to consistently live in an environmentally responsible manner.

Even in our contemporary era, the question of whether or not animals are able to communicate on similar levels as humans is widely debated in the scientific community. While most biologists agree that animals have many different modes of communication, the scientific community continually debates over whether animals are able to communicate in a complex manner like human beings.³¹ For instance, there is no doubt

that many animals can communicate with other animals about where to find a source of food; however, are they able to communicate about abstract thought? Many animals are able to communicate danger to their young, but are they able to communicate complex ideas such as the past and future? Human beings have many distinct languages; therefore, in terms of linguistics we have many different signs that have no relation to what they signify. For instance, there is no inherent connection between the English word *bird*, the French word *oiseau*, the Spanish word *pájaro*, and the actual animal that those words signify; there is a gap between the signified and signifier. Do animals have this same ability to separate signs from their signification? Does a thrush have a different signifier for communicating danger than a robin? Can various species of birds understand the signifiers of other species? These are questions that are still being debated by scientists and will continue to be debated for years to come.

Humans are able to use language that denotes multiple meanings and exhibit a complexity that exists both on a semantic level and on a more figurative level; do animals share in this ability? Finally, humans have the ability to discuss language, analyze the meaning of language, and philosophize about and change our language; do animals have a similar ability to philosophize, debate, and change linguistic meaning? Or, is animal communication more stable and relatively unchanging? These are all questions that are currently being debated in the scientific community and many of these scientists refer back to the work of Gilbert White as a place where these questions began.³² While there were predecessors that asked similar questions, White both asked them extensively and brought popularity to the field in attempting to figure out the answers to these questions.

An example of the work currently occurring with animal communication is that of Jeffery Boswall, who has recorded the sounds of thousands of birds and analyzed them for possible linguistic elements. Boswell argues that birds use language, but it is not nearly as sophisticated as human language:

Human 'language' is the symbolic use of sounds to which meanings have been assigned by cultural convention. With such language we are able to describe abstract ideas and to convey meanings about the past and the future. Few if any animals - certainly no wild birds - could approach this. Their songs and cries for the purpose of communication are more directly akin to our non-verbal communication - sobs, screams, grunts, sighs and our tones of voice. Birds' songs and calls express how the bird feels at the time; they reflect the mood of the moment. This is not to say that they cannot convey a precise meaning. Some birdcalls are like human words in that they refer to very specific happenings - like the different warning cries for 'airborne enemy approaching' and 'ground enemy approaching.'

(Boswall 249)

After Boswall's thorough analysis of the language of birds, he comes to the conclusion that birds can communicate, but mostly on an instinctual level that is comparable to humans "non-verbal communication." However, he does say that this non-verbal communication is able to convey very precise meanings at times, such as when a predator approaches from air or land.³³ It is quite incredible that Gilbert White came to nearly the same conclusions as Boswall over two hundred years earlier.

The complexity of bird communication becomes even more impressive as Boswall suggests that “there is not one song language of birds but as many as there are species of birds – thousands” (Boswall 252). Beyond this, he makes the claim that within bird species individuals are recognized, each with their own “voice print” (Boswall 253). This is the same idea that White philosophized about hundreds of years earlier. In attempting to observe, describe and literally record a bird song, Boswall invokes Gilbert White’s work:

Gilbert White, the gentle curate of Selborne and the father of English natural history, was the first to sort out from one another three very similar-looking birds, by their songs, the willow warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*, wood warbler *Ph. sibilatrix* and chiffchaff *Ph. collybita*. That was 250 years ago. Today in tropical forests virtually the only way to know which birds are about, is to know their songs and calls. (Boswall 254)

Boswall credits Gilbert White as the “father of English natural history” and mentions one of the species of birds that White was the first to distinguish. So, even in contemporary animal language studies, the early work of Gilbert White is mentioned as a precursor and inspirer of modern day ornithology.

White’s passage on the “language of birds” emphasized his sincerity in attempting to recover and understand the language of animals through comparing many different species. He argued that some birds have higher-level communication, while others have only basic levels and some are nearly “mute” like “fish.” At the same time that White

argued that these birds have linguistic capability, he also admitted that he does not fully understand them. However, through close observation and patience comprehension of their expressions is possible, which may be the beginning of deciphering their language. One of the most significant words in the passage on bird language is White's describing of their language as "elliptical," suggesting it as cryptic, obscure, or difficult to determine the meaning behind their language. Matter of fact, when language is referred to as "elliptical," it most often connotes a language that is deliberately cryptic or coded. This suggests that the birds use a language that is meant only be understood by other members of their species. Basically, in this passage White suggested that the birds have personal agency and a language that they purposefully obscure in order to prevent other animals from understanding, so if one were to break their code, they would be able to understand this ancient "language of birds." White observed an enormous level of personal agency in creatures that humans often view as objects, or in many cases, food.

Throughout his work, White provided these depictions of the sounds of nature, but nowhere did he do this more than with birds. For instance, the cock bird was "piping" and "humming" (White 31), while snipes "hum as they are descending" nearly like that of a turkey (White 47). Then, he referred to two different kinds of willow-wrens, which had a "joyous, easy, laughing note" and the "other a harsh loud chirp" (White 45). In his poem "The Naturalist's Summer Evening Walk," he described the "clamorous curlew" of the female cuckoo, the shrillness of the cricket's cry, and the churn-owl's "chattering song" (White 64-5). White depicted the notes of the eagle as "shrill and piercing," while owls had "expressive notes" and "hoot in a fine vocal sound" connecting the hoot of an

owl to the human voice (White 203). Then he differentiated the voices of the owl depending on their emotion at the time: when angry they emitted a “horrible scream” and can “snore and hiss when they mean to menace” (White 204). Ravens had a loud “croak” and a “deep solemn note,” once again he referred to the emotions of the bird. He wrote about rooks in mating season that sung with “gaiety” in their hearts (White 204). Next, he wrote about parrots that had “many modulations of voice” and could learn human sounds, while doves “coo in an amorous and mournful manner” (White 205). The woodpecker had a “loud and hearty laugh” and the fern owl serenaded his mate with the “clattering of castanets” (White 205). White weaved together natural history writing in his poetry and prose as he recorded and attempted to translate the meaning behind these animals’ sounds in a similar manner as Procne attempting to interpret Philomela’s weaving. In the same way that Horace Engdahl, in *Witness Literature*, considers Procne’s translation of Philomela’s weaving an act where Procne is giving voice to Philomela’s testimony, Gilbert White is attempting to understand the testimony of bird language in order to help humans understand them.

White continued to record the natural scenes as the swallow produced a “shrill alarm” that told its family that a hawk was near. At the same time, he wrote that the peacock was a beautiful bird whose notes were “grating” and “shocking” (White 206). The sound of the peacock is compared with other animals like “yelling cats” and the “braying of an ass” (White 206). White characterizes the voice of the goose using the simile “trumpet-like” and metaphors like “clanking.” Then, when they are protecting their young, they let out a menacing “hiss” (White 206). In each of these descriptions,

White did not merely attribute sounds to the birds, he also described motivation and emotion. He attempted to interpret the meaning behind their language making an intentional ethical stance in viewing them as individual, thoughtful agents rather than instinctual beings that cannot act individually. Then, White reached out to his friends and neighbors for insights that he was unable to ascertain on his own:

A neighbour of mine, who is said to have a nice ear, remarks that the owls about this village hoot in three different keys, in G flat, or F sharp, in B flat and A flat. He heard two hooting to each other, the one in A flat, and the other in B flat. Query: Do these different notes proceed from different species, or only from various individuals? The same person finds upon trial that the note of the cuckoo (of which we have but one species) varies in different individuals... As to nightingales, he says that their notes are so short, and their transitions so rapid, that he cannot well ascertain their key. Perhaps in a cage and in a room, their notes may be more distinguishable.

(White 125)

White posited a fascinating question as to whether the different notes of owls come from different species or individual owls within the species, which is similar to the questions that Jeffrey Boswall investigates in his work. The fact that White was impressed with his neighbor's attention to bird individualization reveals that White believed that birds exhibited more personal agency than humans normally attribute to them. The question extends beyond individualization to the degree of individualization: do animals such as birds have similar individualization as humans, or are they more uniform as a species?

The answer to this question will determine the level of personal agency that animals have an impact the way that humans interact with the animal world.

White continued to record natural sounds as he was amazed at the distinction between the sound of ducks based on gender, for the female was “loud and sonorous,” while the drake “harsh, feeble, and scarce discernible” (White 206). The cock turkey had a “pert and petulant note” while in defense mode, yet a much softer tone when they are not (White 206). White deliberately and carefully chose the words for his characterizations. As one reads his work, it brings back memories of hearing these animals in the past, or, if you have not heard them before, you can clearly imagine the sounds and actions in your mind. The incredible part of White’s scenes is that the animals have human-like qualities: some are lovers, others mournful, have a deep belly laugh, or sing sweetly. He uses metaphors and personification in order to create empathy and emphasize his advocacy for his view of individualization and the personal agency of animals. The birds experience pain, fear, and want to protect those close to them. The personification is not entirely metaphorical: instead, White’s technique shows the reader a natural scene and has them relate to the creatures as fellow individual agents living together in one world. This nature writing connects humankind to nature in a way that pure classification cannot by helping the readers to relate with the animals through similar emotions and life experiences.

Gilbert White continued to write about the importance of sound for the naturalist many times throughout his writing, but one of the most personal, gripping moments occurred as he wrote about losing his sense of hearing:

Frequent returns of deafness incommode me sadly, and half disqualify me for a naturalist; for, when those fits are upon me, I lose all the pleasing notices and little intimations arising from rural sounds; and May is to me as silent and mute with respect to the notes of birds, etc., as August. My eyesight is, thank God, quick and good; but with respect to the other sense, I am, at times, disabled. (White 164)

As White described his sadness at beginning to lose his hearing, he wrote that it “half” disqualified him as a naturalist and suggested that recording sounds in the natural world consists of a large part of the naturalist’s job. From his perspective, to him May sounded as silent as August, he could not accurately describe nor philosophize about nature.

White methodically deconstructed anthropocentrism and placed animals on equal footing with humanity in order to help readers understand his environmental advocacy. Importantly, he did it in a biologically realist manner and not in a sentimentalized way.³⁴ Ultimately, what White accomplished through these scenes of animals interacting with the natural world was what he writes in the final lines of “The Naturalist’s Summer Evening Walk,” like a painter forming a composite scene, for this writer/poet, “Each rural sight, each sound, each smell combine” to create a world where each part interacts with each other and the whole. This composite scene, and the many interactions contained within it, show the pivotal role that each part of nature plays in the entire ecosystem and how destruction of any part of that system can have undetermined results.

White’s characterization of a natural history writer as someone who combines all of the senses into a “composite scene” represents an important aspect of both his and

Clare's work. They did not merely observe and present these observations to their readers. Instead, they created an amalgam of all their observations and presented it in a qualitative, complex, manner integrating their ethical beliefs with biologically accurate descriptions and using literary devices to make these connections. These techniques encourage the reader to rethink the way they view the world and create a new literary aesthetic based in biological science and environmental advocacy. When he presents the natural world to the reader, it represents a complex series of verbal illustrations that teem with life and activity and resemble the concept of an ecosystem. The reader may come away with a modified understanding of how the natural world interacts and relates with the human world. This altered understanding may produce a new, more conservationist understanding of how to interact with the natural world.

One of the most direct influences of White's *Natural History* appears in Clare's focus on recording the sounds of the natural world. For instance, throughout Clare's poetic oeuvre, there was very little mention of the bird that appears the most in Romantic poetry, the nightingale. However, the nightingale appeared throughout his natural history writings along with hundreds of other birds. For Clare, the nightingale did not represent a poetic vehicle or a metaphor; instead, it was a living, breathing, and individual bird. His natural history perspective of the nightingale attempted to evacuate the literary history of the bird and view it through a narrow biological lens. When we compare Clare's writing on the nightingale with that of other Romantic poets, we find that other writers were attempting to make larger philosophical, political, or ideological points. While there was

a biological element to many of the other writers' works, they often portrayed the bird through an historical, metaphorical lens.

An example of a writer that wrote about the nightingale, but privileged politics, literary history, and philosophy over biology was John Keats in his "Ode to a Nightingale." Nicholas Roe writes in his book *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* that the main idea of "Ode to a Nightingale" was not the bird or the environment, but a series of contradictions, such as: "opposition between sensual life and 'thoughts;' joy and philosophy; imagination and science; romantic love and capitalism; the liberties of the pagan world and the oppressive realities of 'a time when Pan is not sought'" (60). Roe argues that Keats used "classical antiquity" to address the contradictions throughout the poem. In reading the poem, it is easy to see that biology is not completely evacuated as Keats writes "As does the nightingale, unperched high, / and cloister'd among cool and bunched leaves-- / She sings but to her love" (Lines 816-30). Keats writes about the area where the nightingale likes to nest, but importantly, he writes that the female sings, which is biologically inaccurate. If Keats were writing as a natural historian, this would be a major flaw, but Keats is writing as a poet and philosopher, which meant that an occasional biological inaccuracy is not a major flaw. Instead, the minor error only emphasizes the point that the significance of the bird in the poem is not species identification or individual biological identity. Rather, Keats is merging the bird "symbolic[ally]" with "political associations" and other philosophical ideas (Roe 190).

As Keats uses the figure of the nightingale to address political and philosophical concerns, he also uses the bird and the poem to stake a place in literary history. Nicholas

Roe suggests that Keats purposefully echoes Milton's *Paradise Lost* in order to transform the "Miltonic figures of city and country" (198). Keats's criticism of city life is apparent as he criticizes it for causing "weariness," "fever," and "fret" (Line 23). This sense of literary historical placement is something that is nearly absent from John Clare's natural history poetry as he attempts to ignore literary history and as he would later write "I found the poems in the fields / And only wrote them down" ("Sighing for Retirement" Lines 15-6). Of course, Clare was well versed in literary history, so it is impossible to completely evacuate it from his writing. However, by focusing on natural history, he was often able to nearly accomplish this feat, especially in comparison with his peers who were trying to place themselves in literary history.

Through his narrow, biological perspective, the individualization that Clare used to portray each of the hundreds of birds in his nature writing is quite astounding. For instance, one noise of the Nightingale he wrote as "chur chur," and even specified what the bird attempted to communicate through this sound: "I always took the chur chur as a food call & tooting noise as a token of alarm" (*Natural History* 78). Clare then criticized the bird in a manner that focuses on biological description and ignores literary history, writing that "the Nightingale which appears as timid on the wing as a young bird for fright it as you will it cannot be urged to venture" (*Natural History* 108). This bird, which has been used throughout hundreds years of poetry to symbolize many concepts, Clare called "timid" and "fright[ful]." Like no other natural history writer, Clare individualized many different birds and attempted to interpret their language. At the very least, he

attempted to connect their sounds with their emotions in a manner that would help readers understand the actual bird outside of literary tradition.

Clare's attempt to record and understand the nightingale occurs towards the end of his natural history writings and highlights the incredible ear that he had for the sounds of the natural world. One can imagine him lying with his back against a tree madly scribbling, scratching out, and eventually recording the following song:

Chee chew chee chew chee / Chew-cheer cheer cheer / Chew chew chew
chee / -up cheer up cheer up / tweet tweet tweet jug jug jug / wew wew
wew-chur chur / woo it woo it tweet tweet / tweet jug jug jug / tee rew tee
rew tee rew-gur / gur-chew rit chew rit-chur chur chur / chur will-will
will-will tweet-em / tweet em jug jug jug jug / grig grig grig chew chew /
wevy wit wevy wit / wevy wit-chee-chit / chee-chit chee chit / weewit
weewit wee / wit cheer cheer / cheer-pelew / pelew pelew- / bring a jug
bring a / jug bring a jug (*Natural History* 311)

Even with such an intricate depiction of the sound of the nightingale, Clare still expressed frustration at not being able to get it just right, and explained that “many of her notes are sounds that cannot be written with the alphabet having no letters that can syllable the sounds” (*Natural History* 311). Clare explained the frustration of an artist, who knows that no matter how hard they try, they will never be able to portray the scene exactly as it felt – exact language just does not exist for the actual experience. No matter how hard he tries, he cannot reconcile the gap between the signifier and signified, however, in listening attentively to the bird and trying to determine the intentions behind their

communication, he can mediate that gap with great care so as to a fuller understand of the animal world by beginning to understand parts of their natural language.

Clare used similar methods as White to individualize different birds and translate their unique sounds into writing. One of Clare's most vivid recordings of a bird sound was "The Butter Bump":

[L]ike the bellowing of bulls... indistinct muttering sort of sound like the word butter utterd in a hurried manner & bump comes very quck [sic] after & bumps a sound on the ear as if echo had mockd [sic] the bump of a gun just as the muttr ceasd [sic] nay this is not like I have often thought the putting ones mouth to the bung hole of an empty large cask & uttering the word 'butter bump' sharply would imitate the sound exactly after its first call that imitates the word 'butter bump' it repeats the sound bump singly several times in a more determind [sic] & loud manner-thus [see text for emphasis] it strikes people at first as something like the sound of a coopers mallet hitting on empty casks when I was a boy this was one of the fen wonders. (*Natural History* 89)

In this passage, it is clear to see that Clare was able to convey the language of the butter bump and translated it into sounds that the reader would recognize. This translation of sound enabled the reader to better understand animal communication.

Clare mimicked White's use of onomatopoeic words that imitated the sounds of birds, but he added another layer to his analysis while recording these sounds. Instead of merely mimicking the sound, he attempted to compare it to an artificially created sound

that the reader would recognize. This new layer of description both helps the reader imagine the sound and also gives a suggestion for how one could attempt to communicate with the birds. The previous example of the butter bump illustrates this technique, as does his depiction of the bird that is called by the names: fern owl, goat sucker, night jar, or night hawk. He writes about an attempt to mimic this bird's sound:

It is a trembling sort of cooing sound which may be nearly imitated by making a crooing... noise & at the same time patting the finger before the mouth to break the sound like stopping a hole in the German flute to quaver a double sound on one note this noise is generally made as it descends from a bush or tree for its prey it is said to feed on insects that breed on the fox fern whence its name it is a beautiful mottld [sic] bird.

(Natural History 33)

Clare not only depicted the sound in depth, he also illustrated how to mimic the sound, and when the bird makes that type of sound. This section on the Butter Bump, multiplied by hundreds of birds and hundreds of sounds became the beginning of understanding the language of birds with the hope of mimicking and possibly even communicating with such birds at some point in the future.

Much like White, Clare's natural history contains an extensive variety of these bird sounds. For example, the night owl:

[that] startld [him] with its odd noise which was a dead thin whistling sort of sound which I fancied was the whistle call of robbers for it was much like the sound of a man whistling in fear of being heard by any but his

companions tho [sic] it was continued much longer than a man could [sic] hold his breath it had no trembling in it like a game keeps dog whistle but was one thin continued sound (*Natural History* 35)

Clare continued to mix onomatopoeia and similes with characterizations of how humans would be able to mimic the sound and speculated as to why the birds make certain sounds. He indicated that the female nightingale was silent as soon as they give birth to their young, but then they make a “gurring guttural noise,” which Clare translated as a call to their young for food (*Natural History* 38). The male nightingale makes a “chur chur” sound to call its offspring for food and a loud “tooting noise” when in danger (*Natural History* 78). Sparrows make a “cree creeing” sound and when they “chitter” it means that bad weather is coming (*Natural History* 85, 339). Starnels make a “loud chattering” when quarreling and playing, and the owl a “Tewit[tewho]” sound (*Natural History* 339, 98). Margaret Grainger wrote of a list of other bird sounds described by Clare such as: “‘crank,’ ‘scold,’ ‘mutter,’ ‘hiss,’ and ‘twit;’ they ‘suther,’ ‘whew,’ ‘swee,’ ‘twitter’ their wings, ‘nimble,’ ‘swop,’ and ‘dabble’” (121). These sounds are all onomatopoeic, individualized, metaphorical, and in most cases, Clare attempted to translate their meaning. This attempt at translation is a step towards communicating with animals and eventually recording their testimony about the destruction of their natural habitats.

Clare’s birds are uniquely personal agents that make noises and sounds that he, like White, believed signified modes of simple communication. If observed, recorded, and philosophized about, he believed that humans could understand and perhaps even

communicate with these animals. These observations, recording of the birds' sounds, and the natural history lens that Clare viewed the world through affected the way that Clare wrote his poetry. In fact, Grainger claims that Clare wrote more "bird poems than any other British writer" and the poems promote the idea that the birds are individual agents equal to humans rather than just objects in the natural scene (121). These poems will be examined in later chapters of this work. His unique views of animal communication, rejecting human exceptionalism, and natural history writing in general creates a distinctly different kind of poetry than that of his contemporaries because Clare seeks to blend biologically accurate details with literary tools in order to promote an ethical stance on the nature of the animal world.

3. Where Clare and White Differ: Classification and Experimentation

While Gilbert White's natural histories influenced Clare's writing tremendously, there were two areas in particular that Clare rejected: White's attachment to Linnaean classification and his taste for experimentation through dissection. Clare rejected the Linnaean classification system calling it "artificial," while White interspersed it throughout his natural history writing. Clare argued that the Linnaean system represented, "the hard nicknaming... of unutterable words now in vogue [and] only overloads it in mystery till it makes it darkness visible" (*Natural History* 13). Of course, his view of Linnaean classification is both reactionary and radical at the same time because classification is a necessary part of understanding nature; however, this radical philosophy led him to focus more completely on qualitative studies, an area in which he excelled. Clare made the claim that the Linnaean system obscured the holistic qualities of

the natural world; therefore, it masked the true nature of the world. He even suggested that his ignorance of formal botany gave him strength as a nature writer:

[B]eing ignorant of botany it may be thought impertinent but I dare say a knowledge of botany would not make me a greater lover of wild flowers than I am I love them to enthusiasm & there is many a namless [sic] flower that I lovd [sic] when a boy & worship still. (*Natural History* 22)

This paragraph illustrates why many biographers and critics attempted to make Clare into a Rousseauian noble savage-like figure.³⁵ He has an apparent innocence that allows him to have a passion for the world as a child would and expresses it throughout his writing. Although the noble savage image does not really fit him, because he was self-educated in a multitude of subject areas, Clare does have an enamoring, child-like quality that helps us see the world through his passionate and often simple lens. Furthermore, he expounded that his favorite flowers are wild and that “none are weeds” to him (*Natural History* 23). It is of particular note that Clare used the term weed as if it was derogatory, and he instead wrote that these plants were his favorites. He inverted the meaning of the term weed to make it a positive term rather than the traditional meaning as a nuisance. This deconstruction of the term weed was examined in the first chapter and will be analyzed throughout the rest of this study.

The reason that Clare rejected the Linnaean classification system was because of his ethical stance and compassion for animals that prevents him, despite his curiosity, to have any interest in “specimens” or dissection (*Natural History* 38). Even in regards to plants, he would only take clippings in his own garden and would leave any others alone.

For him, the world existed as a living-breathing ecosystem that if killed for purposes of classification affected all of the surrounding systems:

I love to see the nightingale in its hazel retreat & the cuckoo hiding in its solitudes of oaken foliage & not examine their carcasses in glass cases yet naturalists & botanists seem to have no taste for this poetical feeling they merely make collections of dry specimens classing them after Linnæus [sic] into tribes and families... well every one to his hobby I have none of this curiosity [sic] about me tho [sic] I feel happy as they can in finding a new species of field flower or butterfly which I have not seen before yet I have no desire further to dry the plant or torture the Butterfly by sticking it on a cork board with a pin. (*Natural History* 38)

This distaste for the positivist scientific methods of the time depicts the tremendous divergence between Clare, White, and their contemporaries. While White was happy to dissect and other natural history writers were as well, there were many that did not. Most of these writers that did not dissect “specimens” still used the Linnaean system that was based on the premise of the plant or animal needing to be dead and removed from its habitat in order to be classified. The animals needed to be dead so that they were available for dissection and much of the classification was based on determinations that could only be verified through dissection. Clare more than disliked this system or refused to use it, he rejected such a system that “torture[d]” butterflies and many thousands of other animals. His writing was a celebration of life, built on qualitative descriptions, not

focused on classification and the attempt to organize what the English elite society deemed to be wild.

Clare made an even more critical analysis of the Linnaean classification system as he attempted to read and understand it through the book *Lee's Botany*:

I have puzzled wasted hours over Lee's Botany to understand a shadow of the system so as to be able to class the wild flowers peculiar to my own neighborhood for I find it woud [sic] require a second Adam to find names for them in my way & a second Solomon to understand them in Linnaeus's system (*Natural History* 283)

Once again, Clare referred to this system as a “shadow” system that obscured the natural world by attributing classifications that were determined through one point of view and limited because it did not allow for individualization and personal agency in animal species.³⁶ One of his harshest criticisms of the system was its purposeful obfuscation of what seemed naturally simplistic to him.³⁷ He suggested that it would take a second “Adam” to name everything even in his little town and that only a second “Solomon” would understand such a complicated system. Basically, he believed that instead of wasting time indoors studying books, dissecting, and classifying, a naturalist should go out into the world and closely observe, record, and that qualitative description is a better use of natural historians' time. Through his qualitative observations, Clare was able to gain a fuller understanding of how all the pieces fit together and interact. He argued that those who classify and dissect are just seeing millions of pieces of the whole, while those that seek a qualitative approach gain a broader, more holistic view. Of course, this

reaction against dissection is not unique to Clare, as Charlotte Smith spoke out against dissection, as did many writers, the most famous of which is now William Wordsworth's line from "The Tables Turned" that intellectuals "murder to dissect." Classification and dissection are considered necessary by most people, however, qualitative, holistic observation should always be an equal partner in this process and the dominance of quantitative methods minimized the perceived importance of natural history writers like White and Clare.

An example of this major philosophical difference in perspectives between Clare and White appeared in White's consistent references to Linnaean names. For instance, in the *Natural History*, White referred to Linnaeus twenty one times directly and used Linnaean terminology hundreds of times. Also, in White's letters to his brother John, as John asked him for advice on writing natural history, White sent him the following books: Linnaeus' *Systema Naturea*, Linnaeus *On Insects*, Lee's *On Botany*, Stillingfleet, Cleghorn, and Scopoli, all of which follow Linnaeus' systematic classification (Foster 32). Paul Foster, in his article "The Gibraltar Collections," writes about a detailed correspondence between White and his brother John that showed White knowing the systemic classification of Linnaeus and often using it, but privileging the more qualitative descriptions, while his brother John became more enthralled with the systematic classification. Foster's detailed account of this correspondence makes the argument that John created a natural history that was equally divided between qualitative and quantitative analysis. However, John was not happy with this work, and it ended up lost or destroyed. In this correspondence, Gilbert White established that the Linnaean

classification system was useful; although, he emphasized his belief that qualitative natural history analysis was an integral part of understanding the entirety of the natural world.³⁸

Through this discourse between White and his brother John, as well as in the *Natural History*, we get a better understanding of White's use of dissection. Because he believed in using dissection, he understood the inner workings of a deer better than Clare ever could as evidenced by writing:

If some curious gentleman would procure the head of a fallow-deer, and have it dissected, he would find it furnished with two spiracula, or breathingplaces, besides the nostrils... When deer are thirsty they plunge their noses, like some horses, very deep under water, while in the act of drinking, and continue them in that situation for a considerable time: but... they can open two vents, one at the inner corner of each eye, having a communication with the nose. Here seems to be an extraordinary provision of nature worthy our attention; and which has not, that I know of, been noticed by any naturalist. For it looks as if these creatures would not be suffocated, though both their mouths and nostrils were stopped.

(White 41)

Throughout the natural history writing of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, dissections were commonplace. There was enormous support for cataloging, classifying, dissecting, and understanding the natural world through the literal dismembering of its parts to gain a more full understanding of the inner working of plants and animals. Clare

would have been disgusted by White's experiment with the deer. He would have seen it as the purposeful destruction of the natural world.³⁹ This was a major contradiction for him and his philosophy of the world, yet he was a realist, who knew that others had to do this work; it was just not right for him. Clare believed that just as thorough of an understanding could come from close observation and qualitative description. Of course, this type of work was much more time consuming, but it fit Clare's beliefs and took root because of his more holistic philosophy towards the natural world. The combination of classificatory scientists and more holistically focused natural history writers and poets provide a more thorough picture of the natural world than either could provide on their own.

Clare's poetic temperament and compassion towards the natural world would most likely get him labeled as a radical conservationist or environmentalist in our contemporary era. This reactionary conservationist mindset takes hold most in his anti-Enclosure writings and in the mourning for the loss of the nature of his childhood:

My two favourite elm-trees at the back of the hut are condemned to die--it shocks me to relate it but 'tis true. The savage who owns them thinks they have done their best, and now he wants to make use of the benefits he can get by selling them. O was this country Egypt, and was I but a caliph, the owner should lose his ears for his arrogant presumption; and the first wretch that buried his axe in their roots should hang on their branches as a terror to the rest... Had I one hundred pounds to spare I would buy them reprieves--but they must die. Yet this mourning over trees is all

foolishness--they feel no pains--they are but wood, cut up or not. A second thought tells me I am a fool: were people all to feel as I do, the world could not be carried on,--a green would not be ploughed--a bush or tree would not be cut for firing or furniture, and everything they found when boys would remain in that state till they died. (Tibble 78)

This paragraph encapsulates Clare's conservationist mindset. He felt "shock" and anger at those who wanted to tear down the trees of his youth, yet he also admitted that his thoughts were extreme because if his philosophy were carried to fruition, human survival would be nearly impossible. The most powerful part of this scene is the passionate language. He referred to the owner of the trees a "savage" and that he would take the owner's "ears" for their arrogance. Clare wrote that he would "hang" the first person to wield an axe against the trees as a warning to scare away future predators. He wished for more money to give the trees "reprieves," and admitted that they will die because of his poverty. The most powerful aspect of this paragraph is the way in which Clare humanizes the trees and dehumanizes the men who destroy the trees. The power of this reversal may be reactionary and shocking, yet through humanizing the trees, Clare seeks to bridge the gaps between reader, text, and nature, and, thus he establishes the necessary empathy for advocating his view that plants and animals are as much a part of the world as human beings. This pattern of creating and reversing the binary opposition of humans against the natural world will recur throughout his poetry, but it is in his natural history writing that we see the seeds of reversing this pattern that he develops more fully in his nature poetry.

Notes

¹ Currently, the town is referred to as Helpston.

² Frederick Martin, in his *Life of John Clare*, describes Clare's birthplace as a "wretched" hut that was like a "prison" (Martin 5, qt. in Tibble 2). Clare himself refers the cottage as "comfortable" and "dear," containing: "a red-tiled floor, and a ladder staircase to the bedroom above. The bedroom, even after being halved, was spacious enough to permit, later still, of its being curtained into three" (Tibble 2-3). The discrepancy in description between Martin and Clare himself illustrates a vast difference in perspective, but there is no doubt that Clare's home was a humble place of origin.

³ It is important to note here that Clare does not fit the image of a noble savage that many readers, publishers, and critics have portrayed him as over the course of the last century and a half. While he did not have many of the advantages of other poets, he did have a little formal education and spent much of his youth self-educating.

⁴ For instance, Clare wrote his poem "Narrative Verses Written After an Excursion from Helpstone to Burghley Park" while hopping over the fence into Burghley Park and hiding for the day avoiding work. Also, it is important to note the difficulty that Clare had in even attaining the materials to write with. Jonathan Bate describes Clare's use of every scrap of paper that he could find and how his mother would often ruin many of Clare's poems using them as pot holders and other necessary utilities. The Tibbles outline Clare's use of homemade ink made from "bruised 'nut galls,' 'Green Coppurs,' and 'Stone blue'" (Tibble 156).

⁵ While Clare's fame extended beyond this time period, this would be the period that he was considered a moderately important figure in the London literary scene.

⁶ Multiple critics have argued that Clare was put into the Asylum at the end of his life as a way to avoid jail for his mounting debts; however, it is clear after an extended stay in the asylum, his mental faculties deteriorated.

⁷ Margaret Grainger postulated that Clare's editor, John Taylor, may have just encouraged Clare to write a natural history in order to distract Clare from the long time it was taking Taylor to edit Clare's poetry (*Natural History* xxxvi). There was six years between his second book and his third *The Shepherd's Calendar* partly because Clare's drafts were so rough and also because the book business was going through extremely rough times as is outlined in Tim Chilcott's book *A Publisher and His Circle, The Life and Work of John Taylor, Keats's Publisher*.

⁸ In his book *Ecology*, Stanley Dodson defines ecology as "the study of the relationships, distribution, and abundance of organisms, or groups of organisms, in an environment" (2). Basically, ecology examines the interrelations between organisms and their environment and the impact of these relationships. The origination of the field of ecology in the mid-nineteenth century marked an important point in history because it began a holistic approach to the study of nature that helps us to better understand the world. The formation of ecology led scientists to understand such concepts as food chains and food webs in the early twentieth century and many other integral concepts still being used today.

The field of ecology did not spontaneously develop; of course, there was a long history of classification, natural history writing, early botany, and other branches of scientific study dating all the way back to Aristotle. One of the many branches that led to the creation of ecology as a field was natural history writing. While the classification Linnaeus and others formed was integral to development of biology, botany, and ecology, the natural history writers played an important role as well. Classification provided the more structured quantitative element to the furthering of the scientific field, while natural history writing provided a descriptive and qualitative analysis of the natural world. Natural history writing encouraged holistic studies of the natural world, often provided questions or hypotheses that would later need to be answered through experimentation, and at the same time, along with poetry, popularized the field among public opinion, which resulted in easier funding and dissemination.

⁹ According to Dodson's *Ecology*, the term ecology originated in 1866 by Ernst Haeckel in his book *General Morphology*. Haeckel attempted to define the concept that Charles Darwin discussed in *Origin of Species* that all of nature existed as a "well-regulated system of interactions among plants and animals, and their environment" (Dodson 2).

¹⁰ A system of classification developed by Carolus von Linnaeus (1735) from which our modern biological classification developed. The most important part of Linnaean taxonomy, and what separated his work from others that attempted to create classification systems, was the use of Latinized binomial nomenclature for the division of plant, animal, and mineral genres. The first word in the binomial refers to the genus, while the

second is a unique term for the individual species. Another important change that Linnaeus introduced through his taxonomy was classifying animals by their physical characteristics rather than their methods of movement, which had been the previous consensus for classification. Both his binomial nomenclature and idea to classify animals by physical characteristics are ideas that are still used today.

¹¹ White often argued for qualitative local analysis over the more general universal classification. One of the most directly worded arguments for this occurred as he wrote, “True naturalists will thank you more for the life & conversation of a few animals well studied & investigated; than for a long barren list of half the Fauna of the globe” (qtd in Dadswell xvi). His penchant for qualitative analysis of the local is also apparent as he criticizes “foreign faunists” writing, they “are content if they can get a specimen & describe it exactly... but you will be able to shew them in many instances that the life & manners of animals are the best part of Nat history” (qtd. in Dadswell xix). These two quotes clearly illustrate that White’s sympathies were closer to Clare as far as observation being better than scientific classification; however, White relied quite often on Linnaean classification and experimentation throughout his journals. In his *Natural History*, he refers to Linnaean classification exactly twenty times, and makes use of the system hundreds of times. There are also many instances where he uses dissection and experimentation, with one of the most prominent being the dissection of a deer head in order to understand how it is able to keep its head under water for large periods of time. So, while White theoretically agrees with Clare’s privileging local, qualitative

observation over universal classification systems, in his work the universal classification is spread throughout.

¹² Clare does write about some basic forms of experimentation, such as placing a black ant among a colony of red pismires, and experimenting with different plant clippings in his garden (*Natural History* 113); although, on the whole, he avoided any experimentation that interfered with nature's natural processes and especially avoided every form of dissection.

¹³ I would make the argument that the vast majority of natural history writers from 1800-1900 hundred were in agreement with the Linnaean classification system, while Clare vehemently rejected it to the point that he deemed it oppressive.

¹⁴ Clare's *Natural History Prose Writing* was not published during his lifetime, so White and other writers did not have access to his writing.

¹⁵ Contrasting local, qualitative descriptions with the more dominant universalized analytic classification is integral to understanding the influence of literature and writing in general on the formation of modern biological science. Modern biological science was produced by an amalgamation over centuries of analytic classification (originating from Linnaeus, Buffon, and others) and a more descriptive ecological approach that originated from a more literary background (the other writers addressed in this study). In other words, modern science originated from the more structured analytic scientists and also highly influenced by natural history writers. The importance of recognizing and even teaching about the influence of these writers on modern science can illustrate and

empower contemporary writers to realize that they have the power to shape the future in regards to major aspects of education and society.

¹⁶ In 1809, an act of parliament, “for enclosing lands in the parishes of Maxey with Deepingate, Northborough, Glinton with Peakirk, Etton, and Helpstone” passed and dramatically changed Clare’s hometown (Tibble 25). Clare began noticing changes, which “altered the structure of the area where he grew up, and radically affected the lives of its people, obliterating traditions which had survived since the thirteenth century” (Tibble 25). These changes encouraged him to write his natural history of Helpstone to preserve the pre-enclosure village and the ramifications of these acts permeate his poetic oeuvre.

¹⁷ Paul Foster writes in the journal *Archives of Natural History*, “he [White] regularly traveled the South Downs from Wiltshire to Sussex, and from Selborne to Oxford and to London; visited Devon (for friendship’s sake), Bristol (for the hot-wells), and Rutland (to see relatives); and spent time as a young man in East Anglia.” White traveled all over England quite regularly, while John Clare only traveled to London four times.

¹⁸ See endnotes seven and eight for further information.

¹⁹ For example, see Boswell later in this chapter.

²⁰ The early nineteenth century saw a drastic increase in the popularity of nature writing as industrialization increased and the period before industrialization took on a nostalgic, prelapsarian idealization. Raymond Williams writes about this increase in nostalgic nature writing in his book *The Country and the City*.

²¹ Clare writes about this throughout his autobiography, his natural history letters, and poetry. For instance, see chapter two of this work about his criticism of local hunting practices and many of his animal poems.

²² One of the most famous Romantic poets to address this ethical dilemma of the nature of the relationship between humans / animals is Percy Shelley and his advocacy of vegetarianism. From his “Notes on Queen Mab,” Shelley gives an intensely detailed argument for why humans are not anatomically meant to be carnivorous:

Comparative anatomy teaches us that man resembles frugivorous animals in every thing, and carnivorous in nothing; he has neither claws wherewith to seize his prey, nor distinct and pointed teeth to tear the living fibre. [...] Man resembles no carnivorous animal. There is no exception, unless man be one to the rule of herbivorous animals having cellulated colons. [...] The intestines are also identical with those of herbivorous animals, which present a larger surface for absorption [...] The structure of the human frame then is that of one fitted to a pure vegetable diet, in every essential particular. (Nichols 301)

Shelley continues arguing that herbivorous animals that are forced to eat meat end up with more diseases and shorter life spans. While some of Shelley’s arguments are accurate and others wrong, the important part of what he accomplishes in this piece is moving the discussion on morality and establishing empathy to a more logical argument that would appeal to a different audience than the ethical and emotional appeals. At the

same time, Shelley argues from a human perspective, that it is unhealthy for us to barbarically slaughter animals and leads to a less healthy population.

²³ Clare rejected most systemic classification, including in language and writing. For instance, he writes in a letter to his publisher John Taylor, “Grammar in learning is like tyranny [sic] in government—confound the bitch, I’ll never be her slave” (Storey 133). There is proof in his oeuvre that he is capable of using correct usage, yet he often refuses to do so.

²⁴ M. H. Abrams refers to the overt role of the imagination in nature poetry as “meditative-description” in his essay “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric” (202).

²⁵ This idea is discussed throughout Dodson’s *Ecology*.

²⁶ Some examples of these discoveries are discussed throughout chapters three and four, for instance, their examinations of bird languages, flight patterns, and classifying many different animals.

²⁷ See L.M. Herman’s article “Knowledge acquisition and asymmetries between language comprehension and production: Dolphins and apes as a general model for animals” in the journal *Interpretation and explanation in the study of behavior: Vol. 1: Interpretation, intentionality, and communication* for more information on this topic.

²⁸ See Phil Clapham’s book *Humpback whales* for more information on this topic.

²⁹ See Gunther Witzany’s book *Life: The Communicative Structure: A New Philosophy of Biology* for more information on this topic.

³⁰ The concept of questioning human exceptionalism is especially important in studying literature through an ecocritical lens. In nearly every other area of literary theory, we have deconstructed the idea of an unmarked privileged figure, yet in ecological studies, this process is just beginning. In Feminism, African American Studies, Post-colonialism, Marxism, and many other areas of critical theory, we have attempted to uncover the voices that have been muted by the dominant unmarked society, yet in the case of nature, this has not yet occurred. Jonathan Bate posits the reason for this is that many of the subaltern figures from the other areas have begun speaking out and have been heard; whereas, trees, animals, water and other figures of the natural world are unable to speak clearly for themselves (Bate, "Out of the Twilight" 25). Gilbert White attempts to prove that nature is able to speak and that humans have just been unwilling to listen.

³¹ One important debate has been concerning the work of Herbert Terrace and his study of a chimpanzee he named Nim Chimpsky after linguist Noam Chomsky. Terrace argued that most of the communication between humans and chimpanzees has been exaggerated. His study has been refuted by hundreds of scientists, yet the debate remains about how much communication is meaningful. For more information see Terrace's 1979 book *Nim* and Elizabeth Hess's 2008 book *Nim Chimpsky: The Chimp Who Would Be Human*.

³² In nearly every generation between his time and contemporary society, scientists have referred to White's writing as inspiration for their work and experiments. One example of a natural history writer that modeled his work after Gilbert White was the influential nature writer John Burroughs. Burroughs was an influential writer that influenced

Theodore Roosevelt's nature policies. Burroughs named Gilbert White as a model for his own work writing that White "remembers only nature... There is never more than a twinkle of humor in his pages, and never one word of style for its own sake" (qt. in Lutts 38). Considering the fact that both Burroughs and Roosevelt were harshly critical of nature writers that took too many liberties in their descriptions, this was quite an honor from a discerning critic. Many other writers and scientists also wrote of White's influence on their work over the course of the past two centuries proving him to be one of the most influential nature writers of his time.

³³ Boswall's analysis becomes even more complex as he argues that the birds' songs are different than their calls. He suggests that their songs are most often "sung only in the breeding season and only by males, further, it is typically loud, regularly repeated, persistent and often complex" (Boswall 250). There is a complexity to these songs that rival human communication, but are not currently able to be completely understood. Birdcalls are used by both sexes and are much less complex and are "very much to the point, and make their meaning instantly clear" (Boswall 250). The best comparison to birdcalls could be with human babies who do not yet have language, yet are able to very clearly communicate their needs at times. The distinction between calls and songs show a development from birds to simple, baby-like utterances, to a much more complex language that while not matching human complexity, can at least come close to approaching it.

³⁴ Significantly, John Burroughs, who was one of the most famous critics of sentimentalization in nature writing and he often praised White for resisting sentimentality (Lutts 25).

³⁵ On the first page of Clare's book *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, underneath Clare's name are the words "Peasant Poet." This description began a long history of Clare being described as an innocent, noble-savage like poet of nature. Many reviewers would harshly criticize his work, but then modify the criticism because of his circumstances. At times, Clare and his editors also attempted to capitalize on this perception and many critics followed suit. Since the modern revival of Clare studies, historical analysis and new material introduced has debunked most of these early stereotypes. The description of Clare's reception as a noble-savage like figure appears throughout Bate's biography, in Chilcott's *A Publisher*, and many other critical studies of Clare.

³⁶ The lens that I am referring to here is the sexualization of plants, which is examined more in chapter two of this work.

³⁷ Clare continues deconstruction of the popular scientific notions of the time by taking a critical look at another system of classification, writing a fragment "On the Notions of Male and Female Species in Trees & Flowers." He suggests that by this system all plants are "hermaphrodites" and that the sexual system is "not distinct at all in trees" (Grainger 101). His critical view of the sexual system seems built on the belief that scientists are trying to organize the plant and animal world as if it were built in their likeness. Clare's

argument suggested an absurdity of sexual plant classification as if it were some Freudian nightmare where we see the mirror image of our sexuality reflected back in everything including the world of plants. While the sexual system of plants is currently widely scientifically accepted, Clare argued that it obfuscates a true understanding of plant life by hiding it in a human shadow. For more information on the connection between sexuality and plant-life see chapter two of this work, especially the examination of Erasmus Darwin's work.

³⁸ Foster describes White's use of systematic classification and qualitative descriptions in the following way:

In letter after letter we read advice to John that White himself was to follow and which was to make a singular contribution to the survival and status of his own work – notably his insistence on studying what he termed 'the life & conversation' of creatures. Although he knew that a basic understanding of systematics was necessary, his whole being was primarily focused neither on the cabinet, nor in the laboratory, but on what we might call the behavioural sociology of Nature or, to put this feature of his style and appeal in his terms – establishing a conversation with Nature. (Foster 42-3)

Foster rightly describes White's version of natural history writing close to a behavioral sociology of nature and emphasizes White's use of the term conversation. This analysis

of White's writing affirms my belief that White viewed plants and animals as peers that he could actually communicate with.

³⁹ An interesting question on this topic would be whether or not Clare would have approved of the dissection of animals that were already dead. In reading the entirety of his works, my thought on this would be that he would be okay with this; however, he would see the action as unnecessary. He seemed to have a fundamental belief that qualitative, observational analysis was the most important method for understanding the natural world. However, I do not think Clare specifically addressed this point in his work.

CHAPTER IV: JOHN CLARE, JOHN LEONARD KNAPP AND OLIVER
GOLDSMITH: NATURAL HISTORY THROUGH DESCRIPTION, NARRATION,
AND PERSONIFICATION

The previous chapter analyzed the natural history writing of John Clare and Gilbert White. Both writers created a body of work that examined their hometown and the surrounding areas. These examinations were so incredibly detailed that they resulted in descriptions of intricate ecosystems and animal behaviors that were not formally recognized in the scientific community until over a hundred years later. In order to understand the important observational work that naturalists produced, this chapter will analyze the work of another naturalist, John Leonard Knapp, whose work, in comparison with Clare, will help us to better contextualize natural history writing of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

John Leonard Knapp was born on May 9, 1767 in Buckinghamshire, England approximately seventy-five miles from John Clare's hometown of Helpstone and a little over a hundred miles away from Gilbert White's Selbourne. His family had lived in Buckinghamshire for over a century and a half and he was the youngest son of a reverend (*Gentleman's Magazine*, Knapp). Early in his life he joined the navy and attended school in the town of Thame, Oxfordshire.¹ Knapp's religious background combined with the religious fervor of Thame influenced his life philosophy and appears throughout his writing.² While his most famous work was *The Journal of a Naturalist*, he also produced many others including *Gramina Britannica*, a botanical account of the mountains of Scotland,³ and numerous articles in different periodicals.⁴ His writing mainly focused on

presenting natural history in order to glorify God, record his travels,⁵ and follow in the footsteps of naturalists like Gilbert White whom he admired.

Inspired by the work of Gilbert White in the early nineteenth century, John Leonard Knapp began observing the natural world in a way that he had never before. He wrote that he did not “recollect any publication at all resembling” White’s *The Natural History of Selbourne* and that it “impressed on [his] mind an ardent love for all the ways and economy of nature” (Knapp iii). Like many of the readers of White’s *Natural History*, Knapp heeded White’s call for other naturalists to follow his lead. Knapp explains:

The two works do not, I apprehend, interfere with each other. The meditations of separate naturalists in fields, in wilds, in woods, may yield a similarity of ideas; yet the different aspects under which the same things are viewed, and characters considered, afford infinite variety of description and narrative: mine, I confess, are but brief and slight sketches; plain observations of nature... a mere outline of rural things; the journal of a traveller [sic] through the inexhaustible regions of nature.
(Knapp iii)

The emphasis of Knapp’s work, like White’s, is shown in this paragraph through the use of the word “in.” These natural history writers’ work does not occur in a lab or office; instead, they immerse themselves in the fields in order to attempt to literally become a part of the scene. Knapp also emphasized using a plain language for observation instead of scientific or poetic language.

This call of Gilbert White in *The Natural History* appeared as a theme throughout the natural history writing of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and continues to the present day. Like White and Clare, Knapp uses short observational sketches of the natural world and many narrative and descriptive techniques in order to present nature through a individualized lens to create a connection between the reader and the natural world. Through examining Knapp's work and comparing it with Clare and White, the power of these descriptive and narrative sketches becomes apparent and illustrates why Clare continues this method of writing throughout his poetic oeuvre. In examining these authors use of these techniques in prose, it becomes clear how Clare's poetry blends natural history writing and poetry into a natural history poetry.

Finally, this chapter concludes with a section examining an enormous work by Oliver Goldsmith entitled *History of the Earth and Animated Nature*. This section presents an important contrast with the more qualitative studies of White, Knapp and Clare because Goldsmith, an extremely popular writer, poet, and naturalist, writes a natural history that has a different focus, presenting nature through a more universal and encyclopedic lens. This contrast is not mean to denigrate the work of Goldsmith, because the more universal and classificatory analysis has an important place in natural history, it is merely meant to show that the work that Clare, White, and Knapp were doing was vastly different than many of their contemporaries, including other poets who experimented with science like Goldsmith. In looking at all these writers together, it becomes obvious that Clare's natural history poetry holds a unique position in poetry of the last few centuries.

1. John Clare and John Leonard Knapp: Creating Empathy through Description, Narration and Anthropomorphism

A technique that Knapp often used throughout his oeuvre was writing narrative sketches for the scenes that surrounded him. Through the use of narration, Knapp creates empathy for the natural world by presenting plants and animals in anthropomorphized ways so as to relate to them in a more personal manner. In Knapp's *The Journal of a Naturalist*, he humanizes birds with little sentimentalism or exaggeration. He merely writes narrative sketches of many individual birds in an intensely descriptive manner and through his narration the reader feels both empathy and a connection with these birds. An example of these narrative sketches occurs as Knapp writes about a pair of starlings:

I have observed a pair of starlings for several days in constant progress before me, having young ones in the hole of a neighboring poplar tree, and they have been... persisting in this labor of love for twelve or thirteen hours in the day... it appears probable that this pair in conjunction do not travel less than fifty miles in the day, visiting and feeding their young about a hundred and forty times. (Knapp 141)

Knapp's intensely detailed scene would remind any parent of the early moments of their children's first days after birth. By describing the birds in a narrative form, it initiates memories of late night crying, feedings, and the need of the infant for complete parental attention. Knapp does not need to elaborate on this connection to humanity; the connection with human child rearing is inherent in the depiction of the natural scene. This connection is powerful because it taps into an innate connection that most living things

have in common. The instinctual habits of many animals in relation to their offspring clearly resemble human interactions with their children. Knapp continues this textual illustration of birds that leads readers to realize the interrelatedness of all living things in his writing about the red-start:

We have no bird more assiduous in attentions to their young, than the red-start... one or other of the parents being in perpetual action, conveying food to the nest, or retiring in search of it... They are the most restless and suspicious of birds during this season of hatching and rearing their young; for when the female is sitting, her mate attentively watches over her safety, giving immediate notice of the approach of any seemingly hostile thing, by a constant repetition of one or two querulous notes, monitory to her or menacing to the intruder: but when the young are hatched, the very appearance of any suspicious creature sets the parents into agony of agitation, and perching upon some dead branch or post, they persevere in one unceasing clamor till the object of their fears is removed... (Knapp 142)

In a similar manner as the previous scene, this scene creates a connection with parents that read the passage through the use of multiple descriptive and narrative techniques. A notable interaction occurs in this passage as the birds communicate the possibility of danger to each other and the father is especially attentive in protecting the mother bird from intruders as she is in the process of bearing children. In this case, no analogy needs

to be explicitly given for the reader to draw out the feeling of relating to these fellow living creatures, in this case, communication of possible danger between parents.

John Clare's natural history writing exhibits similar descriptive and narrative sketches of scenes that help the reader relate to the scene through their life experience and through many different emotions as well. Throughout his writing there are scenes of animals with their young like this one depicting the Blue Cap that displays an enormous level of determination in feeding their young each day:

I watched a Blue Cap or Blue Titmouse feeding her young whose nest was in a wall close to an Orchard she got caterpillars out of the Blossoms of the apple trees & leaves of the plumb-she fetched 120 caterpillars in half an hour-now supposing she only feeds them 4 times a day a quarter of an hour each time she fetches no less than 480 caterpillars & I shoud [sic] think treble the number. (*Natural History* 244)

In this scene, the Blue Cap is in continuous motion fetching hundreds of caterpillars at an extremely quick pace in order to provide for its children. Another scene where parental attachment is presented to the reader is as Clare portrays a young swallow in danger:

To day [sic] a young Swallow scarcely pen feathered fell down the chimney where it lay chirping a good while-at last the parent birds ventured down and fed it-and a short time after 2 other swallows joined them and by some means or other got the young one up to its nest in the chimney top. (*Clare's Birds* 60)

In this case, the parallel between human compassion for their offspring and birds attachment to theirs is clear. As the young sparrow falls down the chimney, the parents face peril in order to bring food to their fallen child. They then recruit two other sparrows in a rescue operation reminiscent of contemporary stories of children that have fallen down a well. Because the scene is suggestive of themes that occur throughout the natural world, depictions of these scenes are easily identifiable by the modern reader. The persistence and dedication of these birds with their young is a theme that we see throughout Clare's natural history writing.

Clare's narrative scenes with young animals and other animal interactions create powerful connections with the reader, but perhaps the strongest emotional connection that appears in his natural history writing is through the use of scenes that narrate fearful situations. For instance, Clare writes about a scene with a green beetle attacking a moth in the context of a horrific murder scene:

[The green beetle] was attacking a large moth & when ever the moth made a trial to escape... it retreated back and as soon as it was still it returnd [sic] to the attack again at length the moth became quite exhausted & the beetle with the utmost dexterity began to bite off his wings & when ever the moth made feint struggles the beetle instantly fell to wounding him agen [sic] ... on finding him laying quite still he then took a wide circuit round the body as if like a murderer he was afraid of being seen... I wonderd [sic] what his object coud [sic] be in killing & then leaving him but before I had much time for reflection the beetle again made his

appearance with a companion they went round the moth without attempting to sieze it & seemd [sic] in a consulting posture for some seconds when both of them started again in contrary directions & bye & bye both returnd [sic] ... the beetle that went out returned with two more companions & the company was 6 in all when they came up instantly beg (as if the whole family was not got together) to ade [sic] their dinner on the moth they first turnd [sic] him over on his back & fed on his back & fed on his body 3 on each side & when satisfied they all joind [sic] help in hand & draggd [sic] the remainder of their prey home between the furrows & disappeared. (*Natural History* 70)

This passage uses emotional description and narration in order to connect to the inner fears of any reader. It has the potent impact of a portrayal of some satanic ritual or a scene from a Gothic horror novel, as the beetle slowly bites off the moth's wings and tortures it every time it struggled. The image of the moth that is unable to escape and the family of beetles hovering over it wanting to devour it piece by piece relates to the cannibalistic fears that every society expresses in some way. In actuality, billions of similar events take place each day and few people take notice. As the beetle in this scene monitors the moth like a "murderer" and continuously tortures it until the beetle's companions could return, it hits the inner recesses of human fears reminiscent of something out of an Edgar Allen Poe short story.

Clare presents an equally powerful, emotional, and fear-filled narrative as he describes being in the fields with the animals as hunting season begins:

[T]is the first day of shooting with the sportsmen & the poor hares partridges & pheasants were flying in all directions panic struck they put me in mind of the inhabitants of a village flying before an invading enemy the dog runs with their sleek dappld sides rustling in the crackling stubbs & their noses close to the ground as happy as their masters in the sport... I [was] forced to return home fearing I might be shot under the hedges.
(Natural History 174)

Clare not only characterizes the scene in a powerfully empathetic manner; he also includes himself in the narrative as a fellow animal that feared being shot. He creates a binary opposition between the “sportsmen” with their dogs against himself and the rest of the animals of the forest. As the animals are fleeing “like the inhabitants of a village” under attack, Clare ends up having to retreat himself fearing he may be shot at with his fellow animals. The binary opposition that Clare creates enables him to identify himself closer with the animal world than with that of humanity. He actually appears closer to the animal kingdom in this narrative than the domesticated hunting dogs. At the same time, the reader more easily relates with the animal world than that of man because of the point of view of the writing. He changes the readers understanding of hunting season by allowing the reader to experience the point of view of those who are hunted. This opposition occurs throughout Clare’s natural history writing and his poetry that will be analyzed in future chapters.

Returning to *Journal of a Naturalist*, a technique that Knapp regularly employs is presenting animals, and especially birds, in many different anthropomorphized ways. For

instance, he describes the hedge sparrow as having “domestic attachments,” the linnet as delighting in living in society, “rear[ing] their offspring,” in the commons, where their “families unite,” and form a “household” (Knapp 112). He writes about the robin being “pugnacious, jealous, selfish” and “quarrelsome” among birds; however, because of its aggressive personality with other birds, it “seeks asylum with us” (Knapp 115). With humans, the robin becomes more humble and often partakes in humans’ generosity. His presentation of the robin in particular creates a fascinating characterization:

It has some little coaxing ways, and such fearless confidence, that it wins our regard; and its late autumnal song, in evening's dusky hour, as a monologue is pleasing, and redeems much of its character. The universality of this bird in all places, and almost at all hours, is very remarkable... I have often been surprised in the midst of woods, where no suspicion of its presence existed, when watching some other creature, to see the robin inquisitively perched upon some naked spray near me; or, when digging up a plant in some very retired place, to observe its immediate descent upon some poor worm that I had moved. (Knapp 115)

Knapp’s narratives of birds lives continues along this pattern of using personification to create empathy as he writes about them building their nests like “tiny architects” that are “very assiduous” in regards to their young (Knapp 120, 140). Knapp’s technique for anthropomorphizing these animals is another similarity to Clare in his natural history writing. Knapp continues using personification with his portrayal of plants, specifically with his descriptions of trees:

It is the earliest sylvan beau that is weary of its summer suit; first shifting its dress to ochery shades, then trying a deeper tint, and lastly assuming an orange vest; thus setting a fashion that ere long becomes the garb of all except the rustic oak, which looks regardlessly at the beau, and keeps its verdant robe unchanged. Soon tired of this, the maple takes a pattern from his sober neighbor ash, throws its gaudy trim away, and patiently awaits with all his peers the next new change. (Knapp 79)

Knapp uses personification throughout this paragraph to help his readers understand and identify with the trees of this forest taking a step beyond the personification of animals extending this technique to the depiction of plants as well. He compares the changing of the leaves to the changing of clothes and writes that the trees look to their “peers” for advice on what outfit to wear next. In this context, the forest becomes an animated scene of an infinite variety of colors and characters.

Knapp’s use of anthropomorphism is similar to what we find in Clare’s natural history writing as he writes about birds through language normally reserved for humans. For instance, he writes that starnels are “chattering,” “playing,” and “quarreling,” while sparrows have “bad feelings” (*Natural History* 339). Night Owls “revel” in “curiousitys” and the Red Cap has a “family” as well as a strange habit of holding “prisoners” in their nests (*Natural History* 44). The cock is one of the “pleasantest companions” and has multiple “wives” (*Natural History* 150). Clare presents a scene with swallows that resemble children sitting around an old town person listening to their stories:

[S]wallows are flocking to gether [sic] in the sky ready for departing & a crowd has dropt to rest on the wallnut [sic] tree where they twitter as if telling their young stories of their long journey to cheers & check fears.

(Natural History 175)

The image of the swallow returning from their long journey to a hero's welcome is a powerful trope throughout the history of western literature from Homer to the present.⁶ Many readers can relate to this scene from a human perspective and identify with the excitement of it as well. Another scene where Clare uses anthropomorphism in order to create a connection between the reader and birds is as he writes about a family of swallows:

When it has raised [sic] its family they all live happily together parents and children till the next spring and may be seen in such companys [sic] in winter tracing the common and the fallow fields were the thistles are in plenty on the seed of which it feeds till the summer returns with its other food *(Clare's Birds 36)*

He portrays the family of swallows as living happily together with the parents raising the children and trying to save up enough food to survive the winter. This scene closely resembles family life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries following another common trope from literary history, which helps both the readers of the time and modern readers relate with the animals. However, while the projection of human qualities onto these animals encourages sympathy and promotes advocacy for animals, it also creates a literary filter that distracts from the biologically accurate writing that Clare advocates. In

this way, some of Clare's scenes conflict with his stated mission of producing accurate natural history writing.

Despite the conflict between biological accuracy and the literary use of anthropomorphism, Clare employs anthropomorphism in his detailed descriptions of other animals, including ants:

I have spents [sic] almost whole days... observing the never ceasing travel & labour of ants &... every now & then a small one would be bustling about in the grass out of the track as if not knowing where to go & in evident agitation & terror we thought these had escaped from being kidnapped & were seeking home & friends in vain while a larger one a robber would be evidently on the look out for the poor little stragglers- now stoping [sic] short to listen as it were & then nimbling [sic] along in another direction and standing on end almost every now & then to see if it could look over the grass forrest [sic] for the little stragglers that had escaped it so I thought-& when it met another by accident each would stop a moment as if in fear & then approaching cautiously touch each other by putting their heads together. (*Natural History* 320-1)

In this section of Clare's natural history, through narration and description, he utilizes many words that are most often used for human interactions. For instance, he characterizes their "travel[s]" and "labor," they are agitated and experience "terror" as they escape from "being kidnapped," and many other instances of anthropomorphism are used in order to personalize the scene and gain empathy for animals in situations where

they do not normally invoke it. Once again, fear is used in order to create an attachment between the subject and the reader. In this case he taps into the innate fear and literary trope that humans have of being kidnapped and of being chased or hunted in order to illustrate that ants go through similar trials. Clare's writing taps into tropes and myths that have been passed down through human history both orally and in writing in order to create more identification between the reader and these groups of animals that he refers to in his writing.

Another place where similarities exist between Knapp and Clare is in their compassion against the cruelty of humans towards animals throughout their narratives and descriptions. For instance, Knapp refers to "rural amusements" as "cruel" and cause "misery" and "suffering" to animals (Knapp 155). He specifically refers to the hunting of birds and how hunters do not even show mercy for the young; instead, the hunters "consign whole nests of infant broods to famine and death," while the birds are innocent and even free their "dwellings from multitudes of insects" (Knapp 155). Knapp continues, explaining:

The lives of many of them, even when subjected to the best of treatment, are consumed with labor and fatigue; and when their unhappy destiny consigns them to the power of poverty and, evil passions, what an accumulation of misery and suffering do these wretched creatures undergo! (Knapp 153)

Knapp obviously has an intense empathy for these animals and sees them as destitute creatures that are consigned to a similar fate as human beings who live in extreme

poverty. He continues explaining his empathetic feelings towards these unfortunate animals:

I execrate the practice as most cruel: their death evinces no skill in the gunner; their wretched bodies, when obtained, are useless, being embittered by the bruises of the shot, and unskilful operations of the picker and dresser. (Knapp 156)

The way that Knapp frames this cruelty of the hunt is distinct from Clare in that for Knapp the cruelty lies in the fact that there is no challenge involved and that the bodies are useless afterwards. For Clare, it is clear that regardless of the difficulty of the hunt, or the usefulness of the body, he still abhors the entire practice. Of course, this is mediated by the fact that Clare admitted he could not completely live up to his own ideals and often ate meat that was most likely attained in an inhumane manner. Still, it is an integral distinction between the two writers that Knapp believes the injustice of hunting and trapping lies in the unfair competition and the lack of using the animals productively afterwards; whereas, Clare abhors the practice entirely regardless of the situation. For instance, he presents his abhorrence of such practices in regards to the house sparrow in this passage:

I always thought it a very cruel practice for the overseers of the parish to give rewards to boys to kill sparrows as they often do it very cruelly & cheat the overseers ignorance a many times in taking other harmless birds to pass them for sparrows to get the bounty. (*Natural History* 137)

It is clear in this passage that for Clare the cruelty is inherent in the hunt, and the rewards for that cruelty. Knapp's philosophy in regards to hunting and trapping is philosophical and practical, while Clare's is philosophical and idealistic to the point that it is unrealistic.

In contrast with their objections to hunting and trapping, both Clare and Knapp witness the violence that often occurs in the insect world and both choose to observe it without interference. Knapp views a scene of two ants unwilling to deviate from their paths:

Two parties of these black ants were proceeding from different nests upon a foraging expedition, when the separate bodies happened to meet each other. Neither would give way; and a violent contest for the passage ensued. After a time the combat ceased, and all animosity subsided, each party retiring to its nest, carrying with it its dead and maimed companions. This encounter seemed quite accidental, and the disposition to move in a uniform line, which their meeting prevented, the sole cause of their hostility, combat, and mutual injury. (Knapp 212-13)

Knapp's scene is similar to Clare's account of the beetle tearing apart a moth because of them both portraying natural acts of violence. However, Knapp's scene uses a military narrative to connect the scene to human sentiment and Clare's uses more gothic themes. Both writers act as witnesses to violent attacks and murders, yet because it is a part of the natural course of the Earth, they do not interfere in the scene no matter how brutal it appeared. Also, they both depict the scene as somewhat innocent or accidental. Even

though the interaction appeared violent, the writers do not mourn the victims because this is a natural part of the biological world that occurs billions of times each day. The narrative structure of the scene links the actions of insects to tropes that the readers can relate with and makes the insects more sympathetic characters.

In a similar manner to Gilbert White and John Clare, Knapp also suggests that birds have linguistic capabilities throughout his narratives. He writes that the “language” of birds “convey[s] particular intimation” and distinctly identifies the seasons as accurately as a calendar (Knapp 183). He later writes that there is no doubt that “some of the notes of birds are language designed to convey a meaning” and extends this to other animals, writing: “the periodical calls of animals, croaking of frogs... conveys intelligence equivalent to an uttered sentence” (Knapp 187). Knapp then continues with a more detailed analysis of bird communication:

The voices of birds seem applicable in most instances to the immediate necessities of their condition; such as the sexual call, the invitation to unite when dispersed, the moan of danger, the shriek of alarm, the notice of food. But there are other notes, the designs and motives of which are not so obvious. One sex only is gifted with the power of singing, for the purpose, as Buffon supposed, of cheering his mate during the period of incubation... we must conclude that listened to, admired, and pleasing, as the voices of many birds are, either for their intrinsic melody, or from association, we are uncertain what they express, or the object of their song. (Knapp 187)

In this section of the book, Knapp comes to similar conclusions as Clare and White, that birds have at least a basic mode of communication and possibly a much more complex ability as well. In spite of this, later in the book he questions this assumption suggesting a much more limited ability that only involves the birds' direct needs. This difference illustrates a direct contrast to Clare and White who believed that birds were able to communicate on a more complex level. One major area where Knapp's departure from Clare and White was apparent was Knapp's belief that birds have no conscious minds and that the language of birds remains in stasis, while the language of man is progressive:

From various little scraps of intelligence scattered through the sacred and ancient writings, it appears certain, as it was reasonable to conclude, that the notes now used by birds, and the voices of animals, are the same as uttered by their earliest progenitors... With civilized man, every thing is progressive; with animals, where there is no mind, all is stationary.

(Knapp 185-6)

While Clare and White do suggest throughout their work that the language of birds is simple, they do believe that the birds exhibit intelligence. Importantly, they view birds both as different species and also as individuals within the species. The phrase Knapp uses in regards to birds, his claim that "there is no mind," represents an idea that both Clare and White would reject. White and Clare present a perspective on the individual agency of animals that is remarkable in comparison with other natural history writers, including John Leonard Knapp, who either ignore or deny this agency.

2. Where Clare and Knapp Differ: Ecological Awareness, Commodification and Individual Agency

One continuing theme throughout the nature writing of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is many natural accounts that resemble the modern concept of ecosystems that would not be officially defined until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More specifically, these writers seem to each discover portions of the ideas that would find definitions nearly a century later. For instance, Knapp wrote about the idea of small systems that are sustained through complex interactions defined by energy exchanges, decomposition, and regeneration in a similar manner as Gilbert White's description of cow dung in his *Natural History*. Knapp explains the idea of what today we would call a complex ecosystem full of energy exchanges, interactions and renewal in this scene with the goat moth:

With us they chiefly inhabit the ash... Consequently, for the larger portion of its life it is occupied in these destructive operations; and thus this creature becomes a very powerful agent in reducing these Titans of the vegetable world, crumbling them away to their original dust: for what was decreed to be the termination and punishment of man is found in active operation throughout the whole chain of nature's works, which are but dust, and unto dust return, continuing an endless series of production and decay, of restoration and of change. (Knapp 203)

In this paragraph, Knapp presents in ordinary language what today we would refer to as ecosystem ecology, or in particular, he examines “an explicitly defined sector of the

Earth, including all of the organisms and their physical-chemical environment within its boundaries” (Dodson 160). More specifically, he depicts the ecosystem surrounding the ash tree, including the bugs, the vegetation, decay, and all of the actions that interact with each other in this area. He then examines how the plants and animals of the area interact and are related to each other and even makes the hypothesis that the goat moth accelerates the process of decay in the tree. Through studying and recording these processes, we are better able to understand how the ecosystem works and how to prevent the destruction of that community.

Clare writes about a similar scene as Knapp’s surrounding an ash tree that is intensely descriptive of the scene as well:

Wood pigeons claws the ash with its grey bark & black swelling buds the Birch with its ‘paper rind’ & the darker mottled sorts of hazle [sic] black adler with the greener hues of sallows willows & the bramble that still wears its leaves with the pivot of a purple hue while the stragglng wood briar shines in a brighter & more beautiful green even than leaves can boast at this season too odd forward branches in the new laid hedges of white thorn begin to freshen into green before the arum dare peep out of its hood or the primrose & violet shoot up a new leaf thro the warm moss & ivy that shelter their spring dwellings the furze too common wear a fairer green & ere & there an odd branch is coverd [sic] with golden flowers & the ling or heath nestling among the long grass below. (*Natural History* 46)

Clare presents this scene in such extraordinary detail that even though he does not explicitly explain the interactions as well as Knapp, there is a holistic interaction inherent in this account and all of the elements that make up this scene overlap and interact. All of the details combine in a similar manner as a painting as they blend and become one system filled with life.

Of course, there is a vast difference between Knapp's portrayal of the continual regeneration of the systems throughout his home district and Clare's intensely descriptive scene of the animals and colors that blend together and interact. This divergence becomes apparent as we examine the next scene written about in *Journal of a Naturalist* of the Ash tree. Knapp's scene elaborates on the important aspects of both ecosystem ecology and the concepts of the food chain and web that will be developed later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁷ In this section of his writing, Knapp analyzes the energy exchanges that occur throughout each system:

[There is an] imperceptible line of influences and intelligences that is maintained throughout nature. We know that vegetation and the atmosphere are in a constant state of barter and exchange, receiving and modifying; and possibly, from the unseen effects of a frosty morning, a fall of snow, or a few hours' temperature of the air, a fruitful or an unproductive season may arise. We notice the effects of spring changes, because vegetation has so far advanced as to render influences manifest; but we cannot perceive the injuries of benefits accruing to a hidden circulation from particular events. (Knapp 251)

The “imperceptible lines” refer to energy exchanges that occur throughout the food web an infinite number of times each day. Knapp clearly has an incredible comprehension of the idea of energy transfers throughout the ecosystem that Clare does not quite reach; however, the language Knapp uses here is of particular note. He views nature through the lens of an economy, using terms such as “products,” “barter and exchange,” and “unproductive.” This language appears throughout his journal and represents a distinctly different mindset between him and Clare. Knapp, like Dafoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*,⁸ views these systems through the lens of commodification, organization, and how much use-value an object or its productions have.

Knapp’s analytic, commodified view of the natural world occurs both in the vegetable world and animal world as well. For instance, nearly every portrayal of animal life is described in terms of what use the animal is to man, which is partially a product of his religious beliefs:

Animals were created before man; but some of them were apparently endowed with their useful and valuable properties for his comfort and assistance; for he had the dominion of them consigned to him, and was commissioned to subdue them. Having used their products for food and clothing, conjointly with the fruits and seeds of the vegetable world, and their bodies for the carriage of his burdens... they have continued his faithful and assiduous servants, contented with their destiny, and submissive to his desires. He gives them food and shelter in payment of service, attending them with diligence and care. (Knapp 153)

Knapp's religious convictions are evident in this section as he refers to man having "dominion" over animals,⁹ which is a common argument used by many Christian groups for their treatment of animals.¹⁰ Knapp uses a traditional servant narrative as he writes about a use-value exchange writing that the animals receive food and shelter in "payment" for their "service." While Knapp recognizes that there is an exchange of service and goods, at the same time, he completely denies the ability of the individual animals to have personal agency. He writes:

Actions... [that] when they are performed by mankind, arise most commonly from duty, affection, pity, interest, pride; but we are too generally disposed to allow the inferior orders of creation the possession of any of these feelings... it seems but reasonable to consider them as gifted with latent passions; though being devoid of mind to stimulate or call them into action by any principle of volition or virtue. (Knapp 147)

In this passage, Knapp argues that humankind, in general, gives animals too much agency because we ascribe human emotions to them when, in actuality, they are "devoid of mind" and "virtue." This passage represents a radical departure from the writings of White and Clare who both argue throughout their writing that animals have more agency than humans normally give them credit for. Throughout his book, the theme of animals lacking individual agency continues as he writes "each creature [is] pursuing its own separate purpose in a settled course of action, admitting of no deviation or substitution, to accomplish or promote some ordained object" (Knapp 205). Knapp argues that the animals' actions are all preordained and merely playing out the actions that are

programmed into them by God and natural order. White and Clare reject this idea of natural programming that Knapp writes about. Instead, they view animals as having personal agency, unique identities, and deserving of all the freedoms that humans enjoy.

The contrast between the work of John Clare and John Leonard Knapp in this section emphasizes many of the common themes that nature writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries wrote about. In particular, many writers wrote about scenes that detailed intricate parts of nature in a way that illustrated the concept of ecosystems before they were defined in the scientific community, thus proving the significance of qualitative observation in both literature and the natural sciences. Secondly, Knapp, Clare, and many other writers wrote about invisible or “imperceptible line[s] of influence” that exist throughout the natural world and that the natural world is in a constant state of modification or fluctuation. The major distinction between Knapp’s writing and Clare’s is that Knapp’s view of nature is based on use-value or how valuable plants and animals are to humans, while Clare has a more holistic view of the natural world that avoids this commodified view of the natural world. Clare does not view nature in terms ownership, submission, or domination; instead, he takes a more radical conservationist view of nature being equal to humanity. While this is a radical perspective, it is an effective form of advocacy for the environment.

3. John Clare and John Leonard Knapp in Comparison with Oliver Goldsmith and the Natural History Encyclopedists

At first glance, the idea of Knapp and Clare using descriptive and narrative sketches in order to write their natural histories does not seem all that radical. However,

these narrative and descriptive techniques that invoke empathy, introduce similarities between the natural world and humanity, and suggest that plants and animals have personal agency all are quite radical in comparison with both the Linnaean naturalists and a similar group of naturalists (who also follow Linnaean taxonomy) that I would describe as natural history Encyclopedists.¹¹ These writers portray the natural world in a more detached, universalized manner in the mode of encyclopedia entries. With the rise in popularity of the encyclopedia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there are a wide number of writers who developed different versions of natural history encyclopedias, including: Oliver Goldsmith's *History of the Earth and Animated Nature*, Carl Von Linne's *An Introduction to Botany*, Comte de Buffon's *Natural History Containing a Theory of the Earth, History of Man, of the Brute Creation*, and many other books. In this section, the focus will be on Oliver Goldsmith's *History of the Earth and Animated Nature* because of Goldsmith's reputation as a talented poet, his interest in natural history, and the enormity of his work in this area. Because Goldsmith's work straddles similar boundaries between poetry and natural history writing as Clare, the comparison between the two is especially apt.

History of the Earth is an enormous eight-volume tour de force in regards to an encyclopedic guide of the natural world.¹² Goldsmith wrote this work at the end of his life after writing thousands of pages of essays, poetry, and fiction. In the introduction to the book, he elaborates on the mission of his work:

Natural History, considered in its utmost extent, comprehends two objects. First, that of discovering, ascertaining, and naming all the various

productions of nature. Secondly, that of describing the properties, manners, and relations, which they bear to us, and to each other. The first, which is the most difficult part of this science, is systematical, dry, mechanical, and incomplete. The second is more amusing, exhibits new pictures to the imagination, and improves our relish for existence, by widening the prospect of nature around us. (Goldsmith v)

In the first half of Goldsmith's definition of natural history, he writes about the more systematic nature of natural history writing and the second part addresses a more qualitative descriptive method of natural history. Goldsmith's work seeks to reconcile the two elements of natural history by analytically listing the many productions of nature. At the same time, he attempts to make the natural history come to life with depictions of every one of these listed categories of plants, animals, and other elements of the natural world. Goldsmith then elaborates on the difference between these two aspects of these elements of natural history, explaining:

[H]e is taught by systematic writers of natural history to examine [an animal's] most obvious qualities, whether a quadruped, a bird, a fish, or an insect. Having determined it, for explanation sake, to be an insect, he examines whether it has wings; if he finds it possessed of these, he is taught to examine whether it has two or four... [then] he is then taught to pronounce, that this insect is one of the beetle kind: of the beetle kind, there are several different families, distinguished from each other by their antennae or horns: he examines the insect before him, and finds that the

horns are clavated or knobbed at the ends; of beetles, with the horns thus formed, there are several kinds; and among those, he is taught to look for the precise name of that which is before him... In this manner a system of natural history may, in some measure, be compared to a dictionary of words. (Goldsmith vi-vii)

Instead of merely creating a dictionary of natural objects like he does above, Goldsmith argues that his work is different because he will give “a short, though satisfactory history of its habitudes, its subsistence, its manners, its friendships and hostilities. [His] aim has been to... shorten [the] descriptions by generalizing them” (Goldsmith x). In other words, Goldsmith is staking a claim between the work of many previous naturalists who have created systems that resemble natural dictionaries and the work of Clare, Knapp, and White who create descriptive narratives about the natural world. Goldsmith’s many interactions with Dr. Johnson influenced his decision to begin with the dictionary format and then expand¹³ to a more descriptive and animated book.¹⁴ Overall, this work most resembles a natural history encyclopedia.

Goldsmith began this study with a larger overview of the natural world including mountains, bodies of water, wind, and even an analysis of many of the interactions beneath the Earth’s surface. This universal overview of the world that lasts hundreds of pages illustrates the breadth of Goldsmith’s education,¹⁵ general knowledge, and travels.¹⁶ The enormity of this project is something that Clare, White, and Knapp would not have been able to tackle because of lack of means, lack of access to prominent libraries, and their limited ability to travel. From this larger overview, Goldsmith then

focuses on the animal world beginning with studying human characteristics, then moving into other categories such as “monsters,”¹⁷ quadrupeds, birds, fish and insects with many other areas in between. The reading of Goldsmith’s work provides a stark contrast with that of Clare, White, and Knapp because Goldsmith chooses to look at the world through a more classificatory, systematic lens (as he admits is his goal in the introduction). In contrast, Clare, White, and Knapp chose more qualitative narratives and descriptions.

Throughout Goldsmith’s *History of the Earth*, he chose a more general and universal mode of writing that denies agency to the animals he writes about, denies individualization between species,¹⁸ denies anything more than instinctual linguistic capabilities, and results in a method of writing that does not make full use of his descriptive poetic abilities. While it is an impressive book as an encyclopedia, it lacks the vision and the description that he is known for throughout his poetic and fictional oeuvre. For instance, consider the difference in the way Clare and Goldsmith write about hawks. Clare begins his narrative about a particular hawk in a general manner, writing that he has “often stood to view a hawk [kestrel] in the sky trembling its wings and then hanging quite still for a moment as if it was as light as a shadow and could [sic] find like the clouds a resting place upon the still blue air” (*Clare’s Birds* 1). This account is both useful, accurately portraying a gliding technique, and artistic, using the word shadow as a simile and suggesting it may rest lying on nothing but air. In contrast, Goldsmith begins with presenting the hawk in relation to its usefulness to humans:

As every creature becomes more important, in the history of Nature in proportion as it is connected with man, and as falconry constituted the

principal amusement of our ancestors, this bird may be considered of more consequence than either of the former race... A man of rank, in former ages, scarcely went out without being attended by his hawk; and so much was it considered as a mark of distinction, that the nobility were generally drawn with their favourite bird perched upon their hand. In the reign of Edward the Third it was made felony to put a hawk to death; and to steal the eggs, imprisonment for one year. (Goldsmith 197)

The beginning portion of Goldsmith's entry entirely concentrates on the hawk's importance to humans and the fact that it was a "mark of distinction" for a noble person to own a hawk. Goldsmith also attempts to quantify the amount of the importance of hawks in relation to how much jail time a person receives if they kill one. The importance of the animal is viewed completely in relation to how much use-value it has for humans; whereas, in Clare's natural history writings, animals have a separate value apart from their relation to humanity. Also, after this passage, Goldsmith goes into detail about how to make "obedient" or tame hawks, arguing that the hawks exist for the purposes of humans, which is something that the adult Clare does not normally suggest.¹⁹

Clare's writing on hawks takes a different direction than Goldsmith's with detailed reports of his individual interactions with these birds. For instance, he begins by generalizing that hawks hunt "leverets Partridges and Pheasants," then continues in detail about seeing one injured by a hunter (*Clare's Birds* 1). Clare describes its sound, writing that it made an "earpiercing hissing noise" when confronted by a dog and after it was tied in a barn, it "effected its liberty" by gnawing through the rope and getting through a hole

in the barn. After this very specific example of a hawk, Clare then writes about a multiple kinds of hawks, in depth descriptions of their characteristics, then writes about two specific hawks that were playing in his garden writing that they “were fond of washing themselves,” would run after each other “seizing bits of clods or fallen apples in their claws” or “catching at flies” (*Clare’s Birds* 2). Clare characterizes their habits and preferences, their “atitude[s] [sic],” how they would fly after him, and the way that one landed on his shoulder. This particular hawk had an affinity for Clare and would often follow him until a boy had caught the hawk by surprise and the bird perished shortly after. Clare’s feelings for this bird are presented in his final line on hawks in general as he writes, “I felt heartily sorry for my poor faithful and affectionat hawk” (*Clare’s Birds* 4).

While John Clare’s depictions of animals delve into personal anecdotes, differentiation between individual birds, the animals’ linguistic capabilities, and his emotional connection to certain hawks, Oliver Goldsmith’s representations focus more generally on the variation between species and tendencies of the birds without attributing individualization. Goldsmith differentiates between falcons, lanners, kestrels, goss-hawks, sparrow-hawks and others through examinations of their feathers, claws, wingspans, and many other characteristics. While this classification is important and useful, it does not make use of Goldsmith’s poetic or descriptive eye in the way that Clare’s natural history does.

Another example of the distinction in the natural histories of Goldsmith and Clare is in their writing on martins, larks, and other birds of the “sparrow kind.” Both authors describe the birds generally, writing that these birds prefer to inhabit areas where humans

live, portraying their nests in great detail, their sounds, and they write about how bird catchers often track and catch these birds. As with their depictions of hawks though, Goldsmith concentrates on the general and universal aspects of these birds, while Clare provides anecdotes and individual descriptions. For instance, in their entries on the starling, Goldsmith classifies the bird as part of the “sparrow-kind” and suggests that its bill is differentiated from other birds of this class (Goldsmith 237). In comparison, while writing about the starling, Clare gives an in depth account of its physical attributes, their eggs, and how they are often trained to whistle tunes, imitate words, and even speak short sentences. Then, significantly, Clare delves into an anecdote about a gypsy that had a tame starling that stayed with him even though he did not keep the bird in a cage. Clare presents some more attributes of the species suggesting that they “collect together in flocks” and often “pick something out of horse dung” (*Clare’s Birds* 22). Clare weaves together the anecdotal stories of individual birds with more universal qualities of the species in a way that give a fuller picture than mere classification.

One of the most famous anecdotal stories that Clare writes about a sparrow is his story about a tamed sparrow that he kept as a boy. He kept it for three years and was afraid of his cat killing it. So, he would hold out the bird to the cat and every time the cat would smell it, he would beat the cat. Eventually the cat learned to leave the sparrow alone, but a consequence of this was that the bird lost its fear of predators. Three years after first finding the bird the sparrow disappeared and Clare came to the conclusion that the bird must have not been fearful of a predator because of its experiences with Clare’s cat (*Clare’s Birds* 32). This personal anecdote is shocking when we view Clare as we

have been accustomed to seeing him in terms of an environmental advocate; however, it is important to note that most of the episodes of him taming animals, stealing birds' nests, hitting the cat here, and others are as a boy or young man. These scenes are important in understanding Clare as a good, yet imperfect advocate for nature and also in understanding how his philosophy towards nature changed over the course of his lifetime. This is similar to a young William Wordsworth who would hunt and kill butterflies as a young man, who later in life was much more of an advocate of nature.²⁰ The importance of this scene is that it blends the personal with the general, teaching a lot about the sparrow, and indirectly about the author's ecological worldview as well. After this anecdote, Clare returns to writing about the general qualities of the sparrow like where it builds its nest, a list of the materials that make up the nest, and what its eggs look like.

Even though Clare's writing is more limited in scope and he is unable to make the global connections that Goldsmith makes in his work, we still learn valuable information about abilities of entire species through his more localized focus. For instance, James Fisher writes that Clare identified "from personal observation about 145 wild birds, of which 119 can be identified with reasonable certainty as county records – 65 of them first records" (qtd. in *Clare's Birds* xii). Clare not only identified a vast number of birds, but he was the first person to identify many of them ("Introduction" to *Clare's Birds*). Also, Clare was an expert in illustrating in writing the flight patterns of these birds, in particular the flight of "skylarks, swallows, green woodpeckers, lapwings, kestrels," and many other birds (*Clare's Birds* xiv). Clare writes about the woodlark, that it "fl[ies] in a slanting direction to the ground and rises and falls in alternate scotches as it decends [sic]

which prolongs its song” (*Clare’s Birds* 37). This is an in depth depiction of the flight pattern of this bird that both illustrates Clare’s descriptive abilities and helps a naturalist understand some details of the woodlark’s flight. He continues the account of the woodlark’s flight:

[I]t has an odd way of singing as it flyes from tree to tree dropping down a little way and then rising up with a jerk and when the[y] fly up they are silent agen [sic] and when they are weary they either stuntly drop on the ground or settle on a tree where their song ceases till they are agen [sic] on the wing (*Clare’s Birds* 40).

Compare Clare’s writing on this bird with that of a contemporary naturalist:

In flight the woodlark closes its wings and glides at regular intervals, a pattern of flight known as undulating flight. The melodious song is produced during a song flight, from a perch or from the ground. (*Royal Society for the Protection of Birds*)

Clare’s version is remarkably accurate elaborating on the “undulating flight” and the song patterns of the bird. His description of the undulating flight is perhaps one of the earliest most detailed accounts of this flight pattern of the woodlark. Goldsmith has a similar examination of the flight pattern, but he does not capture all of the many different aspects:

[T]o hear this bird warbling upon the wing, raising its note as it soars, and at length is out of sight; to see it then descending with a swell as it comes from the clouds, yet sinking, by degrees, as it approaches the spot where

all its affections are centered and confined, affords the mind those pleasing sensations which inanimate objects can never produce. (Goldsmith 240)

In this entry, Goldsmith's observation of the woodlark's flight is more generic than Clare's to the point that it could refer to nearly any bird and does not capture the unique nature of this bird's flight. Significantly, Goldsmith's description becomes nearly Wordsworthian at the end of this section, as he writes about the sensations that nature can bring to the mind that inanimate object cannot. The power of Clare's observation is the combination of acute accuracy and minute examination that shows the unique nature of each bird.

One of the reasons for the vast difference between, on the one hand, Clare, Knapp, White, and on the other hand, Goldsmith and other similar writers is their divergent methods of gathering material. Clare believed that all natural history materials should originate from personal observation of the living world. White and Knapp did a majority of their information gathering from personal observation, but also from research on dead specimens and a little of their research came from compiled work of others. Goldsmith, on the other hand, did some observation, but most of his material was gathered from other written sources. Goldsmith's lack of firsthand knowledge of natural history actually became a joke among his friends:

The ignorance on this point of the author of the *Animated Nature* was a constant subject of jest among Goldsmith's friends. They declared he could not tell the difference between any two sorts of barn-door fowl until he saw them cooked and on the table. (Black 17)

While Goldsmith's firsthand observations were weak, he was an expert at researching and compiling the work of others. The majority of his *History of the Earth* derived from dozens of other natural histories and a large amount from Comte de Buffon's *Natural History Containing a Theory of the Earth, History of Man, of the Brute Creation*. This can easily be seen with the large amount of references to Buffon throughout Goldsmith's work.

The difference between the Linnaean naturalists and encyclopedists, versus the more narrative and descriptive writers such as Knapp, Clare and White illustrates the vast disparity in thought processes that were occurring between the natural history writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many writers were acting purely as scientists, classifying, dissecting animals, and analyzing data, while others were acting more as writers, observing, describing and narrating the natural world. Of course, there were many natural historians who carved out an area in between these extremes and it is the broad array of methods and ideas that created some of the most exciting advances in modern scientific study. One of the key reasons to reconsider these writers is to better understand how we arrived at a scientific view of the natural world that is analytical and universal and, at the same time, qualitative and holistic. In this study, we are examining the more holistic and qualitative mindset of writers like Clare, Knapp, and White and contrasting them with the more strictly systemic method of classification of the Linnaean naturalists. These distinctions will become more apparent as we examine the poetry of John Clare and why Clare was one the more important natural history writers of his time and created a natural history poetry that is yet to be fully appreciated.

Notes

¹ Knapp joined the navy at a young age and was present at a skirmish with Paul Jones, the infamous pirate. A few years after joining, he was forced to resign from the navy because of health difficulties. He then became an officer in Herefordshire Militia. (*Gentleman's Magazine*, Knapp)

² Thame was famous for being the site of one of John Wesley's home churches near the end of the eighteenth century and an important place for Christian revivalism. (*Thame.net*)

³ Immediately after the work was finished, a fire destroyed the original impression and only a limited number of copies were left. Because of this, the book never was widely distributed. Knapp refers to this incident in a poem entitled "Progress of a Naturalist." (*Gentleman's Magazine*, Knapp)

⁴ Knapp wrote articles for a large amount of journals, magazines, and newspapers. His most extensive contributions were in *The Times Telescope*, although many were written anonymously. (*Gentleman's Magazine*, Knapp)

⁵ Knapp and many other writers of this era were highly influenced by natural theology books, one of the most famous of which was William Paley's *Natural Theology: or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature*. In Paley's "Preface to the American Edition" he writes that the purpose of the work is to "gather materials from the knowledge communicated by science, wherewith to construct an argument for the existence and attributes of God" (Paley ii).

⁶ Joseph Campbell and many others have thoroughly discussed this trope that occurs throughout the history of literature.

⁷ The earliest food webs were published by Victor Summerhayes and Charles Elton in 1923 and Hardy in 1924 (*Dictionary of Zoology*).

⁸ Many books and journal articles address the commodification of nature in *Robinson Crusoe*. For a succinct summary of this theme, I recommend Brett McInnely's "Expanding Empires, Expanding Selves: Colonialism, the Novel, and Robinson Crusoe" from the journal *Studies in the Novel*.

⁹ For a succinct explanation of Christian Platonism and dominion theology I recommend an article from *Commonweal Magazine* entitled "Caring for the Earth: Why Environmentalism Needs Theology." For more in depth coverage of this topic, many systematic theology books cover this topic in depth.

¹⁰ This argument stems from one interpretation of the word "dominion" in Genesis 1:26:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth (*KJV*).

The debate occurs over whether to translate the Hebrew word for dominion (*rada*) as subdue and subjugate or as to be a caretaker of. The Christian groups that believe that *rada* should be interpreted as subdue tend not to worry about animal rights or

environmentalism; whereas, the groups that interpret it as closer to caretaking tend to be more environmentally minded.

¹¹ None of these writers described themselves in this way, however, encyclopedists is a term that captures the essence of their writing styles. They wrote truncated, general descriptions over an enormous amount of subjects in a similar way as a modern encyclopedia does.

¹² This work was later abridged to five volumes.

¹³ In an 1854 edition of *History of the Earth and Animated Nature*, Washington Irving writes a preface and a biography of Oliver Goldsmith. In the biography, Irving outlines many debates, conversations and interactions between Dr. Johnson, Boswell and Goldsmith. Goldsmith describes the influence of Johnson's dictionary and Boswell describes Goldsmith's project as the "new Pliny" in reference to Pliny the elder, a first century Roman citizen who was considered a model for both natural history writing and encyclopedic writing (Goldsmith, Irving 69). Dr. Johnson also endorsed the importance of Goldsmith's work, saying that it "would do the king good" to read it (Goldsmith, Irving 70).

¹⁴ Washington Irving claimed in the Preface to the 1854 edition of Goldsmith's *History of the Earth* that "Goldsmith is now writing a Natural History, and he will make it as entertaining as a "Persian tale" (Goldsmith, Irving i)

¹⁵ There was great attention paid to Goldsmith from a young age. First he was guided by a nanny that taught him continuously from the age of three until he was able to be taught

by a preceptor named Byrne who kindled Goldsmith's love of poetry. Then his mother ran across some of Goldsmith's poetry, even though he had gone to great lengths to hide it and she was so impressed she implored their relatives to help him get a better education. Goldsmith then went to Trinity College, Dublin where he suffered many indignities as a "poor student," who had to do many demeaning tasks, dressed in a more modest manner, and much more work was required of him than his wealthier classmates (Irving 2-6).

¹⁶ Boswell wrote that Goldsmith "disputed" his way through traveling Europe, but biographer William Black suggests that this most likely meant that Goldsmith begged his way from country to country in order to see the continent. (Black 16)

¹⁷ When Goldsmith refers to "monsters," which he devotes an entire chapter to; he is referring to human beings that differ from the societal norm in some way. Of course, now this wording is very offensive and inappropriate, but at the time it was very common. Here is a portion of Goldsmith's description of what he is referring to when he uses the word monster:

Hitherto I have only spoken of those varieties in the human species that are common to whole nations; but there are varieties of another kind which are only found in the individual, and being more rarely seen, are therefore called 'monstrous.' If we examine into the varieties of distorted Nature, there is scarce a limb of the body or a feature in the face that has not suffered some reprobation, either from Art or Nature—being enlarged

or diminished, lengthened or wrested, from its due proportion. Linnaeus, after having giving a catalogue of monsters, particularly adds the flat heads of Canada, the long heads of the Chinese, and the slender waists of the women of Europe, who, by tight lacing, take such pains to destroy the health through a mistaken desire to improve their beauty... It is sufficient here to observe, that every day's experience must have shown us miserable instances of this kind produced by Nature or Affection—calamities that no pity can soften or assiduity relieve.” (Irving 199)

It is a dramatic description that is quite shocking to the contemporary reader, but was common in the writing of the time.

¹⁸ Many other natural history writers write about individualism within animal species.

One of the best examples is Susan Fenimore Cooper (1813-1894) who wrote one of the first books on nature writing by a woman in America entitled *Rural Hours* (1850). She had an incredible amount of individualization of animals in her book; however, I did not address her work here because she is more known as an American naturalist while the focus of this work is on British naturalists. In future works on naturalism, I would like to address her work more thoroughly. For more information on Susan Fenimore Cooper and individualism within animal species, I recommend Vera Norwood's *Made from this Earth: American Women and Nature* (1993).

¹⁹ There are a few instances as a child and young man where he does write about similar topics, but not in his more mature work.

²⁰ The scene is also reminiscent of “Book One” in *The Prelude* where he writes about his boyhood adventures stealing birds’ eggs:

Sometimes it befell / In these night wanderings, that a strong desire /
O'erpowered my better reason, and the bird / Which was the captive of
another's toil / Became my prey ... / Nor less, when spring had warmed
the cultured Vale, / Moved we as plunderers where the mother-bird / Had
in high places built her lodge; though mean / Our object and inglorious,
yet the end / Was not ignoble. (317-321, 326-330)

Wordsworth attributes animalistic “desire[s]” to his younger self as he describes the bird that he is chasing as his “prey.” As an adult looking back at these events he is still excited by them, yet the adjectives (“mean,” “inglorious”) in this section of the poem suggest that he is uncomfortable with the events as well. Leonard Lutwack writes about this scene in his book *Birds in Literature* explaining that in the 1799 edition of the poem he described himself as a “fell destroyer” and that stealing bird’s eggs brought rewards such as the “sixteen to twenty pence” that a pair of woodcock eggs would bring.

CHAPTER V: JOHN CLARE AND JAMES THOMSON: A LOCO-DESCRIPTIVE POETICS

In reading John Clare's poetic oeuvre, one fact is completely undeniable: that his poetry is tied to his sense of place and that his emphasis on location serves as a primary defining characteristic of his writing. Clare's hometown and the surrounding areas influenced him and resonated throughout his writing, which is the major characteristic that makes his writing unique. Arguably, few British writers of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries were more influenced by their locations than Clare. In order to better understand this focus on location it helps to examine how Clare's poetic career began and the ways that the fellow poet James Thomson (1700-1748) influenced his writing. Clare's first major experience with poetry was reading *The Seasons*, by Thomson, and the impact of this work on Clare helped to shape his writing career into the development of a loco-descriptive poetics based on his hometown, the surrounding areas, and the many natural scenes that existed around him in his daily life.

1. John Clare, Nature, and *The Seasons*

In nearly every biography of John Clare, and in many critical works, there is a section written on a pivotal moment in his young life when he read James Thomson's *The Seasons*.¹ Clare's attachment and passion to privileging local description is inherently connected to his love for this poem, and we can begin to understand this by investigating the different accounts of his first experience reading *The Seasons*. Anne and John Tibble, two of Clare's most famous biographers, simply present the moment in their biography as Clare being "hidden in Burghley Park on his way back from buying the

book at Stamford” and explain how important this moment was for him and his development as a poet (Tibbles 24). Little can be gathered from their account, but, even in this shortest account, it is undeniable that the event was an integral moment in Clare’s writing career. Jonathan Bate, in *John Clare: A Biography*, takes a little over three pages to write about Clare’s excitement from coming across this book of poetry, writing that Clare exhibited a “remarkable” “intensity” upon reading *The Seasons* (Bate 89). Significantly, Bate argues that Clare and William Wordsworth were highly influenced by Thomson’s “loco-descriptive” genre, which for Clare, appeared most obviously throughout his early career, and for Wordsworth, it is especially noticeable in his first two published works, “An Evening Walk” and “Descriptive Sketches” (Bate 90). One of the most gripping accounts of Clare first reading Thomson was written by Fredrick Martin, in Clare’s first official biography, who embellished upon this story a bit more:²

Examining the book [*The Seasons*], he got excited beyond measure. It was the first real poem he had ever seen, and in harmony as it was with all his feelings, it made upon him the most powerful and lasting impression... The sun had risen in all his glory when John Clare was trotting back from Stamford to Helpston. Every now and then he paused to have a peep in his book. This went on for a mile or two, after which he could contain himself no longer. He was just passing along the wall of the splendid park surrounding Burghley Hall, the trees of which, filled with melodious singers, overhung the road. The village of Barnack in front looked dull and dreary; but the park at the side was sweet and inviting. With one jump,

John was over the wall, nestling, like a bird, among some thick shrubs in the hedge. And then and there he read through Thomson's 'Seasons'—read the book through twice over, from beginning to end. (Martin 26-7)

This scene depicts the pivotal moment for Clare, as he purposefully chose actions that separated him from the rest of his peers in Helpstone. First, both his journey, and his stealing away in the park avoiding work in order to read the poem, signaled the lengths that he was willing to go to gain an education and, in general, become knowledgeable about poetry, nature, and the world. In a town where the average person was not able to read more than a few phrases out of the Bible this was a radical action in itself.³ Second, Clare decided to enter Burghley Park, which was not only private property, but also extremely prominent private property in that it was built for Queen Elizabeth's chief minister.⁴ He was clearly trespassing on this land and would have been punished if found. Finally, Clare began writing poetry immediately following his reading of *The Seasons*, composing two poems, "The Morning Walk" and "The Evening Walk." Even though Clare had just read his first official poem,⁵ he was determined to write poetry in a similar manner to that which had inspired him. For this thirteen-year-old boy, there seemed as if there were few boundaries that were sacrosanct for him to cross.⁶ Crossing these boundaries helped shape Clare's character and poetry for the decades to come in ways that will become obvious in the rest of this chapter.

One of the most essential aspects of Martin's depiction of Clare's first experience with Thomson was that the beginning of Clare's poetic career became essentially tied to these places where he began reading and writing poetry. Many of Clare's poems

intricately detailed Helpstone, Burghley Park, and the surrounding areas. In reading his more than nine thousand poems, it would be easy to map out these areas, the plant and animal life contained within, and have a sense of the overlapping ecosystems that made up this area. The fact that Clare was limited to such a small area for most of his life and was a descriptive writer created a unique situation where every detail of the surrounding landscape became an important detail that needed to be written about.⁷

The experience of reading *The Seasons* while surrounded by these natural areas made his sense of place an inseparable part of his writing both in style and content and the major characteristic that made his writing distinctive from that of his peers. While others often wrote about nature more generically or superimposed traditional natural descriptions on their individual locality,⁸ for Clare, his home, and the nature surrounding it, was his passion, inspiration, and his physical reality for his entire life. He almost never departed from Helpstone, and the immediately surrounding areas, other than a couple of trips to London after he became famous. Because he was consistently immersed in the nature and culture of Helpstone, this reality became completely intertwined with his poetic identity to the point that Clare's writing and hometown cannot be separated without thoroughly altering his life's work. Simply put, his work would not be the same if he were not limited to living in this small area for his entire life.

In the next few pages of Fredrick Martin's biography, he depicted Clare as "trembling," in "bitter sorrow" when he missed his first opportunity to buy *The Seasons*, he "could not shut his eyes from sheer anxiety" and "had a good long cry" in fear of not getting the book. Then, as he arrived at the bookshop, he had "wild gleaming eyes" and

fled in an incredible haste (Martin 28-9). Of course, Martin's story was exaggerated for narrative affect, but through the scraps of writing that we have from Clare on this event, Martin's description is not far from the truth as is easy to see from this section of Clare's autobiography:

I clumb over the wall into Burghley Park and nestled in a lawn at the wall side the scenery around me was uncommonly beautiful at that time of the year and what with reading the book and beholding the beautys of artful nature in the park I got into a strain of descriptive rhyming on my journey home This was 'The Morning Walk' the first thing I ever committed to paper I afterwards wrote the evening walk and several descriptions of Local Spots in the fields which I had frequented for Pootys, flowers, or Nests in my early child hood[.] (Robinson 11)

In this scene, Martin illustrates a clear connection between Clare reading *The Seasons*, beginning to write his own poetry, and the fact that his writing focused on "Local Spots" rather than generalizations or universals about nature. Importantly, even though he learned the technique of privileging the local over the universal from Thomson, Clare takes this focus to a more intensive level, perhaps because he was limited in his travels, so most of his experiences originated from a local perspective by default. The intensity through which he localizes his writing is the strength of his poetry and world perspective and will be further examined in the second part of this chapter.

The Seasons is not the only work that Clare lists as an inspiration for his writing, he also writes about reading many other works including Bloomfield's *Rural Tales, Ballads, and Songs*, which inspired him nearly as much as *The Seasons*:

When snugly hid beneath the thorn / I mus'd o'er Bloomfield's 'Rural Tales:' / And there, sweet bard! thy 'forest-song,' / Describ'd with energy sublime, / Fraught with such music, charm'd my tongue, / And turn'd my simple thoughts to rhyme. (Lines 51-56,)

Clare writes about a combination of hiding away in a place where he is surrounded by nature and generally away from humankind, with reading nature poetry, creating an inspiration that leads him to write about the environment that surrounds him. In the same way that he hid away and read *The Seasons* and wrote "The Morning Walk" and "The Evening Walk," he now hides away and reads Bloomfield and writes "Narrative Verses." The combination of entering forbidden areas and being inspired by both nature and natural history poetry is a common theme that appears throughout his work.

Another writer who wrote about the impact of *The Seasons* on Clare's work was the critic John Barrell in *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place* (1972). Arguably, Barrell presents the most remarkable and unique perspective on the writing of both Thomson and Clare, about what Thomson contributed to the history of poetry, and what Clare both drew from Thomson and added on his own. First, Barrell analyzes the way that Thomson presents a natural scene to the reader, claiming that Thomson was drawing from the type of landscape paintings that were painted by the French painter Claude Lorrain (1600-1682) and the Italian painter Salvator Rosa (1615-1673). Both Lorrain and

Rosa were known for making the landscape a main focus of their paintings and making the people, buildings, and other objects to be subordinate to them in their work. In a quick survey of Lorrain's work, it is easy to see that he was prescient in the way that he presented landscapes.

Although Barrell does not address this, many of his landscapes seem to be precursors to the work of J. W. Turner and C. D. Friedrich. An example of this prescience could be observed in the paintings "A Sunset or Landscape with Argus Guarding Io" (1642) and "Landscape with the Repentant Magdalene" (1643), where the land, trees, and a hill form a cup-like shape around the sky similar to Friedrich's "Man and Woman Contemplating the Moon" (1824) and "Two Men Contemplating the Moon" (1830). In each of these paintings, there are human figures; however, they are so small, that the size of the landscape is overwhelming, which symbolizes the immense power that nature holds over human kind. Also, the land seems to cup the sky as if the sky could be trapped and enclosed by the land. In each of these paintings, the landscape is the prominent feature, and it is obvious that the painter took some artistic license in presenting the scene to emphasize the areas that they wanted to highlight. This is a similar technique to what Thomson uses in *The Seasons* to present the landscape to the reader and had a tremendous impact on the work of Clare as well.

After analyzing the way that landscape painters influenced Thomson, Barrell then examines the way that Thomson uses the distance of the subject and the verb in a line of his poetry purposefully to illustrate its distance from the horizon and many similar techniques.⁹ This thorough analysis presents a new way of viewing Thomson's poetry

and at the same time illustrated the importance of interdisciplinarity for finding connections between art and literature that may help readers understand both forms better. He explains that Thomson's perspective comes from a narrator whose perspective is "fixed" from a high point and able to "survey" the entire scene (Barrell 21). At the same time, he challenges the idea that previous critics had held about Thomson that stated that he merely listed natural objects from *The Seasons* in any random order. Instead, he wrote that Thomson had very specific intentions and order as he illustrated the scene for his readers, writing that the "structure [of the poem was] invented to imitate the response of the eye to the landscape that it looks over" from the foreground to the horizon in a "sweeping" motion (Barrell 27). In other words, he attempted to depict the scene in the exact order that the human eye would view each object. This was different from most picturesque writers and artists who were "more concerned with individual features" than the scene as a whole and would often use symbolic features rather than real imitations of the scene (Barrell 50).¹⁰ While this distinction may seem minor, the dedication to detail and contextual accuracy matters when investigating natural history writers. The obvious question becomes: can picturesque writing be natural history writing? I would argue that they could overlap, although, a picturesque writer is much less reliable in terms of natural history writing therefore their work needs to be viewed more skeptically.

Despite Thomson's focus on presenting the real images, his biggest weakness came as he had an "anxiety to control nature," in a neo-classical manner, so, the portrayals of the environment tended to be "plastic" in that they are sometimes altered as Thomson feels the need (Barrell 24-5).¹¹ This produces a dilemma in understanding

Thomson's writing because he is more dedicated to encapsulating the details of the whole picture than most picturesque writers, at the same time, he is not afraid to alter some of the objects in the scene to express his poetic needs. Because of this challenge in categorizing Thomson's work, the best way to categorize his nature poetry is as a mixture of picturesque and natural history. He provides a more reliable narrator than picturesque writers, but less reliable than natural history writers. Barrell's analysis of Thomson is integral to understanding how different Thomson was from other picturesque writers of the eighteenth century and helps us to understand the major influence he had on Clare.

Another aspect of Thomson's writing that we learn about from Barrell is that while other picturesque poets color their natural scenes through a subjective lens and moralizing, Thomson presents the actual scene. Although, importantly, Thomson does move objects or make small alterations according to his aesthetic necessity in the same way that a landscape painter like Lorrain or Rosa would. This discrepancy seems small; however, it is a drastic departure from the nature writing of other poets from his era who took more symbolic liberties with the scenes that they portrayed especially in the tradition of the picturesque. On the other hand, Clare begins with Thomson's technique of portraying scenes as biologically accurate, but the difference is that Clare takes fewer liberties with illustrating the scene than Thomson. The reason for this is because Clare localizes his scenes more than Thomson does, so Clare has a personal investment in presenting the scenes as they actually appear. While Thomson does at times indicate the location of his scenes, it is much more incidental than integral, where with Clare, location is the most integral aspect of his nature poetry.

In order to further understand the impact that *The Seasons* had on Clare, we must first contextualize the poem's importance in literary history and more fully appreciate James Thomson's view on natural philosophy. Thomson wrote *The Seasons* approximately one hundred years before Clare's writing career began in 1821.¹² By the time the book reached Clare's hands it was one of the most popular books in England next to the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress*.¹³ One of the major reasons for this popularity was the way that Thomson presented the natural world. Although overstated, Douglas Grant describes Thomson's significance well:

Thomson was the first modern poet to make Nature his theme. Earlier poets of course had not disregarded Nature; they had all delighted in its beauty; and the pastoral tradition can be exactly traced from Theocritus and Virgil down to Thomson. Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton had observed and described its variety... and Thomson's contemporaries, Alexander Pope, Ambrose Philips, and John Gay, had happily used the countryside as a background for their pastorals. But earlier poets had made Nature subsidiary to humanity... and they only introduced it to give point and substance to imagery whose purpose it was to disclose human nature... Thomson, however, described Nature for its own sake.¹⁴ (Grant 100)

Of course, Grant is exaggerating here a bit about Thomson only describing nature "for its own sake" and him being the "first modern poet to make nature his theme," but his overall point about Thomson's increased emphasis on nature compared to his

contemporaries and predecessors is apt.¹⁵ Thomson's main subject was nature, not humanity in nature, or what nature represents, but nature itself. Most of Thomson's forbearers and contemporaries used nature as the background to what were the important aspects of the poem, which is why exact detail and accurate descriptions were less necessary. Although, I would argue that Thomson does use nature as an avenue for glorification of God through natural revelation, however, nature is still the main focal point of *The Seasons*, the glorification of God is merely his conclusion that resulted from his description.

There are many points throughout *The Seasons* where Thomson deviates away from this emphasis on the natural world,¹⁶ but he consistently returns the spotlight to nature in every case after small deviations for historical references, commentary on society, and allusions to classical literature and arts that was customary of most poetry of this period. Anne Janowitz comments on Thomson's consistent focus on natural history writing that Thomson's "Enlightenment criticism divides the world into the superstitious masses and those who stand above, 'The enlighten'd few, / Whose godlike mind exalts'" (Janowitz 471). Because of Thomson's view that enlightenment comes through analytic observation of the universe, *The Seasons* presents intricate scenes that enable his readers to gain knowledge through his observations that will help them understand the world. Clare is influenced by Thomson's detailed accounts of the natural world, but uses less allusions and historical references. This choice of emphasis is partly because of Clare's less formal education, but also because of a decision by Clare to focus on nature and not

distract from it with unnecessary allusions, a theory which he elaborates on throughout his natural history writings and autobiography.¹⁷

Throughout his life, Thomson received criticism (just as Clare would later experience throughout his lifetime as well) for focusing his poetry too much on description and not enough on larger philosophical ideas. For instance, Alexander Pope said in reference to *The Seasons*, “It is a great fault, in descriptive poetry, to describe everything,” which is reminiscent of Keats’s criticism of Clare that “images from Nature are too much introduced without being called for by a particular sentiment” and that “description overlaid & stifled that which ought to be the prevailing idea” (Grant 115, Storey 122). In an 1820 edition of *The Seasons*, in a section entitled “Critical Observations” the author declares “[t]here is nothing in Thomson that requires any painful exercise of the faculties, that calls for any of the higher exertions of the imagination, or that soars beyond the experience of the humblest intellect” (Williams and Murdoch ix). Throughout their careers, this criticism has been consistently leveled at both Clare and Thomson that their descriptions do not attain a higher level of thought or philosophize enough.

The criticism of having too much description appears again in an 1860 edition of *The Seasons*, where Myles Birket Foster writes, “[t]he diction of the ‘Seasons’ is at times pure and musical; it is too elevated and ambitious, however, for ordinary themes; and where the poet descends to minute description... the effect is grotesque and absurd” (Foster 26). This criticism is reminiscent of Stuart Curran’s commentary on “Beachy Head,” discussed in chapter two of this work, that the minute detail of the poem produces

an “uncanny particularity” (Curran xxvii). Of course, there were many similar critiques of Clare’s poetry as well. For instance, in an unsigned review from *New Monthly Magazine*, the writer argues, “in his minuteness of detail he seems at a loss where to stop” (Storey 68). In other words, Clare cannot help but giving more detail than is needed. Many critics would write positively of Clare’s ability for description, but then deride him for not being worthy of notice because writing does not rise above description. A critic, from *Monthly Magazine* made such an argument, writing that “[t]hough Mr. C’s poems are not devoid of merit, they will not stand the test of trial themselves” because they are not sufficiently philosophical. One piece of advice given to Clare from Charles Lamb is especially notable as Lamb recommends that Clare “transplant Arcadia to Helpstone” (Storey 175). In other words, Lamb was telling Clare that his poetry would be better received if he did not use unique images from his hometown, instead, that Clare should take idealized pastoral Arcadian images and superimposed them over his local area.

A central aspect of these critiques listed above is that they attack the best and most unique aspects of Clare and Thomson’s work, the minute descriptions of nature, in favor of the sentiments that are commonplace throughout the poetry of this period in pastoral and picturesque techniques. The aspect of their writing that distinguishes it from other works is exactly what they were castigated for during their lifetimes. Both poets, much like realist painters, felt that much could be learned through their descriptions without overtly transposing larger philosophical meanings directly onto their descriptive poems, but this was a concept that was highly criticized and often not recognized for its

material benefit and contribution to literature as a whole. Both Clare and Thomson were able to depict a scene in a manner in which the reader would learn about the natural world, ourselves, and many other concepts with pure description and they were often not recognized for this contribution to literature.

The significance of Clare and Thomson's focus on natural detail becomes apparent in the way that Clare advances descriptive poetry beyond Thomson's work.¹⁸ First, it is essential to note that both Clare and Thomson were not purely descriptive, realist poets. Their poetic oeuvres are multi-faceted and have thousands of poems with many topics. For instance, Clare wrote an enormous amount of ballads, poems focused on story-telling, focused on people like gypsies or fictional characters, he had many philosophical poems, especially in his later works, and in general, he has a lot of poetry similar to the common poetry found by any minor poet of his time period. However, when we delve through his oeuvre of over nine thousand poems, and concentrate on his natural history poetry, there are many unique qualities, including an overwhelming concentration on natural detail, realism, and resistance to the overarching philosophical elements imbedded in most of the nature poetry of his day. One main element of Clare's natural history poetry that went farther than Thomson was his intense focus on locality, which will be the focus of the next section in this chapter.

2. Loco-Descriptive Poetics in *The Seasons*

One of the major contributions that Thomson made to descriptive poetry was to act as a precursor to loco-descriptive poetry. This is a genre of poetry that concentrates on a specific area or landscape and uses it as a way for the reader to better understand the

world around them. Some examples of loco-descriptive poetry (or as M.H. Abrams calls it “topographical”) include John Denham’s “Cooper’s Hill” (1642), Alexander Pope’s “Windsor Forest” (1713), John Dyer’s “Grongar Hill” (1762), William Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” (1798), and many other poems of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that focus on a specific place are part of this genre. Although all of these poems fit into the broader genre of loco-descriptive poetry, M.H. Abrams argues that Denham, Pope, and Dyer were all precursors to Wordsworth and the other Romantics’ more “descriptive-meditative” poems (208-211).¹⁹ Through examining portions of Thomson’s Seasons, it is easier to understand the genre of loco-descriptive poetry and how it branched into descriptive-meditative poetry (what Abrams later calls “The Greater Romantic Lyric”) and the loco-descriptive poetry of Thomson and Clare that is closer to natural history.

Both Thomson and Clare’s loco-descriptive poetry is distinctive because of their intense focus on minute description. For both writers, the concentration of their work is on accurately portraying the world around them and the many movements throughout the natural world. Thomson challenged other poets of his time period by writing biologically accurate scenes that are full of energy and movement. Of course, *The Seasons* has other elements beyond natural description, for instance, Sandro Young writes about “Winter” and argues that it is divided into three categories:

[F]irstly, a description of the arrival and effects of winter on human beings, fauna, and flora, including various hymnal addresses to Winter or deities associated with him; secondly the poet-speaker’s introspection and

withdrawal from the external effects of winter ... and lastly the recognition of the established reign of Winter with the awareness of the impossibility of survival, combined with the hope for relief after death.

(Jung 61)

For the sake of this work, we will concentrate on Jung's first categorization of Thomson as providing detailed descriptions of the environment. Because Thomson believes that enlightenment originates from in-depth analytical description, he is immensely loyal to presenting accurate scenes from nature. However, on occasion, like a landscape artist, he does make slight alterations to the scenes in order to fit his poetic needs, but the majority of his images are directly from nature and not merely images borrowed from previous generations of poets. Clare writes in a similar manner as Thomson, but with even more focus on detail, location, and capturing unique words for sounds and actions in his environment.

Thomson and Clare's focus on natural detail enables the reader to come to what we would now refer to as a more ecological understanding of the world that these poets inhabited. It encourages their readers to understand a more holistic view of the natural world. Their poetry promotes the rejection of the reductionist systems of nature that were scientifically prominent in their eras, such as Linnaean taxonomy and dissection that often disregard the importance of local environments, and their poetry concentrates on more fluid, local, organic methods of understanding the natural world. This understanding can only come from intricate details, the same details that they have been criticized for using throughout their careers.

The significance of in-depth, local descriptions in the poetry of Thomson easily become apparent in a few passages from *The Seasons* that makes description the prime element of the passage above all else. In the first section of the book, entitled “Spring,” Thomson begins illustrating nature unfolding before the unnamed speaker, who is assumed to be the author:

The hawthorn whitens, and the juicy groves / Put forth their buds,
unfolding by degrees, / Till the whole leafy forest stands display'd, / In full
luxuriance, to the sighing gales; / Where the deer rustle through' the
twining brake, / And the birds sing conceal'd. At once array'd / In all the
colors of the flushing year, / The garden flows, and fills the liberal air /
With lavish fragrance; while the promised fruit / Lies yet a little embryo,
unperceived, / Within its crimson folds. (Lines 89-100)

In analyzing this passage, it is significant that as of this point in the poem the place where this scene occurs is unnamed. Before this scene, appear some general clues as to the location, however, they are limited. For instance, one of the birds listed, the bittern, is depicted in line twenty-two and is a native of Britain and then in line sixty-six the narrator calls on the people of Britain to “venerate the plough.” So, at this point in the poem the location is known to be in Britain, but no more specific knowledge than that is available to the reader.

Beyond this lack of specified placement, the landscape is portrayed in detail with “hawthorns” that are growing whiter, “groves” that are “juicy” and “buds unfolding by degrees.” The significant aspect of these first three objects portrayed by Thomson is his

focus on the many stages of development that occur within this small ecosystem. When reading the poem it is obvious that each of these scenes occur during springtime as the hawthorns grow whiter in the spring, the groves grow fruit that are considered juicy at that time, and buds unfold in the spring. However, on a smaller scale, the term “unfolding” is modified by the word “degrees” suggesting that within this cycle there are multiple smaller cycles even within the specific species. Thomson is illustrating for the reader the many systems at work in this local area, which is, as of yet, undefined.

Notably, the perspective changes throughout the scene listed above because it emphasizes the many layers of movement that Thomson uses in the poem: movement of perspective, movement of individual objects, and a feeling of movement that stems from the alliteration in the poem. For instance, the scene begins from a wider perspective, the groves and forest, and then moves towards a more narrow perspective of the embryo of fruit within the leaves. Because of this change in perspective, the audience is pulled into the scene as if watching a movie changing from a wide perspective to a close up. The scene could easily have been written in a reverse order, but the author chose to move from a wide view to a narrower perspective in order to draw the reader into the minute details of the scene. Another critical component of most of Thomson’s poetry is that nearly every object in the scene is in motion. The animation of every part of the natural world suggests that all of nature is organically alive and does not merely consist of inanimate objects. The third kind of movement in this scene occurs linguistically as Thomson writes in blank verse and uses alliteration throughout the passage. As he writes about the “whole leafy... full luxurian[t]” forest, the garden that “flows, and fills the

liberal air / With lavish fragrance,” and the “colors of the flushing year” the alliteration of the “L” sound creates a flowing motion when traced throughout the passage. Overall, the passage portrays movement in perspective, through animated objects, and through literary devices creating a scene that signals that the natural world is very much alive.

The middle of this passage presents a forest full of life with birds and deer rustling throughout this small area. The final part of this section describes fruit existing in “embryo” form, ready to be compelled to life, but not quite there. This entire scene, when taken as a whole, textually illustrates one small system in the natural world, a grove or small area of a forest, and then examines the smaller systems of the plants and animals that reside there. Within each of these systems, Thomson writes about the potentiality of life inside fruit trees, the cycle of buds on the plants existing in multiple stages of development, and two different animals that both inhabit their own eco-spheres, and interact with these other systems as well. Throughout this section, he depicts many parts of nature that are very active. Perhaps the most striking aspect of this view of this small section of the grove is how animated and alive each element appears. The hawthorn actively “whitens,” the groves “put forth” their buds, the forest purposefully “stands” to display itself, gales “sigh,” deer “rustle,” birds “sing,” and the garden “flows.” Humans tend to create a dichotomy where humans are considered active and have agency, and perhaps animals as well, however, when we think of gardens, hawthorns, and many of these other parts of the grove, they are viewed as passive and without agency. The interweaving of active verbs every fourth or fifth word creates a powerful cadence that intensifies the activities of the plants and animals in this passage. After reading this

passage, it is clear to see that Thomson is disputing this dichotomy and challenging his readers to do the same.

The passage that we have been examining can be interpreted in many ways. Thomson, early in the eighteenth century, provides depictions of overlapping ecosystems, such as the smaller flowers and fruit from the scene in the passage above, to the system that includes the birds and deer in the scene, and finally the entire grove. Each of these scenes portray systems within systems of plants and animals interacting with each other harmoniously. Thomson purposefully chose to remove all human elements (with the exception of the speaker of the poem who does not interact nor impede in the scene) from these interactions in order to show the natural world in an uninterrupted manner, thus intentionally presenting a model for a better way to interact with the natural world. At the same time, the many ways that he decided to represent this scene produced an ethical statement about the natural world.

From a human perspective, this section of “Spring” shows the potentiality that exists within nature. This potentiality appears in the manifestation of embryonic fruit that if cultivated and left to its system will produce sustenance and continual renewal for every part of this system. The message to the reader is that the natural world has these overlapping complex systems that consistently renew themselves and if humans understand and respect these systems, nature will continue to revitalize itself. Basically, if we act like the deer or bird in the poem, and interact with the ecosystem without major disruption, then we can create a mutual relationship between humans and nature that will be a productive relationship for both. Through Thomson’s realistic interpretation of the

natural scenes before him, an attentive reader, who does not condemn his poetry for being merely description, can ascertain many insights about nature, philosophy, and humanity. The embryo of fruit that is presented could be viewed as a metaphor for descriptive poetry, because such poetry presents images of the natural world with patience, respect, and care for our deeply inter-related worlds.

Significantly, it is not until after this passage in “Spring” that we get a more specific location for this section of the poem, naming it as “Augusta,” a rural district outside of London (Line 107). Thomson immediately contrasts the beauty of the previous scene with the harsh London pollution, writing that it is “[b]uried in smoke” and “noisome damp” (Line 101). The contrast between these two scenes of London and the more rural Augusta provides further evidence that Thomson is purposefully commenting about the way that man exploits nature and how we need to heed the example of the previous stanza by understanding and living with nature without exploitation.

The next section of “Spring” begins by describing a cycle of rainfall over a part of his local area:

Thus, all day long, the full-distended clouds / Indulge their genial stores,
and well-shower'd earth / Is deep enrich'd with vegetable life; / Till, in the
western sky, the downward sun / Looks out, effulgent, from amid the flush
/ Of broken clouds, gay-shifting to his beam. (Lines 185-190)

Thomson paints for the reader a scene of spring rainfall, which represents a consistent renewal for the earth that needs this sustenance to help plants grow, feed the animals, and is a consistently self-sustaining system. Rain is a necessary element in the cycle of all of

nature. A second element of this cycle is introduced, the sun, which arrives in the western sky from behind the clouds to provide another necessary element to the maintenance of this natural area. Thomson continues verbally illustrating this scene, writing a general description of the area that contains a “mountain,” many “streams,” and a large wooded area (Line 192). Then, Thomson describes the bio-diversity of the area, writing:

Then spring the living herbs, profusely wild, / O'er all the deep-green
earth, beyond the power / Of botanist to number up their tribes; / Whether
he steals along the lonely dale, / In silent search; or, through the forest,
rank / With what the dull incurious weeds account, / Bursts his blind way;
or climbs the mountain rock, / Fired by the nodding verdure of its brow. /
With such a liberal hand has Nature flung / Their seeds abroad, blown
them about in winds, / Innumerable mix'd them with the nursing mould,
(Lines 221-230)

Thomson argues that the diversity of plants within this area is such that not even a “botanist” could list all the many tribes and that the wind helps to “innumerable[ly] mix” them, so that the plant diversity in this area is extensive. Importantly, in the middle of this section he makes a commentary on the societal definition of the term “weed.” Thomson calls people that do not recognize the beauty and importance of what are termed “weeds,” “dull” and “incurious.” This is a purposeful disruption of the binary that society deems as plants or flowers as good, while weeds are considered a nuisance. He destabilizes this binary by suggesting that there is good to both what are traditionally viewed as plants and those viewed as weeds and the socially created binary betrays the ignorance of those that

support it. John Clare mirrors this idea in his natural history writings, as has already been discussed, and then, as will later be analyzed in his poetry as well. As with the previous natural scene, nature is depicted with language that is active such as the “living” herbs that “spring” and are “wild” and Nature flinging seeds, and “nursing” them.

A central distinction between this scene and the previous one is that there is a human intruder. The botanist “steals” along the dale, “search[ing]” and “burst[ing]” over a mountain. He or she is portrayed as a foil to the animals of the previous scene because their actions are abrasive in comparison with the deer and rabbit previously portrayed. Also, the botanist is presented as inept in contrast with the genius inherent in the scene as he or she is not able to count the diversity of the scene and is considered “dull” and “incurious” in comparison to the more intelligent animals and people that would appreciate what most scientists view as weeds. Thomson is highly critical of the botanist and infers that he or she should follow the example of how the animals interact with nature, through observation, peaceful interaction, and less abrasive activities in general.

A bit later in the “Spring” section of *The Seasons*, Thomson gives another portrayal, similar to the last scene, that while pure description, is pregnant with meaning. He depicts an area surrounding a brook:

Now, when the first foul torrent of the brooks, / Swell'd with the vernal
rains, is ebb'd away, / And, whitening, down their mossy-tinctured stream
/ Descends the billowy foam; now is the time, / While yet the dark-brown
water aids the guile, High to their fount, this day, amid the hills, / And
woodlands warbling round, trace up the brooks; (Lines 391-397)

In this passage, Thomson once again writes about a small scene, the area surrounding a brook, and then many smaller systems within that scene. The first stanza describes the brook, but within this brook, he describes an “ebb[ing]” away of the land surrounding the “mossy-tinctured” stream and the final line suggests that it is the flowing water that creates the ebbing and the moss. He sees each of these processes occurring within the larger framework of the brook and surrounding areas. Then, in the middle section of this scene, Thomson widens the scope illustrating a larger view of the hills and woodlands where the brook winds around. Throughout *The Seasons*, Thomson continually vacillates his descriptions from larger views of many local areas and then focuses in on a few smaller areas within these scenes. This fluctuation of perspective from a larger ecosystem to smaller systems illustrates his understanding of the way that nature works and continues the theme of movement that appears throughout his work.

Once again, in the above passage, Thomson presents a living scene that is full of action. The brooks “swell” and ebb away, the stream “descends,” the water “aids the guile” and “warbl[e] round.” The scene also has a similar cadence of every fourth or fifth word being an action verb and parallels the fast pace of the water itself. Thomson uses alliteration in order to create a flowing sensation in this section as well. The “W” sound is in every line including the second to last, with the appearance of “fount.” When we trace this sound throughout the stanza, the “W” sounds winds around the words in a similar manner as the water is winding through the area depicted. Thomson uses both action verbs and alliteration in order to portray the liveliness of this hidden area. The second half of this scene continues these same themes:

The next pursue their rocky-channel'd maze / Down to the river, in whose ample wave ... / Just in the dubious point, where with the pool / Is mix'd the trembling stream, or where it boils / Around the stone, or from the hollow'd bank / Reverted plays in undulating flow; (Lines 398, 399, 401-404)

Thomson continues his theme of motion in nature as he follows the “trembling stream.” The perspective shifts again from a wide view of the river to one little place where the pool and stream meet where the water “boils.” The movements both in nature and in his perspective of the scene continue to undulate throughout the poem emphasizing the animation of the natural world.

Throughout *The Seasons*, James Thomson uses a loco-descriptive poetics in order to place the emphasis of his poem on detailed description and many different forms of movement. He focuses on specific scenes, that even when they are not named, it is easy to tell that he is intricately writing about a specified place. Like a landscape painter, he attempts to portray his scenes as accurately as possible, with minor artistic adjustments. This loco-descriptive landscape poetry planted the seeds in John Clare's mind that would develop into a much more intricately detailed loco-descriptive poetry. In the next section, this development of Clare's loco-descriptive poetics will be mapped out and it will be easy to see the connection to James Thomson's work.

3. The Loco-Descriptive Poetry of John Clare

Perhaps the best way to understand the impact that Thomson's loco-descriptive poetry had on Clare is to examine a poem that Clare wrote in 1821 entitled “Narrative

Verses, Written after an Excursion from Helpstone to Burghley Park.”²⁰ In this poem, Clare takes a similar journey as he did to purchase *The Seasons* and enters the same park that was previously considered off limits to him, where his poetic career began. Because Clare’s poetic career began while reading an early loco-descriptive poet, and then he associated Burghley Park with this reading, it is easy to understand why a strong sense of place and a focus on natural detail permeate his work. Early in his career, this connection between poetry and place was instilled in him and it lasted throughout his oeuvre.

In “Narrative Verses,” Clare uses many techniques that will appear throughout his oeuvre and some that he will later modify or expand. For instance, the title of the poem, as in many loco-descriptive poems is extremely precise about location, in this case, a walk between Helpstone and Burghley Park. Throughout the poem, other precise locations are given in order for the reader to envision the exact places where the speaker was standing, which is much more exact than what we find in Thomson. A second technique that Clare uses is that he tends to fluctuate from moments of complete stillness to points of noise and animation in order to emphasize the cyclical nature of the environment. At the same time, much like Thomson, Clare emphasizes cycles within cycles and systems within systems. Third, Clare also like Thomson, often attempts to remove the narrator (or at least the influence of the narrator beyond being merely an observer from the scene) a technique that is especially obvious in his bird nest poems. All of these writing techniques allowed Clare to focus his natural history poetry on minute descriptions without too much intrusion from the speaker of the poem.

Clare begins “Narrative Verses” by focusing on the fluctuations that often occur in nature between apparent stillness and animation in nature. The poem starts with the sun rising and “no blustering wind,” the “air was completely still” (Lines 1-2). Then, at the end of the first stanza, the movement begins as the narrator exclaims that it is a “[d]elightful morn,” a “gale” picks up, and a bee begins to hum “sweetly” (Lines 6-8). The wind signals the action of the poem as the narrator then flies “down the green slopes,” “through the thickest covert” (Lines 10-11). In this case, the rising wind signals a moment where the narrator is able to escape the human realm and enter a space in nature where he “pilgrim-like, trod foreign ground” (Line 20).²¹ This technique of descriptive writing is similar to Thomson’s scenes where the reader gets a bird’s eye view of the scene or appears to be flying over the scene. Basically, Clare shows how the landscape has a diurnal cycle as well as many smaller cycles throughout the minutes, hours, day, and so on. He divides many of his poems into day and night cycles and within them many series of stillness and animation. Clare viewed the world as cyclical with events that were divided up and continuously occurred and recurred, which can be seen most clearly in his work *The Shepherd’s Calendar*. These scenes show the power of the natural world to work independently from human interaction and often in spite of human interaction. Basically, Clare is displaying the many daily cycles that occur throughout the world and implies that they have value in themselves. While many other writers of his time saw nature in terms of use-value for mankind,²² he continually illustrated that nature acted independently of human values.

Importantly, Clare is writing about a specific location in “Narrative Verses,” and this location is written in intricate detail throughout the poem. The first specific location that he writes about is “Barnack Sinnoms,”²³ a section of woods that Clare enjoyed investigating. The narrative of the journey to Barnack Sinnoms follows the Thomsonian bird’s eye view technique for presenting the scene to the reader.²⁴ Clare depicts the “moss-grown hills” and then he “trace[s]” a “deep-sunk moat” and a “stony mound,” which could easily be glossed over with this quick movement from above. In the stanzas leading up to Barnack Sinnoms, the action is quick paced, the scenes are mostly glossed over, and the perspective seems to come from above the scene where the speaker does a quick survey of the scene.

After Barnack Sinnoms, the speaker then travels to a second specific location, which he does not directly name, however, he compares it to Bloomfield’s “Barnham water”²⁵ (Line 80). Leading up to this water-filled area, the narration is again fast paced and with just a quick view from an overhead perspective. This second precise location that the narrator shares with the reader is key because of the comparison with Bloomfield’s depiction of “Barnham Water” from his book *Wild Flowers; or, Pastoral and Local Poetry* written in 1806.²⁶ Clare rhetorically transposes a site from Bloomfield’s poem with this site that he is visiting and indicates that there are similarities to the land that Bloomfield was lamenting had changed.²⁷ This is worthy of note because there is no reason to believe that Clare’s descriptions are not accurate, yet he has no problem intersecting Bloomfield’s place that he has read about with the real place that he is experiencing. This connection between being inspired by loco-descriptive poetry and it

influencing his own writing appears throughout his writing career. The most important part of this passage is that the perspective changes: Clare finds this natural spot that reminds him of Bloomfield's Barnham Water from an overhead view yet that perspective resonates with another perspective where the narrator appears to be lying down and taking a microscopic close look at the scene.

The next precise location in "Narrative Verses" appears as the narrator rushes up "Barnack hill" and the point of view of the scene changes back to the original perspective in the beginning of the poem, where the reader is given a bird's eye view of the scene. Significantly, the narrator's perspective changes as he moves from the very real Barnack Sinnoms to the half literary half real Barnham Water and then back up Barnack Hill. In the beginning of the poem, Clare presents the reader with the perspective of being up in the air flying through the scene, then as we enter the space that reminds him of what he read in Bloomfield, the perspective changes to an up-close, ground-level and almost microscopic view, and then finally back to an overhead view. These shifting perspectives represent the narrator's journey of coming closer to nature by connecting with literature and immersing his identity within the scene. After reading *The Seasons* or Bloomfield, in both cases, it puts Clare in a mood to take a closer look at his natural surroundings.

The influence of the poetry that Clare is reading on him is that he becomes much more in tune with his surroundings. In this case, as Clare reads Bloomfield, he writes that it enables him to gain an "energy sublime," music began coming from the forest that "charm'd" his "tongue," which helped turn his "simple thoughts to rhyme." In this area of the poem, Clare begins writing in a traditionally picturesque manner by reaching for the

sublime; however, before and after this sublime experience, Clare inserts actual natural descriptions that anchor the poem in reality. Even in the dream-like sequence that follows, he never forgoes realistic depiction of the scene for fairies, mystical elements, or allusions that other picturesque writers use regularly.²⁸ Actually, Clare is able to gain a clearer view of the natural world because of this inspirational experience that he has through reading other natural history poetry. For example, after reading *Rural Rides*, Clare describes the world as being “brighter” and he is able to view even the most miniscule parts of the world such as beetles “dancing.” Then as another human approaches, a “stranger... scarcely gave a look” because Clare metaphorically became a part of the scene and was unable to be seen by other humans. He was viewing the world as if he was a part of it, not apart from it. The reading of Bloomfield helped him to see the natural world in a way that he had not previously seen, which is indicated by a change of perspective from distant to radically, almost microscopically close.

Another example of Clare’s focus on a loco-descriptive poetics appears in the poem “Holywell” from *The Village Minstrel*.²⁹ As with “Narrative Verses,” “Holywell” focuses on a particular place in Clare’s local environment as he illustrates through words a walk from his home to visit a famous general in the local area, General Reynardson. In both of these poems, walking provides a thematic element that shapes and alters the progress of the poems. Unlike “Narrative Verses,” “Holywell” is written in a simpler format, with a ballad-like feel. His choice of format may have been in order to express to the reader that this was a faster paced walk or that there was a change in mood. In the first two lines of the poem, Clare gives ownership of his writing to “Nature,” writing “to

thee the simple lines belong” (Lines 1-2). He writes about the sky as “watery” and yet the roads being “dry,” signifying the potentiality inherent in this scene in a manner similar to Thomson. Throughout the beginning of the poem, images show the energy inherent in the scene that is about to be released. He describes the “bush[es]” and “tree[s]” as “naked,” but with “melting patches” with “a flush of green” that will soon turn into “swelling buds” (Lines 7-11).

As occurred in “Narrative Verses,” and in the passages of *The Seasons* about the embryonic nature of seeds, this depiction of potentiality within nature appears with an eerie stillness. The mood of the poem grows increasingly intense, as the scene appears about to spring forth with life and animation. Then, as the narrator begins to walk, nature slowly grinds to action as “thrushes” begin “clear[ing] their throats,” begin singing “two ‘r three notes,” and the “wild heath” is portrayed as nearly coming alive. The violet is coming alive and leaving “its woodland home,” the “wind” and “storms” kick up in a similar manner as the wind beginning to increase in “Narrative Verses,” and a “fluskering pheasant took to wing.” Then, the poem shifts from completely still to complete animation, illustrating the cyclical nature of the natural world.

It is important to take notice here of Clare’s use of the word “fluskering.” The word has no modern usage, and it is questionable whether Clare made up the word himself or it was a dialect word from Northamptonshire where Clare lived.³⁰ Margaret Grainger defines the word to mean “flying with sudden and disordered motion, fluttering” (369). This word is representative of a lot of Clare’s dialect-based language because in the context of the poem, nearly any reader would easily be able to determine

its meaning even if they had never heard it before. However, “fluskering” seems to capture the essence of pheasant flight much better in one word than any other word possibly could capture. The closest modern word would be fluttering, but fluttering seems to miss the “sudden and disordered” part of the definition. Much like in his writing on animal communication, Clare spends a lot of time choosing the exact right words to depict the motion of the animals in his poems. Most importantly, the word fluskering represents motion, animation, and a clumsy, coming-to-life movement that perfectly fits the transition between the still world of the beginning of the poem and the animated world of the middle.

The animation in “Holywell” continues as rabbits begin “bobbing,” brown fallows are “soodling by,” blackbirds “flutter’d terrified,” and they begin to fly with a “prink, prink, prink.” The emphasis on action in the poem comes from the onomatopoeic verb “soodling” and the sound of the blackbirds as they begin to fly. Once again, Clare chooses specific words that capture the clumsy actions and the sounds that occur around him. A reader could easily close their eyes and imagine these sounds that seem specifically chosen for each animal. Notably, as in “Narrative Verses,” the narrator connects himself to the natural world in order to gain a clearer focus on the scene. In this case, he ends up describing himself in an animal-like manner, using the same verb for fallows as he applies to himself, writing that he “soodled on and on” and that he longs to sleep on the ground where the rest of the animals lie.

Finally, towards the end of the poem, Clare reaches the specific location that he has been searching for, Holywell, and the scene begins to quiet down again as the larger

diurnal cycle comes to a close. As night is closing in on the narrator, the “vales” become “[b]estriped with shades of green and gray” and the bustling scene begins to grind to a halt. The river is then depicted as “silver[ing] down the plains,” which sounds very much like slithering or very slowly and steadily moving along. Next, the stars begin to “blink” in the darkening sky, the “tenants” or animals of the “hollow” are “snug” in their “dwell,” and the little bee is hidden in its “cell.” All of the creatures that had filled the scene with life are now hiding away for the night. Through Clare’s descriptions of nature in the springtime, the reader gains some understanding of the processes that occur in this ecosystem at this time of the day and year. The potentiality inherent throughout the natural world is a continuing theme, as is the cyclical nature of the natural world, throughout much of his poetry and parallels the similar scenes from *The Seasons*. Clare examines the cycles that occur daily, seasonally, and even the miniscule cycles that happen throughout the day.

In one of the most effective instances of Clare showing the impact of location on his work is in his first book of poetry, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820), with a poem named after his hometown, entitled “Helpstone.” This symbolic choice to anchor his poetic career in his hometown helps us understand the importance of his local focus throughout his poetic oeuvre. This poem is different than “Narrative Verses,” “Holywell,” and other poems that trace the animated nature theme in that he is surveying land that has been cleared and destroyed very close to his home. Because of this change in focus, the speaker’s presence is in the forefront as he bears witness to the destruction at hand. In a stark contrast from the previous poems analyzed in this section,

as the narrator “stroll[s] along,” nature does not come alive as it once did; instead, it triggers many memories that he had on these fields. He “mourns” the “vanish’d green,” where there is no longer “many a bush and many a tree.” The brook that once was there is now “gone,” as is the “oaken plank,” that allowed him to cross and he can only “sigh at alterations made.” This is clearly a different poem than the previous ones that we have analyzed and fits into what Johannes Clare aptly named the “Enclosure Elegies” in her book *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance*.

Throughout “Helpstone,” Clare establishes direct links through the use of personification that help him represent the depth of his relations with animals. This helps him to come to the conclusion that humans are intrinsically connected to nature and nature is connected to us as well; and because of this, nature needs an advocate that will interpret the natural world and help human beings understand this connection. At the same time he argues that plants, animals, and humans that live in poverty are all subjected to violence from the greed of the wealthy, the exploitations of industrialization and the injustice of many human laws; that violence against the natural world is connected to violence against the lower classes; and, finally, that one way that the poor can help themselves, is to fight against the destruction of the natural world. The way that Clare approaches these themes throughout his poetry is similar to the way he approaches it in his natural history writing. However, in his poetry, his advocacy is more developed and more pointed in a way that actually reached the reading public, unlike his natural history writings. This idea will be further investigated in the next chapter where I analyze personification in Clare’s Enclosure Elegies.

As the book *Poems Descriptive* continues, Clare alters the tone of the poems concentrating more on the natural world and slowly attempts to remove the speaker's influence in the poems in favor of attempting to place description ahead of interpretation. Of course, this is not ever entirely possible in poetry, but his narration style focuses on the description of the natural world and not on the subjective thoughts of the person describing the world. The poem "Evening" aptly embodies this new style. The entire poem is animated by a living and bustling animal world and begins with the haze of the onset of night and the insect world beginning to come alive. This mirrors his patterns from previous poems where he illustrates the cyclical nature of the world vacillating between apparent stillness and bustling animation. First, as the natural world comes alive, the "heedless beetle bangs" and buzzes until he flies right into a cow-boy's "dinner tin" (lines 6-7). The beetle is unaware that this accident has angered the cowboy; the cowboy tries to kill the beetle, but the beetle survives and "buzzes on" (line 15). This entire scene is from the point of view of the beetle rather than the cowboy who seems more animal-like than human. Then, the scene continues to come alive, with "slowly-pacing snails, betraying their meand'ring creep," "dew worms" come out in couples, "owls mope out," "scouting bats / Begin their giddy round," and "countless swarms of dancing gnats" surround the water (lines 18-21, 23, 27-30). The animation appears in nearly every line of the poem at this point.

The world that Clare paints for his readers is clamoring with life, while the speaker steps behind the scene deciding what to show the reader, but not making his presence known. It is clear that this is a purposeful action because of the contrast with his

previous poems where the speaker is in the forefront and actively trying to connect with the natural world through personification and metaphor. Next, the “crickets chirrup” loudly, but then, the mood of the poem abruptly changes as a human voice calls from “distant pasture-grounds” and all of the bustling of the previous scene stops (36-38). Human interference causes apprehension and stillness from all of the creatures in this environment as “[a]ll noises to silence now lulls” (Line 41). There is such a drastic difference that the narrator chooses the word “dying” to explain the sounds that “whimper faint and fainter still, / Till they are heard no more” (Lines 44-48). In a manner similar to the previous poems analyzed in this section, the sounds and life become quiet, the “breezes... all died” as evening approaches (49). Symbolically, the air has been sucked out of this scene by the human interference.

In contrast with “Narrative Verses,” “Holywell,” and “Helpstone,” in “Evening,” the speaker comes forward towards the end of the poem and begins walking after the scene has become still. Also, in contrast with previous poems, Clare adds a mystical element to this scene, writing about “fairies” and “superstition,” however, it is important to note that as he adds these elements, they serve a different purpose than other writers of this genre (lines 64, 68, 76). Clare’s way of introducing fairies into this scene is in a tone that is almost mocking the superstition of the villagers. At the same time, he admits that he does not know how some natural processes work as he writes, “And fairies now, no doubt, unseen... / With dew-drop bumpers toast their queen, / From crow-flowers golden cup” (Lines 64-8). Clare does not know how the process of condensation works, so he uses an explanation that superstitious people may believe, but labels it clearly as

superstition, writing “But Superstition still deceives; / And fairies still prevail; / While stooping Genius e’en believes / The customary tail” (lines 72-6). In other words, the speaker claims that both regular village people and even geniuses sometimes fall for superstitions like fairies. In this poem, Clare writes intricate natural details and debunks widely held myths even though it forces him to admit that he does not know how nature works in this regard. This passage represents the epistemological shift in the natural sciences that occurred throughout Clare’s lifetime where the predominant scientific thought in his hometown involved myths that needed to be debunked in order to move to the more modern natural science that exists today. Clare, like Rousseau, calls for this reformation in biological observation in both his nature writing and poetry.

In much the same manner of his natural history writing, and in continuing to privilege the animals and environment over the speaker, Clare focuses a lot on presenting the noises that fill these natural scenes that he depicts for the reader. For instance, the last book that he published in his lifetime, *The Rural Muse*, (1835) is full of many natural sounds. An early poem in the book, “Summer Images,” describes the “mellow horn” of the “bee-fly,” the “green-swathed grasshopper” playing a “treble pipe,” and the “droning dragon-fly” plays the “rude bassoon” (Lines 27-33). The portrayal of sounds continues throughout the poem as he writes of the “chickering crickets” and the beetles that “murmur” as they tease “each passing ear” (Line 151, 156-7). These depictions are colorful and unique, not the traditional metaphors often used to characterize these insects or their sounds. Also, he often compares the sounds to instruments in order to both help the readers imagine the sound and, to suggest as discussed previously, a possibility of

communicating with them. Then, as in most of his poems on natural sounds, Clare introduces references to the sounds creating harmony. Early in the poem, all of the noises put together are expressed as a “tune” that is not “discordant,” suggesting that all of these distinctive animal sounds have harmony. The sounds combine together to create a “pleasing hum” with a “melody” and a boy that hears the sounds from a distance begins humming to the tune (Lines 160-7). Finally, near the end of the poem, Clare argues directly “Nature’s objects ever harmonize” (Line 188). While the argument could be made that Clare is just using musical metaphors and not making a larger statement, it appears obvious that since he continuously returns to this theme throughout his work, there is indeed a larger meaning. Like Thomson before him, his natural scenes show a natural world that appears incoherent to the average viewer, a series of discordant parts; however, when an observer dedicates sufficient of time watching these scenes and struggling to present them in writing, the parts that seem discordant actually all fit together in a self-sustaining and beautiful system. Clare is attempting to show his readers a natural world that is full of many different ecosystems, yet when viewed on the whole, these systems overlap and form one larger interwoven system.

One of the most intriguing series of poems that Clare writes is his series on birds’ nests from *The Rural Muse*. In the same way that Clare focuses on natural sound in order to privilege animals and the environment over the speaker, these poems often emphasize intricate details that are not regularly found in poetry and, at the same time, deconstruct the poetic archetype of the nightingale. For example, the narrator in the poem “The Nightingale’s Nest” begins a search for this reclusive animal’s nest:

And where that child its blue-bell flowers hath got, / Laughing and
creeping through the mossy rails... / Creeping on hands and knees through
matted thorn / To find her nest, and see her feed her young. / And vainly
did I many hours employ: / All seemed as hidden as a thought unborn. /
And where those crimping / fern-leaves ramp among / The hazel's under
boughs, I've nestled down, / And watched her while she sung; and her
renown / Hath made me marvel that so famed a bird / Should have no
better dress than russet brown. (Lines 10-11, 13-21)

Clare details the habitat of the nightingale from the flowers that are there, to the “mossy rails,” the “matted thorn,” “crimping fern-leaves” and “hazel’s under boughs.” Poetry does not often have as many details as Clare uses here, however, his critics will argue that it is mere description and not poetic. This passage shows that this criticism is truly without merit as the words are beautifully poetic, and at the same time, there is much meaning conveyed throughout this passage without a philosophical intrusion by the narrator. As William Wordsworth argued in regards to standing in nature, it is impossible to be in the presence of an intricate and beautiful scene without it forcing the reader to contemplate larger thoughts.³¹ Also, through what is often demeaned as mere description, Clare completely challenges the traditional depiction of the nightingale that has existed throughout poetic history, which will be examined in the rest of this section.

The passage quoted above from Clare’s “The Nightingale’s Nest” focuses on the beauty of the bird’s habitat with an increasing excitement for finding the bird, but as the narrator finally happens upon the bird, he is amazed that this historically canonized bird

has “no better dress than russet brown.” This bird, that is glorified throughout poetry,³² and used as a metaphor for concepts like beauty, imagination, knowledge and many others, is completely bereft of its archetypal qualities. At the same time, the poetic language is focused on intricate details of the bird’s environment, which deemphasizes the importance of the individual animal and emphasizes the holistic value of all of the scene or system put together. The presentation of this scene echoes Clare’s philosophical differences with other natural history writers of his time who would often take the animal out of its environment to study and dissect.³³ In contrast, Clare argued that understanding the environment, and the biodiversity contained within was an integral part of understanding the animal. The fact that the poem is about the search for the nightingale, the nest of the nightingale, and the environment surrounding the bird rather than the nightingale itself reflects a philosophic choice and a focus that is different from most poetry about this bird that merely treat it as symbol or archetype. It is important to note that the poem does reflect on the beauty of the nightingale’s song, however, the bird itself is demystified and seen clearly as a real biological creature.

An appropriate poem to compare with Clare’s “The Nightingale’s Nest” in order to emphasize its distinctions is Coleridge’s “The Nightingale” (1798). There are many similarities between the two poems. For instance, Coleridge’s poem is described as a “conversation poem,” meaning that he is using blank verse to imitate natural speech. In a similar manner, Clare uses blank verse and simple language in order to not distract from the natural details of the poem. Also, both poems challenge commonly held beliefs about the bird, with Coleridge challenging the way that poets depict the nightingale’s song as

melancholy and Clare depicting its common appearance.³⁴ Significantly, both poems argue that the nightingale needs to be realistically portrayed and not merely presented as a projection of human feelings. Coleridge succinctly writes that to project human feelings onto the natural world “profane[s] Nature’s sweet voices,” while Clare attempts to present the bird and its environment as biologically accurately as possible (lines 39-40).

The distinctions between Coleridge’s “The Nightingale” and Clare’s “The Nightingale’s Nest” illustrate how Clare attempts to evacuate literary history from his natural history poetry. Coleridge attempts to situate himself in literary history by directly criticizing Milton’s portrayal of the nightingale’s song, the poets that copy Milton’s depiction, and by mimicking Wordsworth’s style and tone. At the same time, most commentary suggests that the “night-wandering man” in “The Nightingale” is his “version of Milton’s poetic fiction” or a “composite figure” of Milton’s “persona” (Barbarese 675). Basically, Coleridge is accusing Milton of falsely attributing a characteristic that was influenced by “the remembrance of a grievous wrong” onto the nightingale (line 17). Coleridge suggests that poets should not just merely copy Milton; instead, they should observe nature firsthand:

And many a poet echoes the conceit; / Poet who hath been building up the
rhyme / When he had better far have stretched his limbs / Beside a brook
in mossy forest-dell, / By sun or moon-light, to the influxes / Of shapes
and sounds and shifting elements / Surrendering his whole spirit, of his
song / And of his fame forgetful! (Lines 24-31)

In a similar manner as Wordsworth's "The Tables Turned" and Gilbert White's call for poets to go out into the fields, Coleridge suggests that the best poetry comes from first hand natural observation, not through study and practice. After criticizing Milton, Coleridge introduces William and Dorothy Wordsworth into the poem as an answer to what needs to be changed in poetry:

My Friend, and thou, our Sister! we have learnt / A different lore: we may
not thus profane / Nature's sweet voices, always full of love / And
joyance! 'Tis the merry Nightingale / That crowds and hurries, and
precipitates / With fast thick warble his delicious notes, / As he were
fearful that an April night / Would be too short for him to utter forth / His
love-chant, and disburthen his full soul / Of all its music! / And I know a
grove / Of large extent, hard by a castle huge, / Which the great lord
inhabits not; and so / This grove is wild with tangling underwood, / And
the trim walks are broken up, and grass, / Thin grass and king-cups grow
within the paths. / But never elsewhere in one place I knew / So many
nightingales; and far and near, / In wood and thicket, over the wide grove,
/ They answer and provoke each other's song, / With skirmish and
capricious passagings, / And murmurs musical and swift jug jug, / And
one low piping sound more sweet than all / Stirring the air with such a
harmony, / That should you close your eyes, you might almost / Forget it
was not day! (lines 40-65)

Coleridge begins his poem with challenging Milton and then, as he is expressing the direction where he would like to see the field of poetry head, he writes about bringing William and Dorothy Wordsworth into a grove to view nature directly.

Clare also purposefully writes in simple language, however, he is writing this way because it is the style with which he is most comfortable, not in order to place himself in literary history. At the same time, Clare does not overtly criticize the false natural descriptions in his poetry in the same way that Coleridge does, (or, for that matter the way Clare himself did in his own prose); instead, he just gives minute biological details in a way that challenges poetic history. Clare is carving out a place in poetic history, but is not overtly seeking it in his poetry the same way that Coleridge does overtly.

The next section of Clare's "The Nightingale's Nest" portrays human interactions with the nightingale as needing to be a delicate balance between observance and interaction:

Her wings would tremble in her ecstasy, / And feathers stand on end, as
'twere with joy, / And mouth wide open to release her heart / Of its out-
sobbing songs. The happiest part / Of summer's fame she shared, for so to
me / Did happy fancies shapen her employ; / But if I touched a bush, or
scarcely stirred, / All in a moment stopt. I watched in vain: / The timid
bird had left the hazel bush, / And at a distance hid to sing again. (Lines
23-31)

As the nightingale is unaware of the narrator's presence, the bird is described as in "ecstasy," "feathers stand on end" with "joy," "release[s] her heart," and she exudes

happiness. However, as soon as the narrator accidentally moves or “touche[s] a bush” the bird would become “timid,” fly away and find a new secretive spot. Then, a few lines later, he writes that the bird has a “choking fear” from the human presence, is “mute in her fears,” and his presence “doth retard / Her joys” (Lines 60, 65-6). Basically, an important message is conveyed that when nature is left undisturbed the best aspects come to light, but when there is human interference it alters the landscape. The fragility of the nightingale is also highlighted: this bird that is so idolized, appears timid, fearful, and quite plain looking, yet produces an incredibly beautiful song. Clare is addressing the bird as a realistic biological figure, and at the same time he is deconstructing the mythical archetype surrounding the bird. However, he also argues that just because the bird is not as mythic as often presented, there is much to learn and enjoy through observation of the bird and its habitat.

Then, most importantly, the incredible focus given to the nightingale’s nest in this poem is especially worthy of attention:

How curious is the nest; no other bird / Uses such loose materials, or
weaves / Its dwelling in such spots: dead oaken leaves / Are placed
without, and velvet moss within, / And little scraps of grass, and, scant and
spare, / What scarcely seem materials, down and hair; / For from men's
haunts she nothing seems to win. (Lines 76-82)

Clare portrays the nest in intimate detail and emphasizes the fact that no other bird makes a nest in quite the same way as the nightingale. The details that he provides in his natural history writing are not replaced with more poetic language. Instead, Clare keeps all of the

detail of the natural history writing, but arranges it in a poetic manner. He lists materials that would normally be thought of as not worth saving, such as “moss,” “hair,” and “dead oaken leaves,” yet they add up to amalgamation of the home of one of the most famous birds of literature. The fact that this bird recycles many unwanted elements into an effective home proves the resourcefulness of the natural world to produce for itself in a cyclical and self-contained manner.

A bit later in *The Rural Muse*, Clare continues his emphasis on intricate natural description in his poems in “The Pettichap’s Nest.”³⁵ In the first part of the poem, the speaker explains how unique the habitat of this bird is, writing that he has “rarely found / A place less likely for a bird to form / Its nest.” Specifically, the pettichap tends to build close to the road, “on almost bare” ground, with only a “clump of grass” to keep it safe (Lines 1-4). Next, he lists the material that makes up the nest:

Small bits of hay / Plucked from the old propt haystack's pleachy brow, /
And withered leaves, make up its outward wall, / Which from the gnarl'd
oak-dotterel yearly fall. / And in the old hedge-bottom rot away. / Built
like an 'oven, through a little hole, / Scarcely admitting e'en two fingers in,
/ Hard to discern, the birds snug entrance win. / Tis lined with feathers
warm as silken stole, / Softer than seats of down for painless ease, / And
full of eggs scarce bigger even than peas! (Lines 14-24)

This section of the poem is dense with natural history details. Clare had previously listed the environment where the birds make their nests; now he lists details about the materials, the size and shape of the opening, and the size of the eggs. As with the nightingale, Clare

stresses the resourcefulness of this bird as it uses many odd materials in order to make an efficient home that would stay warm like an “oven.” In the few lines following, the narrator expresses amazement that the pettichap eggs are so “delicate” that a “green grasshopper’s jump might break the shells,” yet “lowing oxen,” “restless sheep,” and “hungry horses” pass them all day long and they are not often broken (Lines 25-33). The incredible detail that Clare presents in this passage proves his incredible ability as a naturalist; at the same time, he uses poetic language to convey the details in an artistic manner.

The natural history details included in the above passage does not sacrifice poetic talent for biological accuracy; instead, the poetry is used to enhance the biological presentations. For instance, the narrative structure of this portion of the poem traces the nest from the outside and ends with the treasure, the birds eggs, contained within. As the narrative moves deeper into the nest, the language reflects the secrecy and sanctity of the inner nest as Clare draws the reader into the nest with alliteration. The speaker repeats the “s” sound increasingly as he get closer to the center of the nest as he writes that it is difficult to “discern” the “birds snug entrance,” that it is lined with “feathers warm as silken stole,” that it is “Softer that seats of down for painless ease” and the “eggs” are “scarc[ly]” as big as “peas.” The most interesting part of this alliteration is how it builds in intensity as the passage ends. In the fifth last line there is one “s” sound, then four in the next line, five in the next, four in the second last, and the final line has three. The combination of the many “s” sounds combine to sound like the speaker is expressing the desire for silence or “sh--” sound. This alliteration is combined with metaphors, similes,

and a style of diction that is presented as the language of an average working class person. The combination of all these elements (intricate biological analysis, many poetic tools, and common language) produces poetry that is highly uncommon and worthy of further investigation.

In order to appreciate the unique nature of Clare's poetry in these bird's nest poems, let's compare it to some nature writing written at a similar time period. A well regarded natural history book entitled *Cage and Singing Birds: How to Catch Keep Breed and Rear Them, with Full Directions as to their Nature, Habits, Food, Diseases, &c.* has an entry on the pettichap worth comparison:

The prevailing colour of its plumage is reddish gray, mingled with white and brown, of various shades; it is a plump handsomely shaped bird... The nest is loosely made of dry grass; the eggs, from four to six in number, are of a dull white colour, dotted with light brown and gray. The young are hatched in about a fortnight, and begin to leave the nest as soon as the feathers appear. (Adams 41)

This depiction of the pettichap is representative of many others from different journals and books from the early nineteenth century, which often list its colors, sounds, a cursory description of the nest, and a description of their eggs. In comparing this with Clare's lines from his poems, Clare has many more details about what materials make up the nests, where the nests are located, how fragile the eggs are, the dangers that the nests will face, and other details that are not included in the nature book written by Adams or similar books from the era.³⁶ The important aspect of this is not an argument that Clare

had more details in his poems than most nature writers' texts. Instead, the reason this is important is to note that Clare's illustrations of these scenes are impressive from any natural history standpoint, but even more impressive when considering that these details were produced in a poetic format. Also, it is important to recognize that these details add up to more than the sum of their parts because of the contemplation that the reader reaches from picturing the scene.

As with Clare's natural history writing, his poetry also often provides more details than contemporary books on the topic. For instance, in the book *Attracting Birds to Your Garden* (2000),³⁷ Stephen Moss and David Cottridge write in regards to the garden warbler (pettichap):

Prefers to nest in thick, dense undergrowth with a fairly open tree canopy, such as small hawthorn copses... Like many warblers, the Garden Warbler builds a nest from dry grass stems, lined with grass and hair, usually found low in thick cover. (120)

Moss and Cottridge's book gives fewer details than Clare who describes what kind of grass and hair, and the book does not list the leaves that Clare claims they also use. There is a small disparity in location as to whether the bird's nest appears in dense undergrowth or more barren areas, but this can be specific to location or a consequence of adaptation. Both Clare and these writers agree that their nests appear in areas where there is not thick cover and later in *Attracting Birds* the authors represent their eggs in a manner similar to Clare. Again, the importance of comparing these descriptions is that Clare's detailed and holistic descriptions are comparable or even better than the nature writers of his day, as

well as better than many contemporary writers. The fact that Clare composes these scenes in a poetic manner helps the reader to more deeply contemplate the environment and human interaction because poetry is generally thought of as text that should be contemplated and analyzed.

Throughout this chapter, the most important point has been to focus on the loco-descriptive aspects of James Thomson and John Clare's work. More specifically, the aim has been to show Thomson's distinctive work in natural history poetry and the thematic strands that connect his work to the influence that it had on Clare. At the same time, Clare went farther than Thomson by being more specific about locations, by focusing on smaller areas, and, generally, by providing more intricate details. Both writers highlighted the environment over humanity, a holistic view rather than classification, they attempted to limit the role of the narrator; and they presented scenes in a manner similar to a realist painter in hopes that from these scenes, their readers would contemplate nature, humanity, and the ways in which the two intersect. As we delve further into the portrayals of nature in their poetry in the next chapter, it is important to understand how different their poetry was compared to their peers, and for Clare, his detailed analysis even rivaled that of natural history writers. While often disregarded for their realistic natural history poetry, these two writers need to be examined more thoroughly for the depth of their ideas as represented in both their prose and poetry.

Notes

¹ Jonathan Bate, in *John Clare: A Biography*, lists the date of Clare's reading Thomson as the summer of 1806, which would make Clare thirteen years old.

² Most contemporary biographers have come to the conclusion that Martin often exaggerated in this first biography for narrative affect. For instance, Jonathan Bate writes, that Martin "always added... colourful narrative embroidery" (Bates 10). Eric Robinson comes to a similar conclusion in his introduction to John Clare's *Autobiographical Writings* writing that Martin's work was "stimulating... overcolored and inaccurate" (Robinson vii).

³ Jonathan Bate describes John Clare's mother Ann Stimson Clare in the following manner: "[she] did not know a single letter of the alphabet and, like many country people, regarded book-learning as a kind of witchcraft" (Bate 13). This contrast between Clare and his mother shows how drastic it was for a person of his social stature to seek knowledge in the way that Clare did.

⁴ Jonathan Bate describes Burghley park as such:

Some forty miles north of Cambridge stands the mellow-stoned market town of Stamford... This was a region of great houses and estates, owned by the British counter-parts of those French aristocrats daily being dispatched to the guillotine by Marat's compatriots: the Spenser seat at Althorp; Milton Park, the principle southern residence of the Fitzwilliams; and, most imposing of all, Burghley House, built for Queen Elizabeth's

chief minister and now the home of his descendant, the tenth Earl of Exeter. (15)

It is obvious from this description that this was an imposing place for Clare to trespass.

Later in his life he befriended the Earl, but at this point it was definitely a risky venture.

⁵ His father was a collector of ballads, so it is easily imagined that Clare had some exposure to writing similar in tone to poetry.

⁶ Goodridge and Thornton write in their essay, “John Clare: The Trespasser” that Clare’s reading of *The Seasons* constituted “a three-fold trespass on the time, culture and land of his social superiors” (88).

⁷ Although tedious, an incredibly unique project would be to attempt to create cartography of Helpstone and the surrounding areas, including plant and animal life, only using details from Clare’s poems.

⁸ John Barrell writes about this extensively in his book *The Idea of Landscape and Sense of Place*. He argues that many writers often took natural descriptions from the great poets back to Theocritus and superimposed these descriptions on the landscape of the area that they were attempting to describe in the present.

⁹ Specifically, Barrell writes:

As the eye reaches the area just below the horizon – as Thompson is conscious of coming nearer to revealing the subject of the clause and its verb – it has time to notice in more detail the features of the landscape; and whereas, before the only adjectives admitted were those necessary to

distinguish, as briefly as possible, one band of the composition from the next, we now have adjectival phrases, which give up descriptive information for its own sake, not simply as to help grasping the structure of the composition. (20)

Barrell's analysis of Thomson's use of grammar and writing techniques in coordination with the aspects of the scene is thorough and in general one of the best analyses of *The Seasons*.

¹⁰ Barrell refers to Claude and William Gilpin as examples of artists who focused on the whole scene being more important than the individual parts.

¹¹ Barrell's argument here is not that Thomson does not portray the scene as it actually is, instead, Thomson views and portrays the scene as it actually is, but then, like a landscape painter, he may move some objects or alter their size or shape in order to suit his poetic need (Barrell 26).

¹² Thomson's poem "Winter" was published in 1726, "Summer" in 1727, "Spring" in 1728, and finally "Autumn" in 1830. (Grant xx)

¹³ In *James Thomson Poet of the Seasons*, Douglas Grant writes the often told anecdote about Coleridge coming across an edition of the "Seasons":

[Coleridge and Hazlitt] stopped at an obscure country alehouse, and Coleridge, picking up a little wornout copy of *The Seasons* which lay in the parlour, exclaimed, 'That is true fame!' ... Other poets have been widely read; other poets have decisively affected the progress of poetry;

but no other poet has been so taken to the nation's heart. *The Seasons* was once to be found in every household. The alehouses had a duodecimo or octavo from the press of the local printer, and another replaced it when it was worn out by the casual fingering of chance travellers; poor families had a similar edition ranged on the kitchen shelf beside the *Bible* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*... A glance through any catalogue will show that it is impossible to exaggerate the popularity of *The Seasons*. (Grant 98)

Coleridge continued to rave about Thomson's works, saying that "Thomson was a great poet, rather than a good one; his style was as meretricious as his thoughts were natural," while other poets of Clare's generation criticized Thomson calling his style "vicious" (Wordsworth) and Tennyson "hated it like poison" (Grant 111).

¹⁴ Here is some of the quotation that was cut out, in order to further explain Grant's point:

The reader of Milton's famous and sublime description of Eden was intended by the poet to understand it as the physical reflection of a moral purity, and not to delight in it for its own sake. When the later poets, Thomson's contemporaries, introduced nature, they arranged it carefully to provide a backcloth to throw into relief the insubstantial figures of the shepherds and shepherdesses... A tree, a cluster of roses, a sweet gale, and a swelling hill were but traditional properties which they could introduce where they willed, and although they were often admirably employed and

prettily described, they were too obviously divorced from the reality.

(Grant 100)

¹⁵John Barrell describes nature poetry before Thomson writing that the “landscape becomes a theatre where the poet’s own moral reflections are acted out... Coleridge called [it] their ‘perpetual trick of moralizing everything in nature’” (Barrell 35). Basically, the argument is not that nature is necessarily absent from previous poetry; instead, everything described in the nature world is depicted to the reader through the subjective lens of the poet. To some degree, this is impossible to prevent; however, the influence of the subjective on natural descriptions can be limited or at least made conscious.

¹⁶ In fact, Alan Dugald McKillop, in his book *The Background of Thomson’s Seasons*, analyzes the poem and compares different parts of the poem to the writers that have influenced Thomson. McKillop describes some passages as “Virgilian,” “Miltonic,” and compares his writing to many other authors as well (McKillop 13-4).

¹⁷ See Grainger pages 38 and 283 or the third section of chapter two in this work.

¹⁸ John Barrell investigated this comparison more fully in his book *The Idea of Landscape*.

¹⁹ M. H. Abrams writes about “descriptive-meditative” poetry in his essay “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric”:

The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of

memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene. In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation. (Abrams 201)

Abrams argues that Denham, Pope, Gray, and Dyer are precursors to this genre and that many of the Romantic and Victorian Poets fit into this category as well. He separates the “Greater Romantic Lyric” (“descriptive-meditative poem”) from the local poetry of the eighteenth century by arguing that in the eighteenth century poetry description was more prominent and in the Romantic version “description is structurally subordinate to the meditation” (224).

²⁰ Summerfield, Haughton, and Philips, in their book *John Clare in Context* give some background to Burghley Park that is insightful. First, they write that the landscapes in Burghley Park are the “topographical equivalent” to the landscapes represented in *The Seasons* (91). Importantly, they then point out that Helpstone is one of the physically lowest places in the land and Burghley Park one of the highest and can be interpreted as the identity of the poet rising as the land raises. The authors also suggest parallels with the work of Collins, Bloomfield, Bunyan, and Keats’s poem “I stood tip-toe upon a little hill” (92-3). *John Clare in Context* presents some important insights into “Narrative

Versus” and the mission of the book is to provide background and historicize Clare’s poems in a way that helps us better understand his motivations.

²¹ Anyone familiar with Romantic poetry, particularly M.H. Abrams’s *The Correspondent Breeze*, knows that the stirring of wind is often used as a symbol of poetic imagination and inspiration, which may be something that Clare is purposefully or inadvertently alluding to, but there is little doubt that Clare’s use of the wind is also literal as well.

²² Examples of this will come in the following chapters, but basically, I am referring to the kind of quantification of nature that can be found in books like Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, where the protagonist obsessively measures, names, and takes ownership over different parts of nature. This occurs throughout poetry of this time period as well, though often more subtly.

²³ Margaret Grainger writes that the original spelling is most likely “Synhams” and is “east of Barnack, between Bainton and Ufford” (*Natural History* 304).

²⁴ Thomson often presents his natural scenes as if he is an observer flying over the environment.

²⁵ James Ford, in the book *The Suffolk Garland*, describes Bloomfield’s Barnham Water in the following manner:

Barnham Water is a small rivulet, which crosses the road from Euston to Thetford; it is in the midst of a ‘bleak, unwooded scene,’ and justifies the poet’s lamentation in its full extent. (Ford 46)

It is clear that Clare feels a close association with this poem because of the familiarity with the scene. Because of the clearing of local lands, Clare was seeing more of these scenes with trees removed and the local waterways often affected as well.

²⁶ Paul Chirico writes about Clare's use of Barnham Waters in his book *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader* (2007). Chirico suggests that Clare is most likely reappropriating this place for a place near Barnack Sinnoms, which is not actually "Barnham Waters." If this is the case, Clare's use of intertextuality here is notable because he suggests that literal nature can be transposed in the same way that texts are. For instance, as he views a stream of water and is reading Bloomfield, he both describes the stream accurately, and at the same time, he imagines it to be the same stream that Bloomfield is writing about. This shows how Clare views writing and nature as things that can be intertwined and do not need to be separated, which can be seen in his famous phrase "I found the poems in the fields, / And only wrote them down" (Cherry 15).

²⁷ One distinction here is that Bloomfield seems to be lamenting that the land was once full of life both humans and animals and now it is barren and full of relics. Bloomfield's lament follows the loss of society, whereas, Clare's poems tend to decry the violence done to nature by humankind.

²⁸ A poem that feels similar to "Narrative Verses" is Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," where it begins in a realistic setting, then moves into the fantastical, and finally comes back to reality. The difference here is that as Clare reaches the more mystical middle of the poem the descriptions remain realistic, while Keats veers off into fantasy.

In Clare's case, the charmed part of the poem enables him to focus on the natural world in a clearer way than he had previously seen.

²⁹I would not label "Holywell" as one of Clare's natural history poems as there is direct philosophizing and a heavy human presence in the poem; however, the poem shares similar themes as his natural history poems, so it is useful to analyze this poem in this study.

³⁰Eric Robinson has done a lot of work in determining whether Clare's dialect words are original to Clare or were regularly used at the time. Other useful resources for further study are Anne Elizabeth Baker's *Glossary of Northamptonshire Words and Phrases* (1854), George Claridge Druce's *Northamptonshire Botanologia: John Clare* (1912), or perhaps easier to access would be Thomas Sternberg's *The Dialect and Folk-lore of Northamptonshire* (1851), which was reprinted in 1971 by S. R. Publishers (Grainger 366).

³¹ See endnote sixteen.

³² James Mckusick's "The Return of the Nightingale" from "Wordsworth Circle" proves to be an excellent resource on the history of the nightingale in Romantic literature.

McKusick explains the purpose of his essay:

I am interested in the nightingale, not only as a literary topos, or commonplace, but also as a biological organism that thrives in a specific habitat. Ecological literary criticism devotes special attention to the relation of poetry to actual places, and to actual biotic communities--real birds singing in real trees. To what extent does the nightingale topos

embody the lived experience of poets listening to the song of an actual
bird? (1)

His essay compares many different uses of the nightingale as symbol throughout literary history from Homer to Virgil, Milton, Keats, Charlotte Smith, and many others all rooted in the original myth of Philomela, yet at the same time, having some rooted connection to the actual bird as well. Significantly, Mckusick, widely known as a scholar on John Clare leaves him out of this study. It would be interesting to see how he would weave Clare's revisions on the nightingale archetype into his narrative of the history of the nightingale as symbol.

³³ For example, the writers mentioned in the first two chapters that adhered to Linnaean classification and often used dissection like Oliver Goldsmith, Gilbert White, and many others.

³⁴ Coleridge cites in a note to this poem that the characterization of the nightingale's song as melancholy comes directly from Milton and has been copied by poets since to the point that it has become common belief.

³⁵ Now most often referred to as the garden warbler.

³⁶ Although I have only done a cursory examination of the natural history texts of the era, I feel comfortable in saying that Clare presents more details in his poems than in a large amount of these books.

³⁷ As with the nineteenth century nature guides, I have also done a cursory study of contemporary guides and find this example to be representative of what was found.

CHAPTER VI: PERSONIFICATION AND ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN THOMSON AND CLARE

Thus far in this study each writer has incorporated personification in their work in different ways. For instance, Gilbert White and John Clare both argued for the idea that birds have an enormous amount of personal agency, and they have their own language: John Leonard Knapp wrote highly descriptive narratives about animals that both humanized the animals and invoked empathy from the reader; Elizabeth Kent compared the killing of plants with the murder of human beings, and she continuously sentimentalized the plants through the use of anthropomorphism; Erasmus Darwin hypersexualized plants and directly compared them with many historic and literary love stories; Charlotte Turner Smith writes about plants in a manner that humanizes them and dehumanizes those who destroy them; and, James Thomson animates his natural scenes in many ways that portray nature as having an enormous range of personal agency. Each of these writers used personification in their own unique way to evoke empathy for the natural world and to advocate for better human interactions with nature.

One of the arguments against using personification in natural history writing is that it creates an additional layer of metaphor between people and a scientifically accurate understanding of nature. While this is definitely a concern, when examining the writing in the context of eighteenth and nineteenth century agrarian capitalism, it should be less of a concern than the exploitation of the natural world. Personification may obfuscate some scientific understanding;¹ however, the empathetic connection that personification creates with readers can be an effective tool for environmental advocacy

that overrides any danger of the overuse of metaphors in scientific understanding. Of course, anyone who studies natural history or its related fields should take into consideration the current anthropomorphism inherent in our classification systems, but as far as writing for environmental advocacy, this is less of a concern. With this possible obfuscation in mind, this chapter will examine the many forms of personification and how it helps environmental advocacy.

Personification appears throughout eighteenth and nineteenth century poetry, however, a large portion of the personification focused on abstract concepts such as love, fancy, and many other universal concepts. Another focus of personification of this time period was of places or large natural concepts such as London, nature, each season, wind, sun, and many other specific places or natural aspects. This second group of personifications focused on extremely powerful forces that should be respected and feared by humanity. A third main way that personification was used throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was mastered by William Wordsworth, though used by others, as what Roger N. Murray terms “light personification,” where nature is more subtly personified (109). Light personification was used in order to show that nature had many attributes similar to humanity, yet there was a firm distinction between the two. Another form of personification, and most applicable to this study, was the anthropomorphizing of individual plants, animals, and parcels of land. This method of using personification was much less common and appears frequently in the writing of naturalists both in prose and poetry. Finally, prosopopeia, or poetry where the narrator is not human, which is the most effective form of personification for advocacy, was another

form of personification used in natural history writing of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This chapter will further analyze personification as a tool used for evoking empathy, promoting advocacy of the natural world, and as a method for deconstructing the binary that our society produces between humanity and the rest of the natural world. In the first section of the chapter, the focus will be on the more general personification of concepts, places, and larger natural occurrences in the poetry of John Clare and James Thomson. In this section, it will be easy to see the influence that Thomson had on Clare. In the second section of this chapter, Wordsworthian light personification will be examined in order to compare and contrast this subtle form of personification with what Clare does more overtly. In the third section of this work, the concentration will be on how Clare moved the use of personification beyond Thomson and focused it more on the final two uses of personification listed above. In particular prosopopeia poems will be analyzed that are written as if they are from the mouth of nature, in particular, a quarry, a stream, and a ladybug. This style of poetry is relatively unique and serves as a powerful technique in order for the reader to hear what nature would say if nature could speak through the words of poets and naturalists.

1. John Clare and James Thomson: Conceptual Personification and Deconstructing Class

The term conceptual personification simply refers to the personification of concepts such as freedom, justice, nature, and many others. This kind of personification has a long history that can be traced from Medieval literature, to the Renaissance, and beyond.² During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries this kind of personification fell

out of favor for a more Romantic version, which sought to learn about humanity through the natural world.³ This Romantic version of personification focused on self-reflection or what we learn about ourselves by meditating on the natural world (what Abrams called meditative-descriptive poetry). This type of personification appears throughout Romantic poetry, where it is used to illustrate the beauty of the scene or to learn more about humanity; however, rarely is it used to argue for the personal agency of plants or animals.

In tracing personification from the Medieval period to the Renaissance, the Romantic period and beyond, it is easy to understand that many of the naturalists that we have written about thus far do not fit into the categories already established for the use of personification. Instead, many of these naturalists used personification to deconstruct our anthropocentric view of the world and to argue that animals have some level of agency. Interestingly, few of these naturalists actually translated this form of agency-based personification into poetry, with the exception of John Clare, who often portrayed animals in a manner that illustrated individualization and agency. In his poems, he intricately traces the language of animals, especially birds, in a manner similar to his natural history poetry. In order to understand Clare's focus on personification for personal agency, this chapter will trace his development from his influence from James Thomson, to a more Romantic personification, and to the areas where he pushed the boundaries through deconstructing the anthropocentric element of nature poetry. My aim throughout is to illuminate where he differed from the other poets of his era and why it is important to continue to establish a more natural history based poetry.

As we imagine John Clare stowing away in Burghley Park to read *The Seasons* (as discussed in the previous chapter) it is easy to imagine how the conceptual personification that Thomson used early in the work would have had a powerful impact on Clare that would reverberate throughout his poetic oeuvre.⁴ Thomson begins the poem addressing spring as if it is a person, writing, “Come, Gentle Spring... and from the bosom of yon dropping cloud... on our plains descend” (Thomson 43, Lines 1, 2, 4). This introduction is reminiscent of the invoking of a muse, so Thomson is clearly indicating that nature, in general, is a powerful force and a muse that enables and empowers his writing. This is a continuing theme throughout *The Seasons*, the expression of nature’s power and the idea that much can be learned through the description of its actions and interactions with humankind.

Thomson’s use of conceptual personification continues as he addresses the character Winter, writing “[a]nd see where surly Winter passes off / Far to the north, and calls his ruffian blasts / His blasts obey, and quit the howling hill” and “bids his driving sleets” (Lines 11-14). In this instance, Winter is an aggressive and powerful male figure who blasts the Earth with forceful winds. The next use of personification, and the most aggressive figure in *The Seasons* is the figure of Nature who is described as being “relenting” with “lusty steers” (Line 35). About thirty lines later, Nature is portrayed as having a “universal robe” and a “swift and secret working hand” (Lines 83-4). Later in the poem, Nature becomes the responsible agent behind all plant growth on the earth as he “flung their seeds abroad, blown them about in winds, / innumerable mix’d them with the nursing mould” (Lines 229-231). Thomson then criticizes the randomness of Nature,

writing that the “negligence of Nature, wide and wild” makes it difficult to follow with the “roving eye” (Lines 502, 504). Throughout this poem, Thomson builds a characterization of Nature that makes it God-like in its power.

Throughout *The Seasons*, Thomson uses conceptual personification for many parts of the natural world, including, but not limited to mountains, the sun, winter, autumn, spring, summer, clouds, and many others. He consistently reiterates this idea that the natural forces in the world have agency, and perhaps are even more powerful than humans. In a manner similar to Greek Gods, these personifications are portrayed as beings who control the world and are so powerful that they can affect all plants, animals, and humans producing a spectacle that appears throughout *The Seasons*.

In John Clare’s poetry, there are times when he uses conceptual personification similarly to Thomson. For instance, he often personifies larger ideas or places like his hometown, nature, and other subjects. For instance, Clare’s personification in his poem “Helpstone” is similar to the personification of *The Seasons* and was quite common in eighteenth century poetry. He personifies the town of “Helpstone,” and concepts such as “Labour,” “Genius,” “Ignorance,” “Fate,” “Fancy,” and many others (Lines 2, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12). But, then as the poem continues, he focuses on smaller parts of nature such as animals and plants, personifying and identifying with “little birds,” many different flowers, “the woods,” a “bush,” and a “tree” (Lines 17, 80-90, 118, 133, 135-6). It is these more localized and individualized personifications of both plants and animals that separated the work of Clare from Thomson and will be examined further in the third section of this chapter. Thomson personifies large concepts and ideas, as many poets

before him, but Clare personifies individual plants and animals in order to show their agency and evoke an emotional response in his readers.

For example, in the beginning of "Helpstone," Clare personifies Helpstone, referring to it as "humble," "unknown to grandeur, and unknown to fame," and lifting "its lowly head" (Lines 1-3). Then, Clare declares that Helpstone needs an advocate, that currently it is an "Unletter'd spot," "unheard in poets song," with "no minstrel boasting to advance thy name" (Lines 4-5). Clearly, Clare is attempting to claim his position as an advocate for Helpstone and the many natural treasures it contains. The next few lines depict a town where "Labor" is what drives the people and that it is difficult for someone, such as himself, to rise to prominence in this labor driven, class-based society.

Specifically, he writes "Unknown nor heeded, where, low Genius tries / Above the vulgar, and the vain to rise" (Lines 9-10). Of course, this line shows that while Clare sympathizes with the plight of the poor people who surround him, he also considers them "vulgar" and often was known to be an outcast in his own town because of his attempts to educate himself.

In the next stanza, Clare invokes a more Romantic use of personification as he connects himself and the poorer classes of people in England with the plight and fragility of birds attempting to survive in the winter. As is visible in these lines, Clare is not afraid to identify himself as a victim of the inhumanity that persists in the world:

So little birds, in winter's frost and snow, / Doom'd, like to me, want's
keener frost to know; / Searching for food and 'better life,' in vain;

(Each hopeful track the yielding snows retain;)... / First on the ground
each fairy dream pursue, / Though sought in vain; yet bent on higher view,
/ Still chirp, and hope, and wipe each glossy bill; / And undiscourag'd,
undishearten'd still, / Hop on the snow-cloth'd bough, and chirp again, /
Heedless of naked shade and frozen plain: / Till, like to me, these victims
of the blast, / Each foolish, fruitless wish resign'd at last, / Are glad to seek
the place from whence they went / And put up with distress, and be
content. (Lines 17-31)

These lines from “Helpstone” are rich in meaning and symbolism. Clare begins by connecting his plight with that of the birds in winter suggesting that they are both “Doom’d” and search for “food” and a “better life in vain.” He then connects the challenges and pains of natural selection in the animal world with an economic determinism of the human world. Both birds and poor people fight forces that they cannot control and end up pursuing their life’s dreams in vain. Despite these hardships, Clare encourages the bird to continue to “chirp, and hope, and wipe each glossy bill” and finally to find contentment despite these hardships.

Basically, in the section of the poem listed above, Clare encourages the birds to persevere despite their nearly impossible situation and to realize the truth about their societal station so that they can achieve some respite from high expectations. He anthropomorphizes the birds writing that they are “undiscourag’d” and “undishearten’d” connecting them through human emotions to his own plight and that of the poor people in Helpstone. One of the most powerful words in this section of the poem appears as he

portrays both the birds and himself as “victims,” which is not easy for a man who has referred to himself as proud on multiple occasions to admit, but an important admission in order to reach an accurate portrayal of societal strife. In this example of personification, Clare is clearly relying on the pathetic fallacy in attributing human emotions to animals in order to produce an emotional response. This is a common Romantic technique, although it originated thousands of years before with the ancient Greeks.⁵ So, in “Helpstone,” Clare moves from using conceptual personification to an approach more like the Romantic version of the pathetic fallacy.⁶ This allows him to initiate an empathetic response in his readers for the animals that he uses in his poems and also helps him to establish a baseline for his arguments for personal agency that appear throughout his work.

As illustrated in the previous paragraphs, in order to become an effective advocate for his town and the nature contained within it, Clare employs both conceptual personification and the pathetic fallacy to evoke an empathetic response. After using these two kinds of personification, he begins to deconstruct the binary between nature and humanity in a way comparable to that contained in his natural history writings. As apparent from his accounts of first reading *The Seasons*, Clare attempts to seek out natural spaces that refresh and vitalize his mental and physical faculties. In “Helpstone,” he refers to these areas as “scenes obscure” and “native spot[s]” (Lines 32, 36). After writing about these revitalizing natural spaces, the tone of the poem abruptly changes and Clare declares that these spots on the “green” have “vanish’d” and that where once there was a brook, “now the brook is gone” (Lines 58, 60). This tragic moment is in reference

to the Enclosure Acts and the destruction and development that resulted from these new laws. From this point on in the poem, Clare takes a much more aggressive advocacy and intensified identification for these scenes that he loved so much, at first sighing “at the alterations,” but then writing:

To see the woodman's cruel axe employ'd, / A tree beheaded, or a bush
destroy'd: / Nay e'en a post, old standard, or a stone / Moss'd o'er by Age,
and branded as her own, / Would in my mind a strong attachment gain, / A
fond desire that there they might remain; / And all old favourites, fond
Taste approves, / Griev'd me at heart to witness their removes. (Lines 72-
78)

In this passage, Clare uses terms similar to natural history writing, illustrating a scene of the destruction of trees, and then humanizes them, while dehumanizing the people who tore down his favorite tree.⁷ In this case, he uses direct personification to establish his abject horror at the trees in his hometown being destroyed, writing that the trees were “beheaded.” Then, in the final line of the stanza, one of his goals becomes clear: to be a “witness” to this horrific destruction and chronicle it so that the memory of the untouched places of his youth can be remembered and perhaps future destructive acts can be prevented.

In the next stanza, Clare begins portraying a lost scene of his youth for the readers writing about a “flow’ry green” with “golden kingcups,” “daisies,” “lilac[s],” and “silken grasses” (Lines 80-85). In order to evoke more empathy for this lost scene, Clare writes about each flower in an active manner. For instance, the green has “freedom,” the

kingcups “open,” the daisies “grow” and “totter” like children attempting to walk, the grass “bends” seemingly on its own, the lilac is described as “mean and lowly,” and Clare’s favorites, the cowslips, “bow’d to shun the hand” (Lines 80-88). The scene is animated, the flowers seem to have agency, and Clare uses anthropomorphism so that his readers can closely identify with these fellow living beings. The movements of the flowers in this scene are much more realistic than in many other examples of Romantic personification. The movements written by Clare about flowers are mostly realistic and are not there for some greater purpose in relation to humanity. Instead, the anthropomorphic qualities that Clare uses to depict the plants are actions that they can really take and show that they have some limited agency.⁸ At the same time, he inserts flowers that are not often used in poetry, continuing to disrupt the poetic tradition of highlighting only certain parts of nature that have been considered the most beautiful throughout the centuries. The personification of the cowslips is particularly interesting because it suggests that they actively attempt to resist human contact. This flower is asserting a great amount of agency attempting to resist being picked.

Just as in his natural history writing, Clare creates a dichotomy between his own identity, plants, animals, and the human beings that destroy the nature he loves. In “Helpstone,” however, he is not the lone friend of nature among humans. For example, in a scene midway through the poem, Clare describes a shepherd in positive terms saying that his calls “cheer’d” the valley and, in general, this character has a very positive effect on the scene. Interestingly, this shepherd appears animal-like throughout this section of the poem being described as “woolly,” he roams among the oxen, and leads them to food.

The shepherd becomes a symbol of humanity and animals interacting in a mutually beneficial manner. Because of this, there were “No calls of hunger,” many “joyful sound[s],” and a “bounty” for the wandering fly (Lines 90-96). Clare once again harshly shifts the scene back to the present with an exclamation:

But now, alas! Those scenes exist no more; / The pride of life with thee,
like mine, is o'er / Thy pleasing spots to which memory clings, / Sweet
cooling shades, and soft refreshing springs... / Now all laid waste by
Desolation's hand, / Whose cursed weapons level half the land. / Oh! who
could see my dear green willows fall, / What feeling heart, but dropt a tear
for all? / Accursed Wealth! o'er-bounding human laws, / Of every evil
thou remain'st the cause: / Victims of want, those wretches such as me, /
Too truly lay their wretchedness to thee. (Lines 99-102, 107-115)

This passage is powerful in many respects, not the least being that he is blaming the wealthy for destruction of nature that could be viewed as an attack on wealthy people like his main benefactor, Lord Fitzwilliam, and the average reader of his poetry.⁹ He does not shy away from this class-based conflict even though there is the possibility of it destroying his career if the wealthy benefactors refuse to fund him or buy his poetry. This quandary presented a precarious balance between speaking truth to power, or in this case, writing, and losing his career, dreams and life goals. In order to soften the harsh tenor of the criticism, Clare uses the conceptual personifications of Wealth and Desolation as characters that wreak havoc both on people and their natural surroundings. By using these

characters, he is able to be more critical of the class-stratified society than if he wrote in less metaphorical terms.

Clare begins the above passage by bemoaning the loss of the natural spaces of his youth strongly writing that because of their loss, his “pride of life” is now over. The one redeeming factor is that his memory will “cling” to these “pleasing spots” in a manner reminiscent of Wordsworth’s “spots of time” from “The Prelude” or the daffodils from “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud.” However, after reflecting on these spots that have been destroyed, he returns to the present moment in order to place blame on those that enacted the destruction. What Clare is producing through this poetry is a sustainable sentiment that can be returned to at any time throughout his life. At the same time, because the descriptions that he uses are both individual, yet common, they are scenes that his readers can find, record, and treasure throughout the world and throughout history. Significantly, as he bemoans the loss of the lands of his youth, he vaguely attributes the “level[ing]” of “half the land” to the generic personified concepts of “Desolation” and “Wealth,” but then is more specific in pointing to “laws,” or more precisely, the Enclosure Acts. Powerfully, Clare writes of Wealth and laws, that they are the “cause” of “every evil.” This is an intensely forceful phrase being written by a laborer of the lowest class in an extremely class oriented English society.¹⁰ Finally, once again Clare embraces a persona of victim-hood as he connects himself with nature claiming that both are victims of a class-based society where the laws benefit the wealthy and exploit both peasants and the natural world. This purposeful acceptance and choice to use his victim-hood to provoke empathy, is a powerful tool that Clare wields throughout his work. While he was a proud

man, who had a strong sense of character, there was no doubt that he was willing to use whatever tools necessary to create awareness of the two main commitments of his life: advocating for the poor and advocating for the preservation of the natural world.

Clare continues his harshly critical attack on the wealthy and the unfair laws that have destroyed the lands of his childhood, writing, “Thou art the bar that keeps from being fed, / And thing our loss of labour and of bread; / Thou art the cause that levels every tree” (Lines 116-118). His direct attack attributes almost every difficulty in his life to wealth, yet, importantly, not to a specific person. Finally, Clare seeks reconciliation by recording and bearing witness to the losses both to himself and to nature, and bidding “adieu” to the scenes that he cherished (Line 129). These scenes are forever gone, but “within her [Memory’s] breast your every scene remains” (Line 137). Much like Wordsworth’s daffodils, Clare will always retain these scenes in his mind and pass them along through many generations with his writing. The major distinction between Clare and Wordsworth’s scenes is that Clare discovers and names a villain for the loss of these scenes that relegated them to his memory, whereas Wordsworth’s scenes were not yet destroyed, and he is often able to return to them in order to experience the scene again. For instance, the ruins at Tintern Abbey are still available to visit even though in an altered form as were the daffodils from his adventures with Dorothy. Clare’s cherished scenes were destroyed by the creation of private property through the enacting of the Enclosure acts and he will never be able to return. Both Wordsworth and Clare produce a sustainable process of natural discovery, recording, and converting their descriptions into

poetry. They produce a process that other writers can mimic and readers can use to discover or rediscover their natural surroundings.

In a similar manner as the concluding lines in many of his poems, Clare ends “Helpstone” by longing to return to the natural scenes that are now gone upon the approach of his death. This theme of death at the end of his poems will appear throughout his work, often suggesting that in death all people are equal. In many poems, he writes about how plants, animals, rich humans and poor humans all become the same as they become dust in the earth, which is an obvious biblical analogy, but also a philosophical analogy. In other words, death is the great class and status leveler. While this idea of death being the great leveler may seem as if he were giving up fighting against the injustices perpetrated on nature and the lower classes, instead, Clare has chosen his avenue for resistance, his writing, and comes to the realization that his recording and bearing witness to the changes in the environment is an important part of preventing this destruction in the future.

The theme of Clare aligning himself with plants and animals against the humans who exploit the natural world appears throughout *Poems Descriptive*. In the second poem of the book, “Address to a Lark, Singing in Winter,” Clare once again uses birds in the winter as a metaphor to align his own fragileness in the world with that of animals. At the same time, he suggests the same solution for the animals in winter that he did in the previous poem, to content itself in the lot it currently has and expect hardships to continue. Specifically, he writes in warning to a warbler, “disappointments will torment thee... I know it well, for I’ve had plenty” (Lines 21, 23). However, in this case, he does

not seek to find the villain as he did in the previous poem; instead, looking back on his life, he claims that his mistake was trusting in hope to begin with and refers to hope as a “sham” (line 45). Instead, he argues, that he should have accepted himself, “just as [he]” is from the beginning rather than reaching for the things that he cannot attain. This theme of acceptance of one’s situation may on the surface seem as if Clare is just giving up. Instead, I propose that this realization of the harsh realities of the world enable Clare and his readers to see the world as it is and find realistic ways of surviving and defying both class stratification and the exploitation of nature. Clare is not just accepting his station, he is actively writing in defiance of his situation to a readership that has a higher position in society and can enact change more readily. He is pleading with them for mercy for the lower classes and the natural world and uses many techniques, including personification, to achieve this goal.

Thus far, this chapter has examined Clare’s movement from conceptual personification to a more Romantic personification and use of the pathetic fallacy. Another type of personification that appears throughout his oeuvre is a more specific anthropomorphism of plants and animals that implies individuality and agency. This type of personification is unlike the more traditional forms because in most cases personification is used to create empathy, to understand more about ourselves, or to inspire imagination, but Clare goes further: he actually uses anthropomorphism to argue that animals are closer to humanity than most people believe. Of course, this is a controversial view, especially for someone like John Ruskin who argued that the pathetic fallacy is destructive to the scientific understanding of our natural surroundings. Ruskin

believed that instead of understanding the world as it is, we view it through an anthropocentric lens that perverts any real understanding of nature. However, the crux of Ruskin's criticism explains why Clare's use of personification is the opposite of the problems that Ruskin had with the pathetic fallacy. Instead of seeing the world through an anthropocentric lens, Clare in his natural history poetry did not necessarily view plants and animals through a human lens; instead, he viewed them as equal, yet different.

An example of Clare's view that animals are equal but different appears, as it did in his natural history poems, through the use of attempting to hear and understand many animals' language, or at least the individualization of their sounds. For instance, throughout the *Shepherd's Calendar* Clare uses exacting descriptions of animal sounds. Examples of these unique sounds include: geese "gabbling," the stockdoves "wizzing," crows "qawking," and many more examples appear throughout this book (From "January" and "October"). In his poem "Childhood," from *The Midsummer Cushion*, the chaffinch "cries 'pink pink pink'" and the firetail lets out a "tweet tut tut." In "The Progress of Rhyme," Clare writes the song of the nightingale, in the same manner as from his natural history, writing: "Chew-chew-chew-chew, / Cheer-cheer cheer-cheer, / "Cheer-up cheer-up" / "Tweet tweet jug jug jug." As with the similar section of his natural history, Clare shows his incredible ear both with words that mirror the bird's sound and also with using punctuation to convey the rhythm of the sound. Then, in another example, Clare characterizes the sound of bees underground, in his poem "Summer Moods" from *The Rural Muse*, as a "craik, craik" sound. In the poem "On Leaving the Cottage of My Birth," Clare describes a bird named the "sailing puddock"

making a “peelew” sound. All of these sounds represent a thoughtful attempt at translating animal sounds to writing.

As was the case in his natural history writing, Clare attempts to understand the meaning of the sounds that the birds were trying to convey. For instance, the stockdove was “startld [sic]” and the crows were reaching for acorns, which implies that their sounds were hunger related. The chaffinch from “Childhood” is reacting to the narrator’s footsteps out of fear and the firetail is also speaking out of being “startld.” Clare’s explanation of the sound of the nightingale, from the “Progress of Rhyme” is distinct from all of the other birds, as he does not ascribe motivation; instead, their call is pure “music” that the narrator would repeat to himself for the rest of the day and would eventually inspire poetry. The interesting part of this exception of the nightingale is that all of the other birds are expressing very basic reactions or emotions, similar to that of a young child. The way that Clare portrays the nightingale, however, is in an entirely distinct manner. The nightingale is represented as a vocal artist who is collaborating with the author to create poetry. The implication of this is that not only can birds convey child-like emotions, but also they are capable of participating in an artistic process, representing a higher level of thought.

Throughout his writing, John Clare portrays animals as if they were his friends on an equal level as humanity. For example, in “The Progress of Rhyme,” he describes the sounds of insects as a form of “worship” to their “maker’s mighty powers.” In the same poem, the blackbird directly answers Clare as he begins to sing, and he refers to the birds as among his only friends. Then, in “The Fallen Elm,” Clare declares that the mavis was

a “friend not inanimate” that “owned a language” and spoke “language of pity and the force of wrong.” In those few lines he expresses that the bird is animate, or full of life, is able to use language and convey meaning from that language. These expressions of the agency of birds extend well beyond personification and argues for the view that animals have agency equivalent, but different from humanity. Perhaps the strongest use of personification throughout Clare’s poetry is in the poem “Remembrances” from *The Midsummer Cushion*.¹¹ He writes:

Enclosure like a Bonaparte let not a thing remain, / It levelled [sic] every
bush and tree and levelled every hill / And hung the moles for traitors-
though the brook is running still, / It runs a naked stream, cold and chill.

Although this poem was written a few decades after Napoleon’s military escapades that hung dissenters, the image of moles hanging like “traitors” was still a powerful picture to the English public that was familiar with the violence of the French Revolution and Napoleon’s reign. This image of a mole hanging is an impression that equates the killing of a mole with the killing of a human. Writers like Elizabeth Kent and Charlotte Smith had already equated killing humans and killing plants and animals, but the difference of Clare’s portrayal is that he accompanies this sentiment with a powerful poetic picture that would resonate in readers’ minds for long after they read the poem.

Throughout John Clare’s poetry he uses a mixture of conceptual personification, a more Romantic version, the pathetic fallacy, and a more focused anthropomorphism of specific plants and animals. Unlike most poets of his time who used personification, Clare believed that animals had an individuality and agency that appears through his

detailed transcription of many animal sounds. The level of agency that he ascribes to these animals is what distinguishes Clare from many other poets and emphasizes why he should be thought of as one of the best natural history poets of the nineteenth century.

2. Wordsworthian Personification: Subtlety and Nuance

Most of the personification that has been addressed in this chapter thus far has been direct and dramatic in order to trigger the imagination of the reader and directly challenge societal beliefs about the natural world. However, often some of the most effective methods for inspiring social change are not direct and confrontational, instead, they are subtle and subversive. Throughout William Wordsworth's oeuvre, he uses many kinds of personification, though, his most effective usage of this literary device appear throughout his poetry in the subtlest ways. Roger N. Murray, in his book *Wordsworth's Style: Figures and Themes in the Lyrical Ballads of 1800*, refers to this form of writing as "light personification." In order to better understand the work of John Clare, comparing and contrasting the light personification of Wordsworth with Clare's more confrontational style will elaborate on how two writers dealt with similar themes in distinct ways.

One of the poems that best illustrates Wordsworth's style of light personification is "Resolution and Independence" (1807). In this poem, and in many others, he uses personification in a way that is neither completely abstract (conceptual or personification of places) nor completely concrete (direct personification of animals or objects). For instance, in line three of the poem, Wordsworth writes that the sun is "calm." While calm is an adjective that can be used for many purposes that do not relate to humanity, (for

instance, ocean waves are often considered calm) the word is most often used in reference to human emotion. So, while writing that the sun is calm is not completely personification, it is a form of subtle personification that humanizes the sun, but not to the extent that we have seen in Clare and Thomson thus far.

The rest of the first stanza has two more uses of marginal or light personification as Wordsworth writes that the “Stock-dove broods” and the “Magpie chatters” (lines 5-6). Once again, the verbs “broods” and “chatters” are not necessarily personification, but definitely suggest a form of agency that is comparable to human agency. This form of light personification is distinct from the first example (the sun being calm) because of the suggestion of agency; however, it still stops short of being a concrete form of personification. The term brood is especially interesting because of its multiple meanings. While brood can mean to “sit upon eggs” or “incubate,” it can also mean to “worry persistently” or “moodily” (*Merrriam-Webster*). Inherent in the word itself is a contradiction that represents both animal-like and human-like qualities. The word “chatter” has a similar usage that is used for both humans and animals. For instance, the definition of the word refers to squirrels making “inarticulate and indistinct sounds,” while also referring to humans as “talking idly, incessantly, or fast” (*Merriam Webster*). Wordsworth purposefully chose words that provide an intermediate ground between humanity and nature, effectively blurring the lines between the two.

Throughout “Resolution and Independence” Wordsworth uses similar transitional words that can be applicable to both humans and animals. For instance, in the second stanza, there is a clear use of personification as the “sky rejoices,” but then it is followed

by uses of the words “mirth” and “run” that blur boundaries between human usage and usage referring to nature (lines 9, 11, 13). The hare is attributed with “mirth,” which is most often applied to humans, but can be used in regards to animals, especially in terms of their movement. Then, the word “run” is used in regards to the mist following the hare, as Wordsworth writes, “Raises a mist, that, glittering in the sun, / Runs with her all the way, wherever she doth run” (lines 13-4). In this case, Wordsworth is blurring the lines between the mist that is not normally considered to be alive and a hare that is considered to have life. In using a nebulous verb such as “run” that has many meanings, Wordsworth melds together nature, animals, and humanity through phrases that do not quite represent personification, yet suggest connections between different forms of intelligent life.

Of course, there is much more meaning behind “Resolution and Independence,” especially as it relates to Wordsworth’s poetic career,¹² but this study concentrates on the personification within the poem in order to better understand the distinction between his use of the literary tool and Clare’s usage.¹³ In the poem “There was a Boy,” Wordsworth uses similar forms of light personification as in “Resolution and Independence;” however, it is important to note that the general themes of the poem are strikingly similar to many of Clare’s natural history writings. For instance, the boy expresses a “gentle shock of mild surprise” as his voice carried through the mountains in the same way that Clare expresses surprise and joy at natural scenes throughout his career (line 19). Similarly, Clare records and remembers the scenes as an act of bearing witness for himself and others, the “visible scene / Would enter unawares into [the boy’s] mind / With all its solemn imagery” (lines 21-3). One of the most striking parts of Wordsworth’s

poem mirrors John Clare's attempts to communicate with many birds (for instance, the account of the Butter Bump in the previous chapter). Wordsworth writes:

Beneath the trees, or by the glimmering lake; / And there, with fingers
interwoven, both hands / Pressed closely palm to palm and to his mouth /
Uplifted, he, as through an instrument, / Blew mimic hootings to the silent
owls, / That they might answer him.--And they would shout / Across the
watery vale, and shout again, / Responsive to his call,--with quivering
peals, / And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud / Redoubled and
redoubled; concourse wild / Of jocund din! (lines 6-14)

This scene from Wordsworth is similar to Clare's attempts to communicate with birds that we examined in chapter three. The boy from the poem not only attempts communication with the owls, at the same time, he instructs the readers on how they would have to form their hands to make the same sounds. This poem in particular shares many similarities with themes from Clare's natural history writing and oeuvre.

"There was a Boy," uses multiple forms of personification as Wordsworth writes that the lake has a "bosom" and that the mountains answer his call (in the form of echoes) with "quivering peals, / And long halloos, and screams" (lines 25, 13-4). Of course, the "bosom" reference is a direct form of personification, but the echoes are less direct, because it is a literal action that takes place in nature, yet it gives the effect of the mountains and valleys responding to the boy directly. Roger N. Murray argues that many of the lines in the poem also are reminiscent of a marriage ceremony providing another level of light personification:

[The scene] is given a nuptial coloring by the addition to ‘solemn’ of the description of the lake as receiving the sky into its bosom ... ‘Uncertain,’ ‘receiv’d,’ ‘bosom,’ and therefore ‘steady’ all contribute to the light personification, the germ of which is already present in the word ‘solemn.’ ‘Solemn’ suggests a visually austere quality in the scene, but it is also the stem of the word ‘solemnity,’ which can denote a marriage ceremony ... Another poet might simply have spoken of a marriage of sky and lake, but in Wordsworth the transformation of the image does not result in our losing hold of the immediate visual facts—the steadiness of the lake, the uncertainty of the heavens, and the austerity of the scene as a whole. (109)

The language of the marriage ceremony, along with simulated conversation between the boy and the echo create a scene that has very little concrete personification, yet a lot of subtle personification. Wordsworth’s use of light personification suggests that nature and humans are not as separated as we seem, and from the boy’s example, we learn that attempting to reach out to nature can metaphorically marry or unite humanity and nature.

Of course, Wordsworth often uses more direct or concrete personification, like in “Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower,” as he has Nature as the speaker of the poem and dehumanizes Lucy in many ways throughout the poem. Nature refers to Lucy as a “flower,” “as sportive as a fawn,” and she symbolically marries nature and consummates the relationship with her “virgin bosom swell[ing]” and living “together” with Nature in the “happy dell” (lines 2, 13, 33, 35-6). Most often, Wordsworth’s direct personification involves a union between humans and nature and does not focus on the destruction of

nature in the same way that Clare does.¹⁴ In general, Clare uses personification in a much more aggressive and confrontational manner for environmental and class-based advocacy as we shall examine in the final section of this chapter.

3. From Thomson to Clare: Advocacy for the Natural World

As has been mapped out thus far in this chapter and the previous one, James Thomson's writing had an enormous effect on the work of John Clare. One of the areas that he most influenced Clare was in his use of personification, which was examined in the previous section. In order to understand where Clare expanded on James Thomson's use of personification, the focus of this section will be on their advocacy for nature. Although this has been touched on in the previous section and chapter, this section will argue that Clare reached the farthest levels of advocacy. In what has been labeled by Johannes Clare the "Enclosure Elegies," John Clare used prosopopeia in order to attempt to ascertain what nature would say if it could advocate on its own behalf. We will examine two of these "Enclosure Elegies," "The Lament of Swordy Well" and "Round Oak Waters," where the narrator of the poems are a quarry and a stream, in order for them to advocate on their own behalf. Of course, it is impossible to truly mimic nature's voice, but Clare uses the damage caused by Enclosure to imagine what they would say as a realistic portrayal of their thoughts. Then, the final poem examined in this section will be Clare's "Clock-a-Clay," where the narrator is a ladybug and is easily comparable to Clare's own persona as established in his other poems.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of Thomson's use of personification is found by concentrating not only where he uses personification, but also by looking for where he

chose not to use it. Interestingly, in the sections of *The Seasons* that focus on in-depth scenes of bird life, he ascribes numerous emotions to them as a form of the pathetic fallacy, but he rarely personifies them through any other method. Thomson gives the birds some attributes which are considered to be human, like “joy,” “elat[ion],” and “love,” which all suggest agency, yet this is the only method he uses for personification in this chapter (Lines 599, 600, 612). Other than attributing these emotions to the birds, Thomson does not personify the birds in any other way that would suggest individuality or agency in this section of the poem entitled “The Love of the Grove and Courtship of Birds.” The same is true of the next section entitled “Nest Building” except for some minor word usage like referring to their “house[s]” and that they are “humble.” However, this section is even less removed from direct comparisons with humanity as the language becomes more distant and less warm and empathetic (Lines 640, 652, 657). Unlike John Clare’s natural history writing and poetry, the animals that Thomson wrote about do not exhibit as much personal agency as they often do in Clare’s work. Then, in the next section, “Parental Duties of Birds,” while there is no direct personification, there is a lot of empathetic language. Thomson writes about the pain of their “sharp hunger,” the “sympathizing lover” attempting to win over a female bird, referring to them as a “helpless family,” and he explains how a schoolboy attempts to rob their nest (Lines 660-691). While Thomson used more personification in this section of the poem, it is obvious that he does not view animals as equals or having the degree of individual agency that Clare ascribes to them.

The next section of Thomson's *The Seasons*, "The Barbarous Bird-Cage and Nest Robbery," is the place where the most personification of birds occurs, and it is imperative to understand why Thomson chose to use this technique in this part of the poem. In all of the previous sections, it was important to invoke empathy for birds, as Thomson does, but nowhere is it more integral than in this area because he is making an ethical argument against what he deems a cruel act and hopes to win his readers' sympathy. There are few techniques more effective in advocacy than to figuratively place the reader in the situation of the oppressed figure in order to attempt to understand the situation of the exploited subject. Thomson attempts to help his readers see what it would be like to be in the situation of these birds through the use of more pointed personification than he had previously used. He began this immediately in the first few lines by establishing a binary of the poet and his readers, against the "tyrant Man" (Line 700). In the next line, he suggests that they are "inhuman caught" and have their "liberty" taken from them (Line 701). The suggestion that birds should be treated in a humane way and should be given the liberty that humans expect is unusual, let alone, the idea that it is tyrannical man who is attempting to dehumanize these birds. This challenges the anthropocentric ideology that dominates literature and Western thought in general. The scene continues with calling birds "pretty slaves" and referring to them as "friends" of "soft-tribes" (Lines 703, 707-8). Throughout the entire passage, Thomson personifies these birds and establishes a binary between the narrator, the birds, and the readers against the tyrannical man who steals the liberty from these birds.

Thomson's scene with birds that are stolen from their nests and put in cages for human enjoyment continues with a mother bird that comes back to a "vacant nest" and experiences "despair" (Line 715, 720). Her sorrow is so powerful that the entire woods feel her pain, the woods "'Sigh to hear her song" and "wail" with her (724-5). The vast majority of *The Seasons* does not use personification to advocate equality or individual agency, unlike John Clare, who uses personification as a major tool throughout his poetic repertoire to destabilize the binary between humans and nature. On the whole, most of *The Seasons*, reads more like Oliver Goldsmith's *History of Animated Nature* (1807) in regards to the use of personification and the universalizing of animals, than the natural history writings of John Clare, Gilbert White, or John Leonard Knapp. Although Thomson does at some points individualize animals, it plays a much smaller role in his work than in Clare's.

One of the most fascinating aspects of John Clare's writing is that he uses personification in ways distinctive from the poets whom he idolized or was exposed to throughout his life. Instead of just giving plants, animals, or other parts of nature anthropomorphized characteristics, on multiple occasions he used prosopopeia as if the natural figure is the narrator of the poem. He attempts to give a voice to the elements of nature in a way that he imagines as realistic. For example, Clare gives a voice to an area of land named Swordy Well and a stream named Round Oak Waters. Both the stream and the quarry that he gives voice to were affected by the Enclosure Acts, so his attempt to portray their thoughts to the reader is an attempt at helping readers to emphasize and understand the negative effects of the acts. He uses this technique of making a part of

nature be the narrator in other poems as well, and generally, this is not a common method for the poets that he had been exposed from other writers.

Clare's most powerful examples of personification in his poetry occur in his prosopopeia Enclosure Elegies,¹⁵ "The Lament of Swordy Well" (1821-4) and "The Lamentations of Round-Oak Waters" (1818). Clare wrote two poems about Swordy Well, a quarry area near his home, the first being "I've Loved Thee Swordy Well" and the second "The Lament of Swordy Well." The first poem on this quarry was an expression of Clare's love for the wild flowers that he found there, while the second was an even more powerful expression because of the loss of this area, which Clare claimed was a direct result of the Enclosure Acts and human exploitation. The most powerful aspect of "The Lament of Swordy Well" is that it is written as a dramatic monologue in the first person from the perspective of the quarry itself and the land speaks of its own exploitation in the language of the working class through a colloquial language unique to that area.¹⁶ There has been debate about whether or not this is the first poem in literary history to personify a landscape and not just individual parts of that landscape;¹⁷ regardless, it is a unique and interesting poem.

The "Lament of Swordy Well" begins with decrying "petitioners" as disingenuous and comparing them to churchgoers who believe that they are better than "saints" (Line 8).¹⁸ In the second stanza, the speaker who is unidentified as of yet, blames profit for the problems of the poor, writing "[w]here profit gets his clutches in / There's little he will leave" (Lines 13-4). Clare begins the third stanza of "The Lament of Swordy Well" with a clear indication that it is not him speaking, and describes the devastation that has

happened to this piece of land that he held very dear: “I’m Swordy Well, a piece of land / That’s fell upon the town, / Who worked me till I couldn’t stand / And crush me now I’m down” (Lines 21-4). Hearing from the land itself increases the reader’s empathy for this land that, because of the Enclosure Acts, is now being over-farmed and destroyed from the haven that Clare had deemed this land. In line twenty-six of the poem, Swordy Well says that there was a time where his land “[m]ade a freeman of the slave,” which is obviously Clare speaking through the land expressing the idea that even when he felt that he was doing the work of a slave he could visit this space to feel free from the challenges of his life.¹⁹ The next two lines reference another benefit of the land, the fact that it provided sustenance for many animals, in the example given, an “ass.” Swordy Well then explains that he made the dwelling “free” for the gypsies that roamed the territory as well. Now that the land has been enclosed, it no longer provides a free space for Clare, the gypsies, or the animals that had roamed freely there.

Swordy Well’s language becomes strikingly blunt in the next section of the poem, as Clare increases his advocacy for the both the working class, preserving the land, and he attempts to show the horrific effects of enclosure through the mouth of the land:

In parish bonds I well may wail... / Harvests with plenty on his brow /
Leaves losses taunts with me / Yet gain comes yearly with the plough /
And will not let me be... / And me they turned inside out / For sand and
grit and stones / And turned my old green hills about / And pickt my very
bones (Lines 25, 29-32, 61-4)

Swordy Well complains of the “bonds” of the “parish” and that the unyielding “plough” “will not let [him] be.”²⁰ The use of the plough as a symbol of abusing the land is especially interesting because of Clare’s familiarity with Thomson’s use of the plough in *The Seasons* as a positive symbol representing the greatness of Britain. This image, of the plough as destroyer, appears multiple times throughout the poem and inverts Thomson’s plow symbolism. Then, a few stanzas later, the imagery becomes very physical as the voice of Swordy Well speaks about being “turned inside out” and having his “bones” “pickt.” The abrasive physicality of these words creates a powerful image that emphasizes the violent destruction that occurs in natural spaces that are abused by overuse. Through the words of this passage, Clare directly connects the ownership of this land through the acts of enclosure to its over-cultivating. The land is being over-used in a despotic way and because of the voice representing the working-class; the poem becomes a commentary on the peasantry being treated like they are enslaved in the “bonds” of the parish. While the personification that Clare uses is metaphorical, the intense language helps the reader imagine what it would feel like to be the land that is destroyed through this exploitation.

“The Lament of Swordy Well” continues to compare the plight of the land with that of the working class as Clare writes of the animals that are dying:

The bees flye round in feeble rings / And find no blossom bye / Then
thrum their almost weary wings / Upon the moss and die / Rabbits that
find my hills turned oer / Forsake my poor abode / They dread a
workhouse like the poor / And nibble on the road (Lines 81-8)

Clare creates a powerful, graveyard-like scene with weary animals dying and searching for food, including a powerful image of them “nibbl[ing] on the road.” The choice of using bees and rabbits as examples of animals that suffer from the exploitation of the land is important in what they represent. The bees are dying because they cannot find “blossom[s]” to pollinate, so they directly represent the loss of the flowers that Clare loved so much in the first *Swordy Well* poem. The honey that the bees produced represents one of the oldest food sources for humankind and,²¹ because of pollination bees represent the thriving of plant-life in general. The loss of bees symbolizes the eventual death of plant-life throughout the land. The rabbits in this passage illustrate the multitude of homes that are lost for animals through the massive cultivation of land. Clare writes a bit later in the poem about this lack of homes for the animals in this ecosystem, writing “Ive scarce a nook to call my own / For things that creep or flye.” These animals are displaced and it forever alters the ecosystems present in that area. Overall, Clare is illustrating, through the mouth of the land itself, how ecosystems become forever altered and eventually destroyed through the over-production of land that came with enclosure and modernization.

Clare continues the theme of the massive over-cultivation leading to destruction of all the beneficial elements of the land through the loss of the butterfly. Through the mouth of *Swordy Well*, he writes:

The next day brings the hasty plough / And makes her miserys bed / The
butterflyes may wir and come / I cannot keep them now / Nor can they
bear my parish home / That withers on my brow (Lines 91-6)

This passage elaborates on how the land becomes inhospitable to even butterflies and uses the symbol of the plow to represent humanity's destruction of the land. At the same time, the fact that the land is inhospitable to these butterflies is representative of the loss of beauty of the land. While the bees symbolized food production and rabbits the destruction of homes within the ecosystem, the loss of butterflies represents the loss of one of the most beautiful creatures in nature. Butterflies symbolize beauty throughout the Western tradition and while Clare is writing about the reality of losing this insect, he is also lamenting the loss of the beauty of the scene. He laments this loss of beauty throughout the poem, but one powerful passage towards the middle of the poem explains "In summers gone I bloomed in pride / Folks came for miles to prize / My flowers that bloomed no where beside / And scarce believed their eyes" (Lines 133-6). This place was special to the village, a place of recreation and admiration, and now it is merely an exploited resource of early agrarian capitalism.

Clare, through the mouth of Swordy Well, condemns the greed inherent in this agrarian capitalism by writing that if the "price of grain [were to] get high" the land should not "possess a single flye" or "get a weed to grow" (lines 147-8). Then, in the same way that Clare's natural history writing, and a few of the poems analyzed thus far, have attempted to anthropomorphize animals and dehumanize humans in order to advocate for nature, he uses the same technique here for anthropomorphizing Swordy Well and dehumanizing the people who have demolished it. Swordy Well refers to the people that have stripped it of its resources as a "greedy pack" who tore "the very grass from off my back" so that he has "scarce a rag to wear" (Lines 136-140). Like Clare's

lines from his natural history letters about trees getting their heads chopped off, here he conveys the pain of the land as if it were hair torn out of skin. He illustrates the loss of the land's ability to produce as an excruciating pain through a torturous action. At the same time, he animalizes the people that are committing these actions representing them as a pack of animals and not human at all. Reversing the human and animal binary so that the animals appear humane and humans appear animal-like is a radical, yet effective way to destabilize the anthropocentric mindset through describing characteristics in this unusual manner. This continues a little later in the poem as Swordy Well refers to the men that now abuse this land as "mongerel[s]" (Line 198). Clare maintains this line of reasoning, needling away at the commonly accepted idea that humans are more humane than animals and uses dehumanization as a technique to illustrate the harm done by humankind. It is obvious that the intensity of Clare's depictions, deconstruction of the human and nature binary, and use of personification has a much greater intensity and urgency than Thomson and many other poets of his era.

Perhaps the strongest lines of "The Lament of Swordy Well" come as the narrator attacks enclosure directly explaining, "Till vile enclosure came and made / A parish slave out of me." Swordy Well compares the affect of enclosure on him as a form of slavery that is torturous, inhumane, and will hurt both the enslaved and the enslaver. Finally, Clare ends the poem in a familiar way by stating that soon there shall be nothing left of Swordy Well except its name. Throughout his poetry, he makes this argument that it is his job, both as natural history writer and poet, to bear witness to these actions and to accurately record the land as it once was and the events that altered it forever. Basically,

Clare argues that even as the land he cherished disappears, he can record it for others to enjoy throughout history, and at the same time, by making the horrific events widely known, perhaps it will prevent this devastation from occurring in other places.

Clare uses a similar form of prosopopeia in his poem “The Lamentations of Round-Oak Waters” (1820); however, in this case, the voice is not a laboring class voice, but a more poetic advocate for the land and working class.²² The speaker, who is assumed to be Clare, introduces the poem, but the narration is soon given to a voice generated from the water itself. Interestingly, the voice appears at the moment that the speaker is complaining about the inhumanity of the wealthy:

(For when my wretched state appears / Hurt friendless poor and starv'd / I
never can withhold my tears / To think how I am starv'd / To think how
money'd men delight / More cutting then the storm / To make a sport and
prove their might / O' me a fellow worm) (Lines 17-24)

The lines here are put in parenthesis to signify that they are thoughts from the narrator that are left unspoken. Interestingly, in the past Clare often dehumanized the men that attack nature in many ways, but here, he explains how he feels dehumanized by “money'd men,” as if he were a “worm.” The word “fellow” that modifies worm is vital to notice here because it signifies both that he feels more in common with worms than these wealthy men, and at the same time, that other pieces of land are made to feel like worms in the same way he is by the wealthy. As the speaker decries that he is “melancholy,” full of “sorrow” and in “misery,” a voice comes from the water to comfort him (Lines 26, 27, 30). In the first stanza of the stream speaking, it shows compassion for

the narrator's pain and refers to him as an "equal" (Line 44). The idea of the stream claiming that he and the speaker are equal is interesting on multiple levels. First, it reverses the technique that Clare often uses where the speaker suggests equality with nature, having nature claim equality with the narrator. Secondly, the water represents a figure with more education and is identifying with a laborer. Basically, at the same time, Clare is leveling the distinction between man and nature and also between different classes of people.

As the poem continues, Round-Oak Waters begins telling the speaker about all of the ways that people used to enjoy its water and how it made the stream contented to live in a mutually beneficial relationship with both animals and people. As with Clare's other poems, he does not promote the complete separation of land and humans, instead, he advocates for a mutually beneficial relationship that is not exploitative. Near line one-hundred of the poem, a pivotal shift in tone occurs as Round-Oak is pulled into the present time and explains:

'But now alas my charms are done / For shepherds and for thee / The
Cowboy with his Green is gone / And every Bush and tree / Dire
nakedness oer all prevails / Yon fallows bare and brown / Is all beset wi'
post and rails / And turned upside down' (Lines 93-100)

Clare begins this passage with Round Oak saying that its "charms" are gone, which is a term that Clare uses often throughout his oeuvre. This is an interesting term for him to use to denote the loss of the resources from the land and the mutual relationship with nature and man. The word charm has a mystical meaning to it,²³ so Clare is suggesting

that when humans and nature work together in a way that is self-sustaining and beneficial to both, there is a holistic and almost magical balance to this relationship. The second interesting point about this stanza is that Round Oak considers the “Shepherd” and “Cowboy” as parts of its environment that are missed now that enclosure has fenced in the land. Clare often references these two figures in his poems as figures that respectfully interact with nature. The land is not resentful of humans that view themselves as part of the natural world, but it is resentful of those who exploit it. Round-Oak also refers to a common symbol in poems where Clare uses anthropomorphism, that is, the idea of being naked. Just like pulling the hair from the back of Swordy Well, Round-Oak regards the overuse of the land that surrounds it as a stripping and painful experience. The brook complains that “dire nakedness oer all prevails” and that it is “stript” of all that is meaningful. This is powerful imagery because of the way humans would regard forced stripping as inhumane, so it helps the reader to empathize with the land through the description of this experience that would be considered tragic if it happened to a human. Once again, the radical intensity of Clare’s language far surpasses most other natural history writers and is one of the benefits of using poetry as an avenue for protesting this exploitation.

The poem then takes a similar dark turn as in “The Lament of Swordy Well” as Round–Oak describes the losses that came with enclosure:

‘The bawks and Eddings are no more / The pastures too are gone / The
greens the Meadows and the moors / Are all cut up and done... / Ah cruel
foes with plenty blest / So ankering after more / To lay the greens and

pastures waster / Which proffited before / Poor greedy souls-what would
they have / Beyond their plenty given? / Will riches keep 'em from the
grave? / Or buy them rest in heaven? (Lines 116-20, 189-96)

As the speaker explains how the natural surroundings have been forever altered by enclosure, three familiar themes are returned to that recur throughout his oeuvre. First, he dehumanizes the perpetrators of the attacks on the land. In this case, he does not animalize them, but instead Clare, through Round Oak, disembodies the people that have stolen from the land. They are no longer viewed as human; instead, he refers to them as “greedy souls.” As he does this, he also comes back to a theme of death being the ultimate class leveler. Basically, this is contingent on a belief in an afterlife, but regardless of this belief, death levels all differences that cannot be overcome in life, even if we all just return to dust. Finally, the third theme that continues throughout his work is attacking the abstract concept of profit and greed as the forces behind all of the destruction. Both Clare and the stream have a common foe, which is perpetrated by humans, but is driven by these abstract concepts that take hold of human nature. It is especially important that he often separates the humans from the abstract concepts perhaps in a concerted effort to show that these motivations are not completely a part of the human spirit and that they can be combated with effort. Clare’s main efforts are to make his readers think of the land as an equal rather than subordinate, remind the readers of the cruelty in their actions, separate humans from the abstract driving forces in an effort to show that humans can resist these motivations, and, finally, that it will all be

leveled out in death regardless, but that they may be punished for their actions if the Christian conception of heaven is correct.

Another poem, “Clock-a-Clay” defies all previous interpretations of his poems in this study thus far. The poem does not fit neatly into any previous category as the speaker is a ladybug, and yet, this is not an Enclosure elegy. The poem is a carefree examination of the life of a ladybug, through its own eyes, in a manner that evokes both empathy and encourages the reader to want the same freedom that the ladybug enjoys. The poem is written in the first person, from the perspective of the ladybug, and begins with it lying in “cowslips,” hiding from a “buzzing fly,” and “waiting for the time ‘o day” (Lines 1,2,6). The poem is written in simplistic verse,²⁴ at least on the surface level, that is often included in children’s anthologies because of the happy mood of the poem and that children often enjoy imagining themselves through the eyes of an animal. The second stanza of the poem illustrates the enormous nature of the forest to the ladybug and for the first five lines it would seem as if the main character is helpless because of the power of nature:

While grassy forests quake surprise / And the wild wind sobs and sighs, /
My gold home rocks as like to fall / On its pillars green and tall; / When
the pattering rain drives by... (Lines 7-11)

The final line of the stanza completely subverts this overwhelming vision of the natural world as Clare writes that the clock-a-clay “stays warm and dry” (Line 12). So, despite the chaotic enormity of the nature surrounding this bug, it stays warm, dry, and safe. The poem continues with illustrations of the enormity of nature, yet the clock-clay continues

to stay safe. As its “home shakes in the wind and showers,” and “Bend[s] at the wild wind’s breath,” the ladybug stays safe, waiting for the right time to leave and fly away.

“Clock-a-Clay” is a poem that is effective on many levels. First, it has the surface level simplicity of a William Blake poem from “The Songs of Innocence,” yet, like Blake; there are a lot of complex meanings contained in these simple words. For instance, both writers attempt to disorient the readers in many ways, including writing their poems through perspectives that readers are not accustomed to. Second, it enables readers, both children and adults, to see the world through the perspective of a ladybug, which allows Clare to reach children at an early age in order to evoke an empathetic response and a new generation of environmental advocates. At the same time, it challenges our current anthropocentric view of the world. The tone and themes of the poem echo another poem that he wrote around the same time period, in the 1840’s, entitled “The Snowstorm.” In “The Snowstorm,” the narrator writes about being in a cottage as a storm hits. Just like the ladybug in “Clock-a-Clay,” the human narrator rests comfortably as the winds “howls, hisses” and incessantly “batter[s] the window pane,” just as the wind battered the ladybug’s home in the cowslips. Also, in a similar manner as “Clock-a-Clay,” “The Snowstorm” alternates between the wild and chaotic outside world and the safe and comfortable confines of the narrators’ homes. The parallels between these poems connect the two very different narrators, a ladybug and a human, suggesting that each is just a miniature part of a larger, more powerful world. Both poems portray very different speakers as very small characters in an enormously large world.

An entire book could easily be written on Clare's use of personification and the many ways that he uses it that are unique, however, that is not the main purpose of this work. Instead, the focus here is to demonstrate how Clare was influenced by the personification in Thomson and how he began to modify and elaborate on Thomson's techniques. Thomson's use of personification was very conventional, with mostly large abstractions that were God-like movers of the narrative and purpose of the poems. In Clare's work, he used personification in a more traditional manner on many occasions, but most of his uses bucked convention and treaded new ground for different purposes than his predecessors. For instance, Clare's use of personification was often to anthropomorphize animals and dehumanize humans in a way to illustrate the equality between humans and animals. He also used this anthropomorphism in order to advocate land preservation and prevent the destruction of land in the future. At the same time, Clare used personification in order to fight against the power of profit, greed, and the exploitation of the working class. Finally, personification was a main tool for him to use in order to describe the horrors of the enclosure movement, bear witness to its destruction, and ultimately, preserve a written record of all that might be lost because of this movement and modernization in general.

Notes

¹ For instance, the anthropomorphism of plants in regards to their sexuality has often been cited as an example where humans only are able to view plants in terms human terminology. Biology is based on the Latinized system of Linnaeus that was built on viewing plants in terms of human sexuality and is now assumed to be the only way to understand plant classification. Of course, at the time that Linnaeus developed his system, there were other competing classification schemas not based on human sexuality and even when Linnaean classification was first translated to English the sexualization of plants was removed from the text until Erasmus Darwin resexualized the language. The explanation of the sexualization of plants is discussed in detail throughout the book *Botany, sexuality, and women's writing 1760-1830: from modest shoot to forward plant* (2007) by Sam George.

² Shira Wolosky, in the book *The Art of Poetry: How to Read a Poem* (2001), traces conceptual personification from the Medieval period to the Renaissance. For examples, she gives Spenser's use of "Despair," "Sans Joy," and "Una" from *The Fairie Queen* (93).

³ Wolosky describes a shift to a more Wordsworthian personification, writing:

In nineteenth-century Romanticism, personification shifted more toward original images blurring the lines between the human and natural worlds...

The power to see ourselves in nature, as Wordsworth puts it, becomes a

defining power, and project of Romantic poetry: to describe nature as alive and sensible and feeling as humans are. (94)

This key shift in personification occurs as there is a change from focusing on making large concepts more human-like to viewing ourselves in smaller, more specified parts of the natural world.

⁴ John Goodridge and Kelsey Thornton write that Clare performed “a three-fold trespass on the time, culture and land of his social superiors” referring to the idea that he was trespassing on his boss’s time by taking time off of work to read *The Seasons*, that he was trespassing in cultural terms, as he was reading literature that people of his class did not often read, and there was also a physical trespassing onto the land of Burghley Park (Goodridge 88). This description of a “three-fold” trespass is an appropriate characterization of Clare’s actions because he was acting outside of the societal expectations of a person of his station on many levels, perhaps even more than three.

⁵ For instance, in the *Histories of Herodotus* (425 B.C.), he attributes human emotions to the river that Xerxes attempts to cross, writing that it is a “deceitful and briny river” and commanded his troops to “chastise the sea” (Herodotus 381).

⁶ John Ruskin originally used the term in his 1856 work *Modern Painters* in order to mean the attribution of human emotions or characteristics to animals. Ruskin used the term in a derogatory manner suggesting that it provided a layer of metaphor between the description and the actual biological description.

⁷ The lines from his natural history writing are the following: “O was this country Egypt, and was I but a caliph, the owner should lose his ears for his arrogant presumption; and the first wretch that buried his axe in their roots should hang on their branches as a terror to the rest.” (Tibble 78)

⁸ The one possible exception to this is the cowslips that “shun the hand,” which at first seems unrealistic, however, if one considers that the breeze could be pushing them away from the hand, it is a possible realistic scenario.

⁹ Many of Clare’s subscribers were wealthy people who bought the poems as much for charity as for enjoyment. As has been documented in many studies on Clare, his editors used this sympathy for Clare in order to sell more books.

¹⁰ In the book *A Publisher and his Circle: The Life and Work of John Taylor, Keats’s Publisher* (1972), Tim Chilcott writes about the censoring done to Clare’s work by both his editors and his patrons. The main two causes for censure were too much sexuality and directly attacking the wealthy. So, much of Clare’s best writing on the destruction caused by wealth did not appear in print until after his death.

¹¹ *The Midsummer Cushion* was supposed to be published in 1832, but because of various reasons, it was not officially published until 1979 by Kelsey Thorton and Anne Tibble.

¹² See Kenneth Johnston’s *The Hidden Wordsworth* pages 557-8 for an in depth look at how “Resolution and Independence” helps the reader understand the trajectory of the poet’s development.

¹³ See *The Gang: Coleridge, the Hutchinsons & the Wordsworths in 1802* by John Worthen for more information about the main ideas of this poem and the interactions between Wordsworth and Coleridge regarding “Resolution and Independence” and “Dejection: an Ode.”

¹⁴ While this is a large generalization, from my reading of Wordsworth and criticism on his work, his use of personification is most often used to draw connections with nature. There are exceptions, like “The World is Too Much With Us,” where he uses personification to attack materialism and worldliness, however, he is still arguing for a union with nature similar to what Abrams referred to in *Natural Supernaturalism*.

¹⁵ From what I can tell, this phrase was coined by Johanne Clare in her book *John Clare and The Bounds of Circumstance* (1987).

¹⁶ Johanne Clare discusses this in her book *John Clare and The Bounds of Circumstance*, claiming that John Clare uses the voice of the laborer for the voice of Swordy Well in order to show the inherent connection between the laborer and land (Johanne Clare 43). This inherent connection, she suggests, is formed from a “common enemy,” namely enclosure and modernization.

¹⁷ James McKusick writes that “The Lament of Swordy Well,” is “one of the first and still one of the very few poems to speak for the Earth in such a direct and immediate way” (86).

¹⁸ It is unclear whether Clare is using the word “petitioner” in reference to individuals who are petitioning the government of the political organization known as the Petitioners,

which later became the Whigs. If I had to venture a guess, I would think that he is referring to the political organization because of the Whigs role in the Enclosure Acts as explained by Kenneth Olwig in his book *Landscape, Nature, and the Body Politic* (2002):

Enclosure provided the means by which customary restrictions upon the rights of property could be removed, thereby creating the uniform space of an estate property. To engage in enclosure, however, was morally problematic for anyone seeking to clothe himself in the countryman mantle because it meant dissolving the ancient customary rights upon which common law and country ideology had been built. The so-called Commonwealthmen, or Old Whigs, perpetuated the “country” ideals of the early parliamentarians and countrymen... [T]he new-guard Whigs, the perfect source of parliamentary ideals to counter the old Whigs who would root those ideals in ancient English custom. (Olwig 119)

Basically, the Old Whigs, who were rooted in the old country traditions, were for maintaining the commons and generally against most aspects of enclosure. The New Whigs, on the other hand, disregarded traditional custom and were for enclosure. Clare seems to be calling the New Whigs hypocritical in both calling themselves Whigs and yet standing against custom in regards to enclosure.

¹⁹ Fredrick Martin writes of Clare’s time as a lime-burner:

John Clare’s labours as a lime-burner at Bridge Casterton were of the most severe kind. He was in the employ of a Mr. Wilders, who exacted great

toil from all his men, setting them to work fourteen hours a day, and sometimes all the night long in addition. (53)

Although Clare's work was extremely difficult and tiring, all of his biographical works indicate that he was in high spirits and enjoyed working in the outdoors.

²⁰ Johanne Clare makes an interesting connection here between John Clare writing that Swordy Well was in "parish" hands and an episode from his autobiography that refers to his father:

The economic emphasis is unusual, and though Clare in his own character as labourer makes no appearance in the poem, it's worth recalling that his father mended roads until he "couldn't stand" and then, crippled by rheumatism and destitute, was forced to 'fall in parish hands'. (Johanne Clare 44)

It seems highly likely that John Clare was transposing the fate of his father onto the land at Swordy Well. Although, what he had seen his father go through, as his body broke down, impacted his affection and empathy for the plight of the working class and the fellow victim of modernization, the land, represented by Swordy Well.

²¹ The British writer Bee Wilson writes in her book *The Hive* (2004):

Bees were with us from the very beginning. Before man had discovered how to produce bread or milk, before he had domesticated any animals or planted any wheat, when his diet was still entirely hunted and gathered, man had found in the wild bee's nests the sweet food which must have

been such a welcome addition to his simple fair. Man had begun hunting
got honey in Paleolithic times, at least 10,000 years ago, searching for it in
hollow trees and rocks. (4-5)

As can be ascertained from this account, bees have been an important resource for humans for thousands of years and lived peacefully amongst us until the industrial revolution, whereas Clare describes that massive cultivation of land ends up destroying one of our greatest companions and resources.

²² Johanne Clare, in *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance* (1987), analyzes the narration of this poem quite effectively and should be a reference for anyone looking to learn more about this poem.

²³ In Samuel Johnson's dictionary from 1836, the word charm is defined as "to bewitch, delight... a spell or enchantment" (58).

²⁴ Jane Manning writes in her book *New Vocal Repertory: An Introduction* (1994) that "'Clock-a-clay' gives the singer a perfect opportunity to emphasise [sic] the consonants and make a steady ticking effect. In the following low, gentle staccato phrase, the notes should not be too short" (54). The poem lends itself well to song, and because of this, it reaches a wider audience.

CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

Romantic natural history writing is a narrowly focused genre, yet it has influenced a variety of literature and scientific writing.¹ One of the reasons that it is not usually recognized as a major theme in Romantic literature is because it has only recently been compiled into anthologies (Mckusick and Keegan) and critically theorized as a genre (Nichols, Kroeber, Bate). There is much more work to do to continue to anthologize, theorize, and critically analyze Romantic natural history writing. Once more work is done in this area, the poetry and prose can then be further divided into other categories, for instance: ecology-based natural history writing, animal advocacy in natural history writing, didactic natural history writing, and other areas as needed. The formal analysis and study of this genre of literature is integral in understanding a strain of literature that influenced the view of nature for the canonical Romantic poets, popular society, and the formation of modern science.

Understanding the formation of modern scientific thought is integral to future study in order to realize the malleability of the field. Many people view biological science as a static system that has been developed in the manner that it has because it was the best possible system; however, when studying the history of biological studies it is easy to see that its formation was random in many ways and there were competing theories that had similar levels of validity. An example of this malleability is the competing theories of plant and animal classification that were equally valid at the time Carolus Linnaeus was translated to English and began to dominate the field.² This realization that branches of science are malleable and that acts such as translation and / or

advocacy by writers or scientists can affect the future of the systemic sciences is integral because it establishes writing and translation as powerful forces in the fields of writing and science. This empowerment can promote more writers to venture into scientific fields realizing that it is not a static system and that their advocacy can affect the future uses of these systems.

The empowerment of writers is an important aspect of studying natural history writing and is one of the integral reasons that it needs to be incorporated into literature and Romantic studies. One area where incorporation of natural history is especially important is pedagogical applications of natural history studies in both the literature and composition classrooms. An example of a pedagogical strategy for incorporating natural history in the classroom would be to have students read examples of natural history prose and poems and attempt to write their own natural history texts. If possible, students can then, on their own or with an instructor, take nature walks and take notes and / or pictures, then incorporate it into a bigger project. Students can work in groups where they concentrate on scenes that resemble those from the writers they are analyzing and use a computer program like *Microsoft Publisher* to combine their writing with their pictures and the writing they analyzed. Then, after each set of writings and pictures they could write about what philosophical ideas come to mind from the scenes (using the Wordsworthian model), what ecological elements are present in the scene, what elements are present in the scene but not visible, what that scene would look like during different seasons, what it might look like in a few decades, and other endless possibilities. This

type of activity could be used in both literature and writing classes, although it would probably be easier to navigate with smaller numbers of students.

The impact of this type of natural history focused literature or composition course is that it attaches poetry to material reality, which is often one of the most difficult areas for students to grasp in poetry courses. I have often come across students who have trouble attaching what they learn in poetry courses to their material realities. While many students can grasp the philosophical and abstract concepts that poetry often deals with, many others struggle with this aspect of studying poetry. For those students, natural history poetry and writing can provide an opening by focusing on material realities and then expanding into more theoretical concepts. At the same time, environmental advocacy has grown exponentially over the past few decades,³ so the realization that the poetry they are studying can represent some of the origins and reasoning behind the environmental movement may attract more of them to further study. Connecting literature and writing to the popular environmental movement can engage students in ways that purely philosophical approaches to poetry may not. In my classes, I personally have viewed students become more active and engaged when they can connect what we are working on to something that matters to them. This engagement can be encouraged through interdisciplinarity and the flexibility of the instructor to connect the subject matter of the course to the students' lives.

Because of the current popularity of environmental consciousness, it seems the ideal time to revitalize the study of Romanticism by introducing, analyzing, and promoting natural history writing. The methods for accomplishing this include: creating

more natural history anthologies, introducing more natural history writing in Romantic anthologies, more theoretical analysis of natural history writing, encouraging interdisciplinarity in the classroom, and incorporating natural history study in both the literature and composition classrooms. Promoting natural history writing at a time when there is great popularity for the environmental consciousness is an unprecedented opportunity that writers, critics, and educators need to take advantage of in order to more fully engage students in the literature and writing classrooms.

Notes

¹ A few examples of the influence of natural history writers include: Gilbert White influencing James Boswell (famous ornithologist), White influencing John Burroughs and Theodore Roosevelt, Erasmus Darwin popularizing Linnaeus and the sexual classification system, and many other examples discussed throughout my study.

² One example of classification based on different criteria than we currently use is classification based on method of movement. This method of classification was equally respected, but did not gain as much support and advocacy.

³ Ralph Lutts argues in his book the *Nature Fakers* that since the creation of Earth Day in 1970 popularity of nature studies and environmentalism has increased (21).

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