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The Notes of a Peasant Poet's Life: Rootedness, Emotion, and Identity in John Clare's Bird Poetry

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**The Notes of a Peasant Poet's Life: Rootedness, Emotion, and Identity in John
Clare's Bird Poetry**

By

Maria Theodora Diakantoniou

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2018

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Clare's Bird Poetry**

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April 16, 2018

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I explore the Romantic poet John Clare's remarkable relationship with birds. Clare (1793-1864) was interested in birds for his entire life, writing over one hundred poems devoted to a wide range of species. As an under-educated member of the working class, Clare's sustained attention to birds was particularly significant. Although he demonstrated a lifelong love of birds, Clare's emotional circumstances also shaped the way in which he observed and wrote about them. His relocations from his home village of Helpstone in Northamptonshire to Northborough, and later to two different asylums, influenced his ability to comprehend birds. Uprooted from his secure nesting place of Helpstone and weighed down increasingly by despair, Clare's senses dulled and his transcriptions of bird song became far less intricate, immediate, and exact. I also investigate the impact of land enclosure in Helpstone, which Clare strongly opposes in his verse. In doing so, Clare reveals his strong identification with birds and his desire to protect them as their habitat is transformed. By examining his bird poetry composed at several distinct periods in Clare's life, I hope to illuminate his fluctuating mental state. This study will examine the effects of physical dislocation on a quintessentially local poet, suggesting his compromised status as a listener in the soundscapes of unfamiliar territory.

DEDICATION

To my parents, siblings, and fiancé for their unwavering support. You gave me the space to bloom, grow, and become the person you always knew I could be. Thank you.

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CHAPTER 1

Incubation: John Clare's Avian Allies

“Like a bird in the forest, whose world is its nest, / My home is my all, and the centre of rest.”¹ John Clare was born in Helpstone, near Peterborough, Northamptonshire, in July of 1793 to poor parents. Known to his public as a “peasant poet,” he spent his youth working various rural jobs including thresher, horseboy, ploughboy, gardener, and limeburner (Storey 1). Although Clare faced financial need and had to work tirelessly for most of his life, he formed and maintained a strong interest in ornithology that endured until his final years. Clare recorded specific details on birds during his youth and maturation in Helpstone that were reworked into both poetry and natural history notes. According to Jonathan Bate, Clare compiled a list of over one hundred bird species in April and May 1825.² In this collection, Clare included detailed descriptions of birds’ habits, mostly stemming from his own observations. His determination in recording precise details of avian behaviours demonstrates his keen interest in ornithology. Isabel Karremann writes that Clare even planned to create a *Natural History of Helpstone* volume similar to Gilbert White’s *Natural History of Selborne* (1789) (Karremann 97). Although the volume was never completed and Clare’s dedicated avian natural history entries only spanned a couple months, Clare continued to write many bird-related poems for the rest of his life, including during his Northborough period (1832-1837) and asylum period (1837-1864). Even his poems that are not named after birds often contain bird imagery. According to Chris Washington, Clare’s writing “includes over one hundred poems devoted to birds and birds’

¹ From “Home Happiness,” lines 3-4, in the *Delphi Complete Works of John Clare (Illustrated)*.

² See *John Clare’s Birds*, edited by Eric Robinson and Richard Fitter.

nests” and “routinely depict[s] human-animal relations as consciously and conscientiously respectful and gentle, true idylls of rural country life” (667). Clare’s bird poetry changed in focus and sentiment throughout his life, but his interest in birds remained constant.

Clare has received a fair amount of posthumous recognition for his ornithological ability and poetic skill. He frequently wrote about the outdoor world, but he did not simply include nature in his writings; he observed and recorded plants and animals in great detail and, as many critics have shown, demonstrating impressive accuracy. Eric Robison and Richard Fitter claim that “the combination of poet and field-naturalist has never been bettered in our literary and scientific history” (xviii). Tom Duddy states that no poet before Clare wrote so naturalistically while remaining lyrical, and no subsequent poet wrote so joyfully on birds (72). By analyzing the way in which Clare writes about birds, I hope to demonstrate his remarkable knowledge and relationship with them. In this thesis, I will argue that Clare’s emotions are manifested in his poetry by the way in which he depicts birds. In Chapter 2, “Building the Nest: Dwelling Among the Birds of Helpstone,” I detail Clare’s profound attachment to his home environment in Helpstone as illustrated by the birds whose habitats, behaviours, and sounds make him feel secure. In Chapter 3, “Stranger Birds: Stasis in the Northborough Fens,” I analyze Clare’s bird writings upon moving to Northborough, where he begins to feel isolated and struggles to process bird song with the same clarity and idealism that he did in Helpstone. Finally, in Chapter 4, “Bound Birds: The Silencing of Enclosure,” I explore the diminishment in bird poetry during Clare’s later life and demonstrate his reaction to the enclosure of the environment, as well as his own enclosure within two different asylums.

Clare cared deeply about birds and did not include them in his writing solely to serve a poetic purpose. Instead of seeing birds as merely symbolic, Clare saw them as real and important, and his writing includes detailed depictions of birds that privilege the close observation of the creatures around him. Through Clare's poetry, he portrays birds as living beings rather than as symbolic objects. Karremann writes that Clare presents his birds as subjects that possess agency (99). She examines Clare's depiction of birds in terms of their semiotic significance, applying Anat Pick's concept of the creaturely to Clare's poetry. According to Karremann, Pick's idea of a creature is "first and foremost a living body – material, temporal, and vulnerable," and Pick "proposes a revision of human/animal relations in terms of a shared vulnerability that is 'the creaturely estate of all human (and non-human) beings'" (Karremann 96). Karremann interprets the creaturely as "an apt category for overcoming the great divide between human and non-human existences" (96). She goes on to explain that Pick's concept seeks to depart from the anthropocentric focus of some forms of writing; instead, these types of writings provide animals with increased autonomy. Hence, Karremann describes Clare's poetry as creaturely, since it focuses on portraying animals and even plants as autonomous beings. Sehjae Chun's argument aligns with Karremann's, as she notes that Clare writes about birds as self-governing beings and not simply as a means of expressing human emotion (50). This distinguishes Clare from some other Romantic writers who often included birds for symbolic purposes alone.

Clare's bird poetry blends emotion and observation, suggesting that he had a closer relationship with birds than many other Romantic poets who lacked his detailed knowledge of the outdoor world. For instance, Clare allows birds to be the central focus of many of his poems without the distraction of self-reflexive commentary. Robinson and Fitter

observe that one of Clare's bird poems, "The Progress of Rhyme," displays such precision in transcribing bird song that it would have seemed odd to Romantic writers and readers, but ornithologists today would understand it (xiii), as they often use onomatopoeia to describe bird song precisely. However, Robinson and Fitter also state that Clare's creativity never compromised the accuracy of his observations (xiv). Clare's poetry is unique in that it contains the level of exactitude one would expect from an ornithology book. His ability to blend natural observation and poetry suggests that Clare held a special relationship with birds. Spending so much of his time outdoors, Clare had the opportunity to observe birds on a regular basis, but his detailed recounting required effort and dedication. His interest in ornithology is noteworthy, particularly for a labouring-class poet who had little time for leisure and little practical incentive to practice birdwatching. Duddy also explains that Clare is distinguished by writing so often about birds' nests, "the most 'lowly' element of the bird world" (64). His appreciation of birds is not only demonstrated by his poetic style, but also by his dedication and curiosity.

Clare's knowledge of birds came primarily from personal observation. Duddy points out that Clare was not a passive observer of nature, instead actively immersing himself in the scenes about which he wrote. Clare often focused on birds that had not previously been included in literary tradition. He drew inspiration from his own local experiences, providing a wealth of details that allows readers to become immersed in each creature's specific habitat. Sara Lodge notes that Clare writes vividly about the calls, habitats, and eggs of many different species native to Northamptonshire (551). She also argues that he writes in the style of literary impressionists, providing particular details without analyzing the experience (548). Again, this is quite different from other Romantics,

who sometimes include birds to launch into commentary about their own lives or feelings. Clare's first impulse is to observe birds and record them exactly as they are.

Although Clare writes of birds in meticulous detail in his poetry, most critics agree that he borrowed very little from existing ornithology texts. By writing so extensively on birds, Clare presents himself as an authority on the subject even though he was an under-educated member of the working class. Amateur ornithologists were not uncommon in the period, but few belonged to John Clare's class and circumstances. Stephanie Kuduk Weiner suggests that Clare was influenced by pioneering naturalist Gilbert White—in particular, White's *Naturalist's Calendar*—adopting “White's precision, conciseness, and affection for verbs of action and the common names of birds and flowers” (381). White recorded observations such as “Redbreast whistles” and “Nuthatch chatters,” mirroring Clare's succinct and lively descriptions in many of his poems of the middle period (Weiner 380). For example, in “[Autumn Birds]” (discussed in Chapter 3), Clare writes that the “wild duck startles” (1) and “starnels wiz” (5).³ In addition, Clare's bird-related field notes often mirror his poetry in subject matter and style. A genuine, sustained interest in ornithology and a shared approach to notation are common to these amateurs of very different backgrounds. As mentioned previously, Clare planned to write a natural history book dedicated to the wildlife of his native village. While the example of White's *Natural History of Selborne* is active in this project, White's influence is most evident in the precision of Clare's mode of description. Chun claims that Clare gained most of his ornithological information from his own observation rather than from the ornithology writings of the time (51). The poet owned a number of bird-related volumes, according to

³ All Clare poems are taken from *John Clare: Major Works*, edited by Eric Robinson and David Powell, unless otherwise noted.

Robinson and Fitter, including “a *Natural History of Birds* (Bungay, 1815)... John M’Diarmid’s *Sketches from Nature* (1830), Robert Mudie’s *The Natural History of Birds* (1834), and a copy of Gilbert White’s *Natural History of Selborne* (1825 edition)” (xv). Only White’s book could have helped Clare improve his ornithological observations, as “[t]he Bungay book was out of date when it was published, while Robert Mudie’s book was published after Clare’s best bird poems had been written” (xv). They conclude that Clare “had no respect for book learning when it came to things of nature” (xv). In fact, Clare was much more of a pioneer than critics previously realized; he sometimes picked up on minute behavioural details that naturalists of his time had never recorded (Robinson and Fitter xix). James Fisher provides further evidence of Clare’s skill: “it is possible to show that the poet knew from personal observation about 145 wild birds, of which 119 can be identified with reasonable certainty as county records – 65 of them ‘first records’” (2). These results, including sixty-five ‘first records,’ suggest that he took birding seriously and devoted a great deal of time and effort to his bird writing. As will be discussed later in the chapter, Clare’s ornithological prowess seems far greater than many other Romantic writers who represent birds in their verse.

Clare is a remarkably proficient listener of bird song, as demonstrated by the transcription of melody in his poetry. Clare uses onomatopoeia frequently in his writing, which Weiner says merges poetic language with the actual sound being recorded (372). His is the most accurate recording of bird song for a century, according to David Rothenberg (Weiner 386). This accuracy, which distinguishes Clare from his contemporaries, is the result of sustained, first-hand observation. Listening is an important skill for a birder to practice, and, as Weiner discusses, sound is a key component of Clare’s

descriptive poetry (371), suggesting the legitimacy of Clare's birding skills. Throughout Clare's poetry, but especially his Helpstone poems, birds make up a significant portion of the soundscape. According to Sam Ward, a soundscape is comprised of the total collective sounds in an area, and the listener assumes an active role as both observer and sound-maker (27). By creating such detailed soundscapes in his poetry, Clare positions himself as a listener in the environment. As will be explored in later chapters, Clare's ability to hear and comprehend sound largely depends on how rooted he feels in a particular environment. When he lacks a sense of security, Clare becomes less attuned to the soundscape. Fear or anxiety mute what he can hear on occasion. Moreover, Clare understood the relationship between sound-makers and often wrote about the impact of one member of the soundscape on another (Ward 27). Sound is a critical part of Clare's bird writing, and subsequent chapters shall suggest that, in part, Clare's ability or inability to interpret bird song reveals his own mental state. Although Clare certainly knew a great deal about birds and attempted to transcribe their sounds into his poems, his mood often dictated what he was able to perceive. To be clear, Clare did not manipulate birds' behaviour or sounds to suit his internal state; rather, he recorded true and accurate behaviours as he perceived them. His ability and skill in registering their song shifted during different stages of his life.

It is important to note that while Clare relates emotionally to birds, he does not use them only as mirrors to reflect human feelings. Birds have more than just a symbolic function in Clare's writing, despite his powerful identification with them in times of personal joy and sorrow. As mentioned previously, Clare possessed extensive knowledge of birds and valued them highly as autonomous creatures. Chun, too, argues that it is flawed to view Clare's birds solely as reflections of himself or other working-class labourers who

were also victimized, marginal figures, because suggesting this reason alone for Clare's focus on birds would be to diminish their importance to him. As Chun points out, Clare's writing resists the tendency to veer into anthropocentrism, as he offers a unique perspective in which readers "can take the perspective of the birds" (Chun 50). Again, this differs from other poets of the Romantic period who sometimes represented birds as one-dimensional creatures who lack emotional complexity. By writing so thoughtfully on birds and depicting them as being capable of similar emotions as humans, Clare reveals his high regard for birds, suggesting that his bird writing holds deep significance. Because of Clare's understanding of birds and their emotions, he feels a sense of sympathy for their circumstances, especially since sometimes, as in the case of enclosure, their victimization was shared. At a time in which their shared environment was changing, Clare's knowledge of birds allowed him to sympathize with their plight and prompted him to advocate for their mutual rights to freedom in his poetry.

Throughout his life, Clare was impacted by the Enclosure Movements in Britain, which translated into his poems, including those about birds. In his book *Enclosures in Britain 1750-1830*, Michael Turner provides an explanation of enclosure:

The term enclosure mainly refers to that land reform which transformed a traditional method of agriculture under systems of co-operation and communality in communally administered holdings, usually in large fields which were devoid of physical territorial boundaries, into a system of agricultural holding in severalty by separating with physical boundaries one person's land from that of his neighbours (11).

For someone accustomed to roaming the landscape freely like Clare, enclosure posed a problem. "The Act of Parliament for the Enclosure of Helpston was passed in 1809, and the final Award was published in 1820" (Barrell 106). John Barrell notes the extensive delay between the act and the award, but explains that "the new landscape of Helpston was

fully marked out long before the Award was published” (106). Since Clare was born in Helpston in 1793 and resided there until 1832, he certainly felt the effects of enclosure. Critics such as Andrew Smith observe that, for Clare, political freedom is linked with physical freedom, and Clare loses both due to enclosure (40-41). The loss of footpaths, for instance, blocked Clare’s access to nature, and the ‘improvement’ of wild moors and wetland meant the destruction of bird habitat. Both animals and labourers lost their right to roam the land when the enclosure movements took place.

Clare addresses the conflict between nature and enclosure by arguing for the necessity of protecting an environment in which birds are a central factor. As Karremann suggests, humans seem to be the villains in many of Clare’s bird poems, for they misinterpret the creatures and fail to understand their behaviour (98). For instance, he tended to focus on the way in which humans intrude on birds’ habitats, often by making noise. Similarly, the enforcers of enclosure intruded on the land of tenant labourers, who were no longer allowed to roam the fields freely (Ward 27). Clare’s critique of human destruction aligns those who know little about nature (and fail to respect its creatures) with the enforcers of enclosure. He disagrees with those who cannot see the beauty in nature, and his poem “The Mores” mocks the unnaturalness of closing off the land: “As tho’ the very birds should learn to know / When they go there they must no further go” (73-74). Clare recognizes the need for humans and birds to be free, using the creatures not to gesture toward human experience, but to complement it. He portrays birds and humans as nearly equal, endowing the animals with the same rights as people. For Clare, birds were in danger and needed to be preserved as much as humans did. Moreover, there is a tie between Clare’s method of depicting sound and his resistance to the defilement of his beloved landscape

through the process of enclosure. Ward discusses John Barrell's claim that Clare writes about places as if he is standing inside of them rather than observing from a position of elevation. He expands on Barrell's argument by suggesting that Clare's writing conveys space so well because of the way he uses sound. According to Ward, "[l]istening... draws you into the world; looking... separates you from it" (16). To support his argument, Ward discusses Clare's method of recording sound, writing that although Clare may use idiosyncratic language, he transcribes sounds in a consistent manner. Clare uses many onomatopoeic words in his bird writing, and Ward writes that Clare refused his publisher John Taylor's suggestions to omit them from his work. Interestingly, Ward explains that using these sound-filled words holds ecological value, since the topography of Clare's hometown was under threat from change. Clare's decision to immerse his readers in particular locations serves to preserve them despite the potential threats of enclosure. As Ward notes, enclosure would certainly alter the sounds of a community (26), which could be why Clare had such a strong inclination to record present sounds. Furthermore, Ward writes that "[t]he drainage of marshland and the stoppage of streams... would have caused a reduction in the number of marsh and fenland birds" (26). Hence, enclosure very likely changed the soundscape of Clare's home parish, and recording regional sounds such as bird song allowed Clare to combat enclosure.

Critics have suggested that Clare was a proponent of animal rights. For example, Duddy writes that Clare avoids writing about the harsh realities of birds, such as their violent tendencies, and instead portrays humans as the antagonists (71). In addition, Clare seems genuinely concerned about the welfare of his fellow creatures, particularly when he writes about the effects of enclosure. For example, in "The Mores," which will be treated

more fully in Chapter 4, Clare writes the following: “birds and trees and flowers without a name / All sighed when lawless law’s enclosure came” (77-78). Although Clare uses personification here, he takes the opportunity to comment on the emotional state of the birds as a result of enclosure. He illustrates that they are complex creatures who will experience negative consequences of enclosure just as humans will. Clare was not merely projecting his feelings onto the wildlife; he knew enough about nature and about birds that he understood the harm of closing off their habitats. For instance, with their habitats diminished, it is possible that some birds would have gone extinct, causing a decrease in biodiversity. The thoughtless manner in which humans behave toward wildlife is certainly a topic that Clare critiques in his writing. Washington writes that in 1818-1835, Clare wrote many idyllic poems about the birds of Helpstone, but in 1835-1837, after he relocated to the village of Northborough, Clare wrote angrier poems that often dealt with the mistreatment of animals (666). Clare’s focus shifted from the privacy of nests to the degradation of animals’ habitats that took place post-enclosure. Washington makes an astute observation, but there is further exploration to be done. I will investigate the way in which Clare’s bird writing changes from his youth in Helpstone until his final years in the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum. His writing changed in terms of how he regarded humans’ treatment of birds, as Washington suggests, but his own perceptions also changed. Clare’s ability to listen to and interpret birds diminished as he left Helpstone in 1832 and ventured into new territory containing new wildlife. Clare’s feelings about becoming an outsider in an unfamiliar place are manifested in his writing on birds. The level of precision in Clare’s bird writing is determined largely by his sense of rootedness in an environment, so examining his verse helps reveal his internal state in various locations.

To better illustrate how Clare's bird writing reveals his emotional state, it is helpful to contrast his poetry with that of two influential contemporary poets. I have chosen to examine the representation of nightingales in well-known verses by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John Keats in order to demonstrate the greater accuracy, detail, and care evident in Clare's avian portraits. Before delving into the authors' poems, it is necessary to establish a brief history of the nightingale's literary representations. The nightingale is often associated with the tale of Philomela, in which Tereus, king of Thrace, rapes her and cuts out her tongue. In an act of revenge, Philomela and her sister Procne, Tereus's wife, kill his son and serve him to Tereus. Before a fight can ensue, Zeus turns the protagonists into birds. Most versions of the story feature Philomela turning into a nightingale. According to James McKusick, because of this tale, portrayals of nightingales throughout literary history have hearkened back to Philomela and her plight (34-35). McKusick argues that although the nightingale seems to represent the idea of 'lost voice,' it also symbolizes positivity and rebirth (35).⁴ Moreover, "Especially in Romantic poetry, the nightingale connotes not only heartache and grief, but also renewed vitality; not only autumnal melancholy, but also springtime rejoicing" (McKusick 35). Hence, traditional writings on nightingales include both joyful and joyless representations.

McKusick also points out a feature of the representation of nightingales specific to the Romantics. He notes that during this time period, authors began to appreciate the nightingale for its song and as more than merely "a literary *motif*" (34). While the Romantics were certainly interested in nature and its beauty, they were also interested in discussing the human emotions that the scenery evoked. Nature writing in the Romantic

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the nightingale as a representation of lost voice, see Geoffrey Hartman's "Evening Star and Evening Land."

period was not usually a simple catalogue of a natural scene; poets tended to segue from descriptions of their surroundings to more personal, interior reflections. The tendency of Romantic writers to write about their emotions in conjunction with nature made the nightingale all the more fascinating to them, for the bird “manifests poetic imagination by varying its song to fit different moods” (McKusick 35). The bird could then be used to explore the range of emotions a poet may have been feeling while composing a poem. McKusick writes that Charlotte Smith influenced Romantic writers to depict the nightingale “as a full-blooded living creature, a real bird singing in a real forest” (38). However, the extent to which the Romantics describe nightingales as complex, sentient beings varies greatly.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge discusses the nightingale in two of his poems: “To the Nightingale” (1794) and “The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem. April, 1798.”^{5,6} In each of these poems, Coleridge alludes to Milton, in particular his “Il Penseroso.” However, “The Nightingale” addresses the bird in a far less conventional way. Whereas in “To the Nightingale” Coleridge refers to the bird as a “‘Most musical, most melancholy’ Bird,” quoting Milton, his subsequent poem subverts the traditional representation of nightingales as melancholy. He quotes Milton but argues, “A melancholy bird! Oh! idle thought! / In nature there is nothing melancholy” (14-15). He points out that poets call nightingales melancholy to suit their own emotions:

But some night-wandering man whose heart was pierced
With the remembrance of a grievous wrong,
Or slow distemper, or neglected love,
(And so, poor wretch! filled all things with himself,
And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale
Of his own sorrow) he, and such as he,

⁵ The source of “To the Nightingale” is *PoemHunter.com*.

⁶ The source of “The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem. April, 1798” is *Representative Poetry Online*.

First named these notes a melancholy strain.
And many a poet echoes the conceit (16-23).

Coleridge dispels myths about nightingales being melancholy and also, as McKusick suggests, begins to see them as real birds. He references the story of Philomela, stating that those poets who label the nightingale as melancholy insist on viewing the bird as a representation of that tale:

And youths and maidens most poetical,
Who lose the deepening twilights of the spring
In ball-rooms and hot theatres, they still
Full of meek sympathy must heave their sighs
O'er Philomela's pity-pleading strains (35-39).

Coleridge hints at the superficiality of this association, suggesting that people are often too preoccupied with frivolous affairs to partake in the beautiful experiences that nature offers. This commentary certainly marks a shift, as Coleridge departs from the tradition of depicting nightingales as symbols of sorrow or joy only, moving to a new realm of experiential learning that emphasizes the value of nature.

Another indication of Coleridge's innovative writing on nightingales is his care in recording their sounds. Far from being a mere symbol, the bird is its own entity with its own unique vocal ability. Coleridge describes the bird's "fast thick warble" and "delicious notes" (45), "musical and swift jug jug" (61), and "one low piping sound more sweet than all" (62). This vocabulary is specific to the nightingale; Coleridge addresses the variety and duration of its call rather than offering a cursory portrayal of bird song. The speaker addresses the nightingale before he leaves, saying, "till to-morrow eve" (89) as if he visits the nightingale every night. As he retreats home, he allows the bird's song to take precedence over both his words and his intentions: "That strain again! / Full fain it would delay me!" (92-93). Finally, the bird's song is so important to Coleridge that he comments

on his hope that his son will “grow up / Familiar with these songs, that with the night / He may associate joy” (109-111). By wishing for his son to gain first-hand knowledge of the nightingale’s songs, Coleridge reinforces the new Romantic sentiment that the nightingale is a real bird whose behaviour is worthy of observation. In dispelling the melancholy literary associations of the nightingale, Coleridge begins to reclaim the night as a joyful experience, thus redefining his relationship with nature through his perception of the bird.

Coleridge’s interest in the nightingale, however, demonstrates a self-centeredness not present in the bird poetry of John Clare. While Coleridge dwells on the nightingale for the majority of his poem, the ending inevitably fades into rumination on his son. In doing so, Coleridge suggests that the nightingale’s purpose in his poetry is to provide a connection to his friends and son. Further underscoring Coleridge’s ‘removed interest’ from the bird is his lack of accurate description, especially in comparison to Clare. Coleridge’s depiction of the nightingale’s song as a “swift jug jug” resembles Clare’s innovative onomatopoeic portrayals of bird song; however, according to Marc Plamondon, this phrase “has been used in literature since at least the sixteenth century as an imitation of part of the nightingale’s song.” Hence, Coleridge’s representation of the bird’s song may not be as “concrete” or attentive as McKusick suggests (39). His onomatopoeic description does not in itself prove his presence at the bird’s habitat, as the sound had already been recorded widely in literature. To his credit, however, Coleridge offers detailed description of the nightingales’ habitat, where “[t]hin grass and king-cups grow within the paths” (55), locating the bird in a specific place. Coleridge describes the nightingale’s grove as “wild with tangling underwood” (53), an abandoned landscape near a castle that has been re-wilded by nature. Although familiar with the nightingale’s coordinates, Coleridge hints

that other inhabitants may know more than he. “A most gentle Maid” who lives nearby knows “all their notes” (71-76), suggesting that he does not.

Although Coleridge disputes the traditional representation of nightingales as melancholy, he perpetuates other mystical aspects of the bird. The nightingales’ association with sadness has led many authors to place them only in settings of darkness and moonlight. Coleridge’s poem likewise takes place in “the dimness of the stars” (11):

On moon-lit bushes,
Whose dewy leaflets are but half disclosed,
You may perchance behold them on the twigs,
Their bright, bright eyes, their eyes both bright and full,
Glistening, while many a glow-worm in the shade
Lights up her love-torch (65-70).

The image of the birds’ bright eyes in the darkness adds to their mystique, suggesting that they are elusive as well as nocturnal. However, according to McKusick, male nightingales (the songsters) sing “at any time of day or night” (34). Therefore, while Coleridge’s writings are true to his experiences, the poem acknowledges the Miltonic tradition of representing “the nightingale in its nocturnal habitat.... In some magical and mysterious fashion, the bird’s very presence takes on the power of darkness” (McKusick 36). Also adding to the birds’ elusiveness is the fact that they often sing from within cover; they are heard frequently but are not as often seen: “You may perchance behold them” (67). Coleridge does not actively seek out the birds, as does Clare. Instead, he leaves the encounters to chance and makes little effort to discover more than what he can perceive immediately on any given evening.

Coleridge also states that by hearing the nightingale’s song, his son will associate happiness with the night (110-111). The bird may be real to Coleridge, as McKusick suggests, but it seems only to be real at night, despite the nightingale’s continued presence

throughout the day. In addition, reading the bird's song as joyful is as presumptuous as supposing the bird to be melancholy. Coleridge writes that as the moon emerges, "these wakeful birds / Have all burst forth in choral minstrelsy, / As if some sudden gale had swept at once / A hundred airy harps!" (81-84). He only speculates on their behaviour and makes assumptions about the joy apparent in their behaviour: "Many a nightingale perched giddily / On blossomy twig still swinging from the breeze, / And to that motion tune his wanton song / Like tipsy joy that reels with tossing head" (85-88). He assumes that the birds are joyful because their song matches the motion of a wind-swept twig, but this could be a disingenuous observation that he included to suit his own poetic needs. In fact, Frank B. Gill's standard *Ornithology* textbook (2007) reveals that the "Common Nightingale of Europe" sings "roughly 200 distinct and discrete song types" (234). Despite their lengthy musical displays, they continuously shift between different songs. Gill also states that nightingales are solitary singers at night but group singers during the day (234), contradicting Coleridge's account of a "choral minstrelsy" in the moonlight. Thomas Bewick's depiction of nightingales in *British Birds* (1797) confirms Gill's more recent account. Bewick writes that "[t]he Nightingale is a solitary bird, and never unites in flocks like many of the smaller birds, but hides itself in the thickest parts of the bushes, and sings generally in the night." Although Bewick perpetuates the misconception of nightingales singing primarily at night, he, too, portrays the bird as solitary, perhaps suggesting territorial behaviour. Rather than demonstrating his knowledge of nightingales, Coleridge creates a new myth of communal happiness based on his own limited observation.

Approximately twenty years after Coleridge's poem, John Keats published his "Ode to a Nightingale."⁷ From the outset of Keats's poem, it is clear that his focus is on himself and his emotions: the first words of the poem are "My heart aches." The entire poem uses the figure of the nightingale to examine Keats's own internal state, suggesting that the bird present is simply an embodiment of the whole nightingale species and not an individual with its own unique qualities. He writes, "Darkling I listen; and, for many a time / I have been half in love with easeful Death" (51-51). However, although he 'listens,' he neglects to describe the sounds he hears and instead continues his internal reflection. Rather than engaging in descriptive accounts of the bird's real song, Keats refers to the music as "The voice I hear this passing night" (63). Although McKusick claims that Keats's poem portrays a "real bird in a real forest" (39), it strays far from this ideal and instead fails to note any concrete details about the bird because of the speaker's interior focus. Keats does not acknowledge that there may be various, complex aspects of the bird's life, as is the case with humans. Moreover, he is content in the elusiveness of the bird. It does not reside in a botanically exact habitat, but in "some" plot of green, "and shadows numberless" (8-9). He writes the poem at a remove from the bird, without getting close enough to note any distinguishing traits of that particular nightingale. Thus, Keats seems to write the poem because the bird is useful for his poetic commentary, not because he appreciates the bird or wants to learn more about it.

Like Coleridge, Keats also bends the behaviour of the nightingale to match his intended tone and mood. Keats at first refers to the nightingale's "ecstasy" in song (58), but toward the end of the ode, Keats calls the bird's song a "plaintive anthem" (75).

⁷ The source of this poem is *Bartleby.com*.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, the word “plaintive” is “expressive of sorrow; mournful, sad.” This description is incongruous in comparison to the song’s earlier description as joyous. Hence, the end of the poem suggests that Keats’s own sorrow has taken over and impacted his depiction of the bird. Keats also speculates about others who have heard the nightingale’s song, imposing his own feelings onto their experience:

The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that ofttimes hath
Charm’d magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn (61-70).

Keats projects the nightingale’s song onto past situations as if it were a ritualistic experience; he describes hearing the bird as a rite of passage for those in distress. The bird becomes merely a symbol to indicate that the listener is sad, despite the creature’s true feelings or intentions. For example, Keats writes that Ruth may have heard the nightingale’s song simply because she was distraught.⁸ This again suggests that Keats manipulates the true behaviour of the nightingale to provide a suitable setting for his, and others’, internal reverie.

Keats also draws on mythical and traditional representations of the nightingale, focusing on established concepts rather than sharing first-hand knowledge of the bird. In the first stanza of his ode, he calls the nightingale a “light-winged Dryad of the trees” (7). The *OED* defines “Dryad” as a figure in Greek and Roman mythology, and more specifically, “A nymph supposed to inhabit trees,” highlighting the mythical depiction in

⁸ Victor J. Lams Jr. argues that Keats’s portrayal of Ruth is, in fact, inaccurate: “the girl who willingly left Moab for Bethlehem and accepted the ‘Lord God of Israel’ becomes, in the ‘Ode to a Nightingale,’ ‘sick for home’ amid ‘alien corn’” (“Ruth, Milton, and Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale,’” p. 417).

Keats's poem and linking the bird to its common association with Philomela. His portrayal suggests that he never got close enough to see the bird or collect any concrete evidence of its existence other than its song. Instead, the bird acts as a vehicle through which Keats can confront his anxiety regarding his poetics and legacy. Additionally, McKusick notes that Keats "personifies the nightingale as a female singer" (39). This depiction cannot be accurate in describing the true nightingale present in the trees, as only male nightingales sing, while females remain silent (McKusick 34). McKusick reveals that in literary history, nightingales were almost always depicted inaccurately as females (34). Thus, Keats follows literary tradition, unaware of specific details of the bird and seemingly disinterested in pursuing further knowledge. Finally, the setting of Keats's poem echoes that of Coleridge's poem, as it takes place "in embalmed darkness" (43). However, according to his housemate Charles Brown, Keats wrote his ode in the morning while a real nightingale was present near their Hampstead house (Lynch and Stillinger 927). Although the bird was real for Keats, he was still content to be removed from it, not seeing it or noting any particular details. Like Coleridge, Keats also characterizes the bird as capable of only extreme joy or sorrow, and his own mood dictates his interpretation of the bird's song. While Keats offers a fascinating glance into the plight of humanity, he uses the nightingale as a symbol and fails to note any of its true qualities with accuracy. His ultimate goal is to write about the nightingale in accordance with literary tradition, as he uses the bird to contemplate his own condition.

John Clare provides an unprecedented level of particularity in his bird writing, transforming the nightingale from a symbolic creature into a sentient being. Although he includes some inaccurate speculations about birds, his descriptions are usually meticulous

and thorough. For instance, his characterization of the nightingale is highly detailed in “The Nightingales Nest,” a poem first published in late 1832 (Bate 368) when Clare had just relocated from Helpstone to Northborough. Because of his ornithological knowledge by this point in his writing career, Clare was able to write poetry “grounded in natural history.” In contrast to Keats, Clare felt that his contemporary relied too heavily on mythology and “did not know nature at first hand” (Bate 189). Clare claimed, ““he [Keats] often described nature as it appeared to his fancies and not as he would have described her had he witnessed the things he described”” (qtd. in Bate 189). Critics agree that Clare’s representation is distinct. Deidre Shauna Lynch and Jack Stillinger write that Clare’s “nightingale poem [‘The Nightingales Nest’], written in a long-established literary tradition, has many more particulars of nature than any of those by his predecessors” (869). Although Clare also calls the singer a female bird,⁹ he provides many concrete descriptions of both the nightingale and her habitat, showing his genuine interest in the bird. Clare describes the habitat as “crimping fern leaves ramp[ing] among / The hazels under boughs” (17-18), not in any generic habitat, but “just here” (2), in a landscape that Clare records with botanical exactitude. He also includes specific, distinguishing characteristics of the bird, which he observed first-hand: “her renown / Hath made me marvel that so famed a bird / Should have no better dress than russet brown” (19-21). When Clare sees the bird, he describes its appearance and its song in tandem using concrete detail:

Her wings would tremble in her extacy
And feathers stand on end as twere with joy
And mouth wide open to release her heart
Of its out sobbing songs (22-25).

⁹ Despite this inaccuracy, Clare writes the following in a letter during approximately the same time period: “as regards particulars this is in the wrong gender for I think and am *almost* certain that the female is silent and never sings” (*John Clare’s Birds*, p. 45).

He conveys excitement and awe upon seeing and hearing the nightingale without mythologizing the bird. He exclaims, “How subtle is the bird” (57) and “Sing on sweet bird” (67). Thus, Clare’s poetry reveals that he deeply appreciates the nightingale, as he takes the time to record a myriad of precise details of its appearance, song, and habitat.

The rhetoric of the poem explicates a cause-effect relationship for the bird’s behaviour, displaying that Clare understands (or tries to understand) the nightingale. For instance, while Keats notices simply that the bird flew away, Clare writes, “if I touched a bush or scarcely stirred / All in a moment stopt” (28-29). He recognizes that human interference causes nightingales to flee and, more importantly, he tries to minimize his impact by remaining quiet and still. Significantly, he is aware of the way in which his own movement contributes to the soundscape of his environs, showing his keen perceptive skill. Clare wants the bird to stay: “Hush let the wood gate softly clap—for fear / The noise may drive her from her home of love” (3-4). His emphasis is on protection of the bird and on allowing it to remain in its chosen environment. He instructs his listener, “lets be hush” (42) and “part aside / These hazle branches in a gentle way / And stoop right cautious neath the rustling boughs” (45-46). He wishes to observe the bird without disturbing it, again suggesting his genuine concern for the bird’s well-being. When he approaches the nightingale, Clare writes that the bird

[...] raised a plaintive note of danger nigh
Ere we were past the brambles and now near
Her nest she sudden stops—as choaking fear
That might betray her home so even now
Well leave it as we found it (58-62).

Again, Clare demonstrates his understanding of the bird’s behaviour and attempts not to bother it. He interprets not just the bird’s sounds, but its silences as well, expanding literary

representations of nightingales' emotions to include fear in addition to joy and sorrow. He recognizes that a fleeting emotion or song does not encompass the bird's whole life; many factors, including human interference, can change how a bird behaves. Rather than imposing his own interpretation onto the nightingale, Clare observes its behaviour and makes astute connections based on his (and the bird's) experiences.

Throughout the poem, Clare's familiarity with nightingales becomes apparent, and his poetry reveals that he observes the bird as a matter of choice. Clare reveals immediately that he already had knowledge of the nightingale before composing this poem: "lets softly rove / And list the nightingale—she dwelleth here" (1-2). He not only knows the exact location in which the nightingale nests, but he also sounds anxious to show his friend the bird, highlighting his appreciation. Clare's interest in the bird is sustained, as he writes that he has heard the nightingale sing at that location "many a merry year" (5). By including such a line, Clare also provides a record of the bird's habitat over the years, conveying useful information similar to that of a natural historian. This distinguishes Clare from his Romantic contemporaries. Although Coleridge may have visited the nightingales every night during a particular period of his life, Clare seems to live among them throughout his life (before being institutionalized). He observes them "[a]t morn and eve nay all the live long day" (6), departing from the traditional literary paradigm of nightingales only being spotted at night. Not only does this show Clare's accuracy in description, but it also reveals that his relationship to the birds is much closer than Coleridge's or Keats's. Moreover, the motive for Clare's curiosity is not to use the birds as symbolic figures to strengthen internal speculations; instead, Clare spends so much time searching for, observing, and describing the nightingales because he finds joy in it and wants to learn more. Demonstrating this

uncommon interest is the fact that Clare describes the nightingale's nest with stunning detail:

How curious is the nest no other bird
Uses such loose materials or weaves
Their dwellings in such spots—dead oaken leaves
Are placed without and velvet moss within
And little scraps of grass—and scant and spare
Of what seems scarce materials down and hair (76-81).

Clare notes these specifics and continues discussing the bird until the end of the poem. Not only is the description detailed, but it also touches on seemingly 'anti-Romantic' topics, as birds' nests were considered lowly. Again, the bird is more than just its song for Clare; it constructs complex habitats, making decisions that humans may not yet understand. Clare's longing to know and share information about the nightingale (and other birds, as well) drives his poetics. He does not use the birds solely as vehicles for personal rumination.

Clare's genuine interest in the nightingale is also demonstrated by the fact that he wrote several other poems on the subject, all of which celebrate the bird. Clare's poem "To the Nightingale" is both descriptive and loving.¹⁰ Clare begins the poem by stating, "I love to hear the Nightingale" and later notes the importance of the nightingale as a mark of the passage of the seasons:

I love the Poet of the Woods,
And love to hear her sing,—
That, with the cuckoo, brings the love
And music of the Spring (33-36).

This poem seems a love letter to the nightingale and to spring, so it is only fitting that it should be so musical and feature many perfect rhymes. Moreover, Clare does not introduce the idea of springtime because it is a literary motif; he speaks of spring because his own

¹⁰ The source of this poem is *poetrynook.com*.

observations have led him to associate the nightingale with that time of year.¹¹ Clare's poetry in this case mimics the singing of the bird he depicts, aligning him with the "Poet of the Woods" (33). As with his other poems, the natural setting he describes in "To the Nightingale" is a detailed and specific record of his own home-ground. The nightingale is a part of the environs of the village and, thus, a part of Clare's own existence as well. Clare knows the secrets of his surroundings, including the nightingale's habitat:

I found her nest of oaken leaves,
And eggs of paler brown,
Where none would ever look for nests,
Or pull the sedges down.
I found them on a whitethorn root,
And in the woodland hedge,
All in a low and stumpy bush,
Half hid among the sedge (25-32).

Clare's discovery of the bird's nest and eggs is certainly not accidental; he searches deliberately, drawing attention to his curiosity. Although he does not depict any sightings of the bird itself in this poem, he still knows exactly where the sound originates from.

I hear her in the Forest Beach,
When beautiful and new;
Where cow-boys hunt the glossy leaf,
Where falls the honey-dew (9-12).

As Clare notes, the nightingale is a beacon of the spring, and he conveys his curiosity and admiration: "I could not think so plain a bird / Could sing so fine a song" (23-24). Perhaps Clare hints, here, that low, rustic, and discounted creatures are worthy of praise; for Clare, nature possesses beauty even when it is 'plain.'

Although Clare wrote several more poems featuring nightingales, his most precise and impressive depiction occurs in "The Progress of Rhyme" (composed 1821-1824).

¹¹ For a closer look at the association between nightingales and spring, see Thomas Alan Shippey's "Listening to the Nightingale."

According to Stephanie Kuduk Weiner, this poem distinguishes Clare because it features several innovative uses of onomatopoeia to approximate bird song (386). Clare himself states the goals and challenges with which he was faced in writing about birds: “I can sit at my window here & hear the nightingale singing in the orchard & I attempted to take down her notes[,]’ Clare writes; ‘many of her notes are sounds that cannot be written the alphabet having no letters that can syllable the sounds” (qtd. in Weiner 386).¹² The fact that Clare attempts to record sounds for which there did not exist letters and words (that he knew of, at least) is a testament to his innovative bird writing. Indeed, Bate describes a sequence in “The Progress of Rhyme” as Clare attempting to “unite his song with that of nature itself by imitating the very voice of the nightingale” (384). This level of description goes far beyond any attempted in the nightingale poems of Coleridge and Keats:

—‘Chew-chew Chew-chew’—and higher still
 ‘Cheer-cheer Cheer-cheer’—more loud and shrill
 ‘Cheer-up Cheer-up cheer-up’—and dropt
 Low ‘tweet tweet tweet jug jug jug’ and stopt
 One moment just to drink the sound (239-243).

Clare’s meticulous description of the song spans at least another eight lines.

‘Wew-wew wew-wew chur-chur chur-chur
 Woo-it woo-it’—could this be her
 ‘Tee-rew Tee-rew tee-rew tee-rew
 Chew-rit chew-rit’—and ever new
 ‘Will-will will-will grig-grig grig-grig’
 The boy stopt sudden on the brig
 To hear the ‘tweet tweet tweet’ so shill
 Then ‘jug jug jug’—and all was still (247-254).

Weiner notes that while Clare’s uses of “tweet” and “jug” are conventional and echo Coleridge’s description of the nightingale, his inclusion of unique phrases such as “wew-wew” and “chur-chur” demonstrate his desire to “capture the exact sounds of the bird song”

¹² Clare’s quote is from *Peterborough MS A58*, found in *Natural History Prose Writings* (312).

(386), which sets him apart from Coleridge. He is not merely translating the bird's sounds into text; he is attempting to transcribe them. Moreover, even when Clare's language is generic (as with "jug"), he plays with the associations of the sound, writing that he "drink[s]" the sound. He acknowledges the "insufficiency of language to convey the 'poesy' that [he] found in the fields" (Bate 385), and rather than conceding, he alters language until it matches nature's music. Bate clarifies that Clare wishes to find "'true poesy'" in "the 'language that is ever green': nature itself" (385). As much as Clare's onomatopoeic depictions of bird song convince readers how much he values birds, his commentary provides further proof. For instance, while Coleridge and Keats may enjoy the birds' company or find it useful, Clare displays humility and elevates the bird:

[...] a wilder strain
Made boys and woods to pause again
Words were not left to hum the spell
Could they be birds that sung so well
I thought—and maybe more than I
That musics self had left the sky
To cheer me with its magic strain (255-261).

Clare raises birds to the status of poets who perhaps produce more impressive art than humans; instead of lifting himself above them, Clare places himself on an equal level with the birds, demonstrating their close relationship. While Coleridge and Keats appear to appreciate the nightingale, Clare's interest is so pure, humble, meticulous, and sustained that he is entirely distinct from other Romantic poets.

Clare's challenges to the conventions of Romantic bird poetry are noteworthy. His interest in birds was not fleeting or restricted to a certain period of his life, but rather, he observed and wrote about birds until his final years. In the following chapters, I examine Clare's bird poetry throughout the stages of his life, demonstrating that, although his

fascination with birds is constant, his ability to fully register their habits varies with Clare's emotional and mental health. I hope to develop a new approach to the work of John Clare, as no existing studies have considered fully the relationship between Clare's bird poetry and his mental state. As a local poet, Clare's ability to perceive and record nature was also tied to a sense of security and rootedness; he writes as clearly as he perceives. The bird poems Clare wrote in Helpstone, Northborough, and finally the High Beech and Northampton asylums, track his relationship to place.

CHAPTER 2

Building the Nest: Dwelling Among the Birds of Helpstone

Around 1820, Clare wrote that “nature is the same here at Helpstone as it is elsewhere” (qtd. in Barrell 119). However, John Barrell identifies a shift in Clare’s work in 1821 to 1822 in which his main objective became recording nature as he perceived it in Helpstone and not as it appeared elsewhere. In fact, Barrell writes that Clare’s desire to write specifically about his home village is apparent in most of the poems he wrote in Helpstone, as well as his natural history letters and the catalogue of birds of Northamptonshire (119). Clare’s bird catalogue, written in prose, demonstrates his scientific interest in birds. He chose to observe birds for the sake of knowledge and observation rather than using them as fodder for his poetry. However, poetry seemed to be Clare’s preferred method of dissemination, since he wrote over one hundred bird poems and continued writing on the topic for his whole life. As will be discussed in the following chapters, Clare identified with birds in many ways, and poetry was the best vehicle to allow him to produce his own songs. Hence, Clare establishes an allegiance to birds through music, establishing song as a commonality between humankind and birds. In addition, as a poet, Clare had a responsibility to produce writing that could be comprehended by his readers, but he also succeeded in creating poems that would be relevant in the field of ornithology. His interdisciplinary poetry served as the most effective way to reach both audiences while still communicating his deep interest in birds.

Clare has long been identified as a local poet,¹³ but it is important to consider why Clare was so interested in writing about the birds and nature of Helpstone. After all, the

¹³ For example, see Joseph Albernaz’s “John Clare’s World.”

landscape of Helpstone was not extraordinarily different from any other nearby localities, nor was it so similar that it could stand to represent nature more generally (Barrell 120). Barrell addresses two factors that help clarify Clare's preoccupation: first, the threat of enclosure made Clare more aware of the identity of a particular landscape and, thus, opposed to the idea of its defilement; and second, the landscape of Clare's village, Helpstone, was the only one he knew intimately (120). This chapter will explore the idea of Clare as a local poet, not generally as the classification applies to his representation of landscape, but specifically considering his connection to the birds of Helpstone. Fiona Stafford's *Local Attachments* is useful in characterizing local poetry of the Romantic period and will thus be used as part of the framework defining Clare's sense of locality. Stafford writes that the eighteenth century featured much debate on the concept of truth. The Romantic period departed from the notion that truth was universal and instead began to endorse a sense of individual truth. This encouraged more people to take up writing, including members of the working class, as now anyone could gain authority through their writing. Moreover, outdoor labourers had a special understanding of the landscape in which they worked, allowing them to notice and record details that others might miss at a glance (Stafford 25). As Stafford notes, local poetry was not only for the residents of that location to enjoy; readers everywhere could relate to it despite living in a different environment. William Wordsworth also explored "the personal, emotional charge of particular places, attempting to understand the deep, hidden narratives associated with habitual experience of an area" (Stafford 21). Clare, too, wrote unceasingly about his environment; he was so well-acquainted with the landscape of Helpstone that the emotional tenor of his Helpstone poetry differs greatly from that of his later poetry. His familiarity with his home

environment gave him access to his own truth, which will be explored in this chapter. However, I am also interested in exploring what happens when that familiarity with place (and thus, that truth) is removed, which will be discussed in Chapter 3, below.

It is usually understood that local poets are experts on recording the appearance of their environments, but their relationship with the soundscape is less often discussed. Stafford discusses Wordsworth's belief that poets are "half-creator and perceiver" (17), emphasizing the strong connection between what local poets take in with their senses and what they write about. In addition, she agrees that their poetry is part of the world "of eye and ear" (17), perhaps suggesting that poems of the Romantic era were not only read but recited. I believe that Clare's poems made up part of the soundscape of his environment, but also that Clare's sense of rootedness in Helpstone shaped his relationship with its sounds, as well as the sounds of his future dwelling places. Although Clare could have become almost as familiar with his subsequent homes, he would never be able to associate them with the memories he gained during his formative years in Helpstone. Uprooted from the environment that he made a conscious effort to know and write about, his successive experiences of place could never measure up. Stafford presents the interesting argument that for some Romantic poets, "Seeing was determined not by the physical facts of the external world, but by the imaginative action of the individual mind" (26). Even if Northborough and the landscape around the asylums had the same features as Helpstone, Clare would not have been able to write about them in the same way. As I contend in Chapter 3, Clare's skill as a listener also varied throughout his lifetime, and I believe it is because his imaginative power changed when he entered unfamiliar territory. He could no longer register sight or sound as accurately because of his mental state and, perhaps,

because he lacked an essential connection to these landscapes. Wordsworth recognized how certain places can continue to evoke emotions long after events have taken place there (Stafford 47), and the particular relationship between place and memory is clear in some of the later poetry in which Clare recollects Helpstone. Ultimately, Clare recorded the sights and sounds of the landscape not only as they truly were, but also as he knew and remembered them. To remove Clare from the environment in which he felt most secure is to alter inextricably his ability to perceive and to write. Moreover, to expose him to a new territory with a whole new community of birds is to displace him, decreasing his ability to relate to birds. The birds Clare knew were an extension of Helpstone. They shared an outdoor world with the poet and faced adversity because of the protracted enclosure of their environs. The birds of Helpstone established themselves as Clare's friends in the village where he felt most himself, and hence, his writing on birds inevitably changed as his location changed.

Clare's early poetry (up until his relocation to Northborough in 1832) observes natural habitat precisely, but a sustained examination of the bird poetry of Clare's Helpstone period has yet to be attempted. I argue that in his early bird poetry, Clare demonstrates his profound knowledge of the natural scene of Helpstone and, more significantly for this project, a knowledge dependent upon security and his sense of belonging in his home parish. Clare's emotional state will be explored through an analysis of several poems illustrating his extraordinary relationship with familiar birds written in (or at least about) Helpstone in this period. As briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, Clare's passionate attachment to the landscape of Helpstone distinguishes his early poetry from the bleaker Northborough poetry. He was not simply a nature-lover who observed from afar,

but rather, he was immersed in nature from the time of his youth. The time Clare spent outdoors was a matter of both choice and necessity, as he enjoyed observing the natural world but also needed to work outdoors to support his family (see Chapter 1). Robinson and Summerfield write that Clare's poetry is so accessible because he "almost always writes about the things he knows well and which are a part of his life" (14). Since he lived in Helpstone for his first thirty-nine years, they argue that Clare's personal development was restricted to Helpstone and its immediate surrounding areas (14). In fact, he viewed Helpstone as even more paradisaical than Eden (Robinson and Summerfield 18). Recent criticism has celebrated the clarity of Clare's memory. Robinson and Summerfield state that "[b]ecause his vision is always so sharp, whether he writes about a person or a bird's nest, and his memory so reliable, there is a strength in his poetry which seldom allows him to become merely sentimental" (15). By focusing on his Helpstone poems, this chapter will demonstrate the significance of not only the birds Clare observed in his personal Eden, but the way in which he chose to write about them.

In his early poem "Helpstone," which he would revisit and add to later in life, Clare details the difficulty of being a local poet in an obscure location.¹⁴ According to Clare, Helpstone resists representation, and the village inhabitants must spend their time labouring instead of appreciating the landscape:

Hail humble Helpstone where thy valies spread
And thy mean village lifts its lowly head
Unknown to grandeur and unknown to fame
No minstrel boasting to advance thy name
Unletterd spot unheard in poets song
Where bustling labour drives the hours along
Where dawning genius never met the day
Where useless ign'rance slumbers life away

¹⁴ According to Barrell, Clare claimed that he wrote "Helpstone" in 1809, but he seems to have added sections until at least 1815 (*The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, p. 110).

Unknown nor heeded where low genius tries
Above the vulgar and the vain to rise
Whose low opinions rising thoughts subdue
Whose railing envy damps each humble view (1-12).

Here, Clare accepts the realistic facts about his village as he examines his own place within it as a writer. Despite its initial lack of literary promise, Clare clearly finds beauty in the landscape and decides it is important to record. Although his early poems are mostly polite and unfrontational, Clare could be suggesting that his own genius will not be recognized due to his 'lowly' position in the village. Interestingly, Clare thinks of Helpstone as an "[u]nletterd spot unheard in poets song," yet his very words actualize the opposite: he is recording the details of Helpstone in his poem. Although his portrayal of Helpstone seems rather bleak, the following stanza offers a glimpse of hope.

So little birds in winters frost and snow
Doom'd (like to me) wants 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
Tho sought in vain—yet bent on higher view
Still chirp and hope and wipe each glossy bill
Nor undiscourag'd nor disheartn'd still
Hop on the snow cloth'd bough and chirp again
Heedless of naked shade and f[r]ozen plain
With fruitles[s] hopes each little bosom warms
Springs budding promise—summers plentious charms
A universal hope the whole pervades
And chirping plaudits fill the chilling shades[...] (23-36).

It is clear that Clare identifies with birds, as his characterization of the birds as doomed is followed by "like to me." Birds and labourers share the outdoor world of Helpstone, aligning them further as creatures that live within nature. In fact, Clare positions birds as being part of the landscape, stating that their footprints leave marks in the snow. Moreover, Clare portrays birds as innocent of any wrong-doing, suggesting their mutual status as

victims of enclosure along with the labourers (see Chapter 4). At this point in his life, Clare seems to have a clear, straight-forward relationship with birds; their behaviour is instinctual and untroubled, and he interprets it as such. The optimism of the birds mirrors Clare's vision for his own life as a poet of place. He writes that although the birds yearn for a better life in the hardship of winter, they carry on and continue hoping. Clare finds evidence of their hope in their song, describing their chirps as persistent. Similarly, Clare seems to be advocating for lowly poets like himself to continue composing their own hopeful songs. Despite his reference to the birds' hopes as fruitless, Clare speaks of a universal hope that is represented in the birds' sounds. By writing that "chirping plaudits fill the chilling shades," Clare suggests that bird song has the ability to brighten an entire landscape and positions song as a harbinger of the changing seasons. He establishes birds as companions to men who share similar struggles but provide hope in the persistence of their song. However, as the poem's title reminds readers, they are not just any birds: they are the birds of Helpstone.

Although "Helpstone" is considered an early poem of Clare's, intermingled with past happiness is a sense of present loss. Clare recognizes that the scenes he once cherished now only exist in his memory, offering a stark contrast between the environment in which he grew up and the enclosed landscape. Again, Clare reveals that birds were largely responsible for his fond memories of his home, as they acted as antidotes to his physical labour:

When nature made the fields so dear to me
Thin scattering many a bush and many a tree
Where the wood minstrels sweetly join'd among
And cheer'd my needy toilings with a song (141-144).

Clare writes that while he worked outdoors, the natural world shaped his affection for the fields. The presence of trees, bushes, and birds transformed his working environment into a place where he felt secure and happy. Clare also refers to the birds as “minstrels,” which often means “poet” in addition to “singer” (*OED*). This use emerged in the 1700s and continued into the 1800s, remaining popular in the Romantic period. Clare surely intended this connotation, especially when one considers his other mentions of birds as poets. For Clare, birds and poets are linked, but this is a concept present almost exclusively in Helpstone. Clare characterizes the birds of his home village more affectionately than other birds he encounters, and his decision to call them minstrels emphasizes the creative power embedded in Helpstone’s natural scene. In the case of the poem “Helpstone,” birds are important creatures that Clare both appreciated and relied upon to rid his loneliness.

In “[Summer Evening],” Clare incorporates both onomatopoeic depictions of bird song and explanations for birds’ behaviour, demonstrating a particular understanding and affection for the birds of Helpstone. Clare begins discussing birds in line five of the poem, and his descriptions continue until line twenty. His focus upon birds here suggests that Clare’s idea of a summer evening necessarily includes birds and their sounds. Clare’s interest in the birds is not fleeting or superficial; one gets the sense that this level of observation is commonplace for him, and he delves into precise observation on the birds’ habits. He writes that “[c]rows crowd quaking over head / Hastening to the woods to bed” (5-6). In line five, Clare creates a rhythmic, melodic effect by incorporating alliteration, which mimics the quality of bird song. Although there are no explicitly noisy words, the construction of the sentence ensures a level of musicality, which Clare seems to associate with a summer evening in Helpstone. Next he writes, “Cooing sits the lonely dove / Calling

home her absent love” (7-8). Even if Clare is slightly inaccurate when stating the sex of the cooing bird, he still recognizes a complex and accurate reason for the bird’s song: attracting a mate. In this way, Clare does not impose an emotion onto the bird, but rather interprets the sound in a biological sense. Unlike his contemporaries, as discussed in Chapter 1, Clare does not include birds merely as symbols. He uses birds to build the soundscape and environment of his village, recounting his own experience of a summer evening in Helpstone. Clare uses onomatopoeic words to mimic the sound of the partridge, showing his capacity for transcription in bird song:

Kirchip Kirchip mong the wheat
Partridge distant partridge greet
Beckening call to those that roam
Guiding the squandering covey home (9-12).

According to *British Birds* (1923 edition), the behaviour Clare describes has a logical cause:

At the approach of sunset, and until dark, the call of the leader [partridge] may be heard from the chosen roosting-ground. It is a familiar sound to everyone in the rural districts—a harsh and powerful cry.... When the birds are assembled, they settle down for the night a little distance apart from each other, disposed in a circle, all with faces turned outwards. Disposed in this form, it must be difficult for any prowling animal to come upon them without being detected by some one bird in the covey (364-365).

Hence, Clare’s lines are not merely sentimental; it is likely that the partridges were, in fact, greeting their distant covey-mates, signaling that it was time to sleep. Through onomatopoeic descriptions, such as those found in lines 7 and 9, Clare positions himself as a listener in the soundscape of his village. As Scott Hess points out, Clare includes several points of view in “[Summer Evening]”; Hess argues that “[t]he poem’s representation of environment... is not dominated or appropriated by [the] first-person point of view” (34-35). Although Hess discusses the overall sensual experience of the poem, he fails to

acknowledge the rich soundscape that Clare develops throughout the poem. The birds do not alone comprise the soundscape, but in lingering on descriptions of birds and their sounds for many lines, Clare establishes himself as a listener. His diction suggests that the birds he describes possess agency, as he incorporates many active verbs: for example, “quaking” (5), “Hastening” (6), “Cooing” (7), “Calling” (8), “Beckening” (11), “Guiding” (12), and “twittering” (14). This active depiction, coupled with Clare’s decision to write in the third-person, demonstrates the birds’ importance to him. Again, Clare represents his native village as a dynamic environment with a rich soundscape, of which he is but a single component. Even Clare’s sound-rich poem is itself added to the soundscape, making him both a listener and a songster.

Aside from Clare’s mutual position as a songster, he also aligns himself with birds through his portrayal of their evening routines. For example, in the beginning section of the poem, the birds are preparing for sleep. Shortly after the wild birds go to bed, Clare writes, “[g]abbling goes the fighting geese / Waddling homward to their bed / In their warm straw litterd shed” (78-80). By including a domestic bird species in between the wild birds and the humans, Clare anticipates the nightly preparations of the villagers near the end of the poem. The geese waddle home in a herd, but their herd-like behaviour is also paralleled by the villagers. Clare describes the cooperation of the community in which each person plays a particular role; however, they ultimately form a cohesive whole, just as the wild and domestic groups of birds do. He writes,

Dobson on his greensward seat
Where neighbours often neighbour meet
Of c[r]aps to talk and work in hand
And battle News from foreign land
His last wift hes puffing out
And Judie putting to the rout

Who gossiping takes great delight
To shool her nitting out at night
Jingling newsing bout the town
Spite o dobs disliking frown
Chattering at her neighbours door
The summons warns her to give oer
[Prepar'd to start, she soodles home (137-149).

Line 138, which details an interaction among humans, even echoes his earlier line about the partridges (“Partridge distant partridge greet”). Even Clare’s descriptions of Judie “[c]hattering at her neighbours door” and “soodl[ing]” home recall the communication and movement of birds depicted earlier in the poem. Both birds and villagers have nightly routines that seem almost ritualistic, as they are prompted into action by nightfall. By portraying comparable evening behaviours of humans and birds, Clare comments on the similarities between avian and human communities in Helpstone. As outdoor beings who live in nature and know its details very well, Helpstone’s villagers are similar to its birds, establishing a bond between them. This bond is specific to the environs of Helpstone because of Clare’s rootedness in the environment, which will help illuminate his contrary representations of the birds in other localities (Chapters 3 and 4).

Later in “[Summer Evening],” Clare offers some personal commentary spurred by a description of birds, but his focus remains on the birds rather than himself, as he calls for their admiration and protection. Clare details an unfortunate yet common occurrence in which boys attempt to catch sparrows and kill them (91-95). Clare vehemently argues against their cruel acts, assuming guardianship over the birds at his cottage: “Sure my sparrows are my own / Let ye then my birds alone” (99-100). They are not “the” birds; they are “my” (Clare’s) birds. Despite the birds’ threat of being mistreated by young boys, Clare believes they have a “sweet” life and longs to live as they do. This wish springs from the

deepest admiration, as Clare admits, “Much I love your chirping note” (106), endowing the sound with a sense of musicality. He even offers to build the birds a nest (107), showing the effort he would expend to make the birds safe. He notes that the birds are “welcome here” (102) and tells the birds not to be afraid, which also speaks of his own level of comfort in Helpstone. He knows the birds well, and he feels comfortable enough with them that he could live among them. Clare begins a list of sparrows’ good deeds, demonstrating their usefulness in the larger ecosystem:

Did not the sparrows watching round
Pick up the insect from your grounds
Did not they tend your rising grain
You then might sow—to reap in vain (121-124).

Clare praises the sparrows for specific behaviours he has observed, showing his awareness of the birds of his native village. This level of closeness between Clare and the birds he depicts is reflected in his emotional state. In this poem, he seems happy, at ease, and an intimate friend of the birds.

Clare’s emphasis on the need to protect birds could reflect his knowledge of the impending threat of enclosure (see Chapters 1 and 4), possibly suggesting his identification with the birds of his home parish. The impact of enclosure will be treated more fully in Chapter 4, but it is important to highlight Clare’s protectiveness over the birds of his home. He attempts to construct his village as a place where everyone is welcome, including both the poet and birds. In “[Summer Evening],” he tells the sparrows, “Fearless come yere welcome here” (102). Not only does Clare offer to build the birds a nest, but he also promises “shelter peace and rest” (108). Clare seems to recognize that the type of protection and kindness he demands for the sparrows is closely related to the way humans should treat each other. Immediately following his defense of the birds, he writes, “As Id have other[s]

do to me / Let me the same to others do / And learn at least Humanity” (132-134). These lines strongly resemble Bible verses such as Matthew 7:12, which states, “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them” (*King James Bible*); however, Clare’s slight alteration is significant. Instead of using the word “men,” Clare uses the more general term “others.” By using a broad term, Clare presents the idea that other creatures, such as birds, should receive considerate treatment. He also seems to echo Matthew 10:29-31, as he advocates for the importance of even the lowest of creatures (in this case, sparrows), suggesting that all creatures are valued by God.¹⁵ Therefore, Clare does not use the birds as symbols to discuss the larger topic of human decency; they are sentient beings that deserve kindness as much as humans do. Their vulnerability mirrors the vulnerability of the labourers impacted by enclosure, solidifying the common bond of oppression between Clare and birds. This bond is likely why Clare felt it necessary to defend the birds from the harmful influence of humans; he, too, was a victim of their ruinous choices.

Clare further advocates for the appreciation of birds in “Songs Eternity,” as they are members of ‘low’ society, which he believes produces more meaningful music than that of ‘high’ life. Clare argues that the sounds he witnesses in his daily life are everlasting, while the sounds of praises, cities, and books being read will inevitably fade away. Clare’s idea of meaningless praises opposes the beautiful music of song later in the poem. He writes,

Praises sung or praises said
Can it be
Wait awhile and these are dead

¹⁵ Matthew 10:29-31: “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows” (*King James Bible*).

Sigh sigh
Be they high or lowly bred
They die (5-10).

His representation of praise takes the form of sighs, which suggests disappointment and leads to death of the sounds. Later in the poem, he repeats “Sigh sigh” when discussing the transient nature of cities and of books, which he believes will also inevitably die (23-30). Significantly, in his enclosure poem “The Mores” (discussed in Chapter 4), Clare anticipates what will happen to the sounds of nature once enclosure takes place, writing that birds, trees, and flowers “sighed when lawless laws enclosure came” (77-78). Hence, in Clare’s poetry, sighs come to connote the suppression or absence of the songs of nature. When he shifts into description of sounds that he believes will persist, he questions whether song’s eternity can “noise and bustle be” (3), arguing that “[m]elodys of earth and sky” exist “here” (in Helpstone) and continue to thrive throughout the years, remaining very much alive (13-20). Clare begins cataloguing nature’s music by describing birds and bees.

Dreamers list the honey be[e]
Mark the tree
Where the blue cap tootle tee
Sings a glee (31-34).

These lines feature at least two possible meanings: first, that dreamers (like himself) are the ones who take notice of the bees and birds, as opposed to the people who are less imaginative and less acquainted with nature; and second, that Clare is addressing his readers as dreamers, asking them to note the aspects of nature he describes. If the latter is the case, as suggested by Clare’s use of the imperative verb “Mark” to begin a line, then Clare asks his readers to follow his own personal map of Helpstone. The tree he refers to is not any tree, as demonstrated by the definite article “the.” Not only is it a specific tree, but it is distinguished from the others by the sounds that emanate from its branches. Birds

are especially important in establishing the eternal soundscape of Clare's environment, and they also form part of the landscape. Hence, Clare argues that Helpstone's environs illustrate song's lasting qualities, as its profound natural music is held in contrast to the superficial sounds of city life.

In addition to the soundscape holding personal associations for Clare, it becomes a site of divine significance. For instance, when discussing the blue cap, Clare states that its song is the same melody that Adam and Eve heard (35), and he discusses birds' role during the events surrounding Noah's ark (38-39). In this way, Clare seems to position birds as divine messengers and companions since the time of the Bible. He incorporates Christian theology, stating that the same songs have survived for six thousand years (since the beginning of creation). Although the suggestion that the exact same songs exist now may not be realistic, Clare's insistence on the survival of bird song is a testament to its importance to him. For instance, if these songs date back six thousand years, then birds become an immovable part of the landscape, as they create a universal listening experience for mankind. Clare depicts birds as being sent directly from God and pleasing listeners with their music. His biblical allusions reinforce the eternity of birds he endorses in his poem. Moreover, according to the biblical story of the flood, Noah sends out a dove to assess whether the floods have ceased, and the second time, it returns with an olive branch in its beak, signaling that the flooding is over (Genesis 8:8-11). This and other biblical stories feature doves as messengers, and Clare incorporates biblical allusion to suggest the true eternity of bird song.

Clare also emphasizes that, for him, eternal song exists specifically in Helpstone and is tied to his experiences there. He claims,

The eternity of song
Liveth here
Natures universal tongue
Singeth here
Songs Ive heard and felt and seen
Everywhere (51-56).

Although the “here” he references may stand in for any rural environment with similar sounds, for Clare, it is a specific place: the one where he has “heard and felt and seen” (55). He writes, “Sing creations music on / Natures glee / Is in every mood and tone” (47-49), suggesting that the soundscape of his village is always active and dynamic. Especially because Clare distinguishes between his environment and those of the cities, it is clear that his own environment is important to him and that his locale is tied to particular sounds. His village is the place where “song’s eternity” dwells. Clare claims that the birds’ melodies qualify as “creations music” (47), further highlighting his belief in the divine significance of bird song: the phrase suggests that God created the songs, but it also evokes the idea of the poet gaining creative energy from listening, as he is composing music as he writes. Finally, he writes that “[t]he giver / Said live and be and they have been / For ever” (58-60), referencing the songs of “Natures universal tongue” (53). The natural music about which Clare speaks is one of the few aspects that has remained relatively unchanged since the beginning of creation. Robinson, Powell, and Dawson provide a similar analysis of “Songs Eternity,” stating that “the music of the universe... is a sound to be distinguished from the noise and bustle of contemporary life and the trumpeting of fame. Clare’s sense of Nature’s music is a participation in divine harmony and essentially religious” (xix). Thus, Clare’s specific location is the home of creation’s music for both nature and the poet. It is important to note the human participation inherent in Clare’s descriptions of eternal music; the birds do not just sing, but humans are present to receive and understand the

songs. Again, the listener becomes an important element in the overall soundscape of a given location, as Clare certainly is in his native village. Lastly, Robinson, Powell, and Dawson also note that “song remains for Clare a positive value linking him with his community, his locality, his particular place in history and in creation” (xix). Thus, although bird song may be occurring in many rural villages, Clare’s experience of everlasting music is a deeply personal one that is inextricably tied to Helpstone.

“The Robins Nest” firmly establishes Clare’s security and ease in the outdoor world of Helpstone, as he characterizes the bird’s home as his own nest in an immutable environment. Clare begins by beckoning the spring, but it is clear that he is calling for spring in his native village:

Far from the ruder worlds inglorious din
Who see no glory but in sordid pelf
And nought of greatness but its little self
Scorning the splendid gift that nature gives
Where natures glory ever breaths and lives
Seated in crimping ferns uncurling now (6-11).

Clare represents his location as his own nesting place, establishing his identification with the birds of his village. In nature’s ancient refuge, Clare is enfolded and feels secure; he is in the presence of birds and their songs, but he is at the same time “[s]hut out from all but that superior power” (27), suggesting a lack of human interference. For Clare, this is where “natures glory ever breath[e]s and lives,” which gestures back to the eternity of song being related to his own environment. In addition, Clare’s reference to the “crimping ferns” is repeated in “The Nightingales Nest” (treated in Chapter 1), suggesting the same location in each poem. Since Clare is a poet of place, it becomes even clearer that this poem is about Helpstone when he writes that his heart “[c]lings with delight” to the gray and green oak trees (14-16). This poem may not have been written in Helpstone—Clare entreats, “there

let me be” (13) and calls the location “this old spot” (23), suggesting he is not currently there—but it is undoubtedly about Helpstone. Also important to assess is the other possible meaning of “old”: Clare perceives this environment as ancient, which suggests the power of nature to circumvent human influence. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, Clare was aware of looming enclosure, as well as humans’ general disrespect toward nature, but his characterization of Helpstone in “The Robins Nest” suggests the eternity of his native village. He describes the plants and birds of Helpstone as if they are landmarks that will remain despite any changes in the environment. For example, when speaking of plants, he writes, “In this old ancient solitude we might / Come ten years hence of trouble dreaming ill / And find them like old tenants peaceful still” (65-67). He believes that the happiness he feels in his village’s natural world can outlast human time, since it is seemingly immune to destruction. According to Clare,

[...] the weeds remain
And wear an ancient passion that arrays
Ones feelings with the shadows of old days
The rest of peace the sacredness of mind
In such deep solitudes we seek and find (55-59).

Again, this patch of nature is near the village while still offering the speaker respite from human society. In depicting the robin’s nest as a “deep solitude,” Clare aligns himself with the bird. The idea that his solitary outdoor world is everlasting and immutable gives Clare a refuge from the unstable, manmade world of change he experiences at several points in his life (see Chapters 3 and 4). Clare establishes for himself a stable world in his ‘nest’ in Helpstone, as it is immune to the destruction of enclosure.

Clare’s discussion of birds in “The Robins Nest” suggests that they are integral to his happiness, as they treat him as an active and welcome participant in their shared

environment. Clare writes, “The birds unbid come round about to give / Their music to my pleasures” (17-18). Although the word “unbid” may often carry negative connotations, Clare’s characterization of the music being pleasurable negates the possibility of the birds being intrusive, uninvited guests. Hence, Clare’s meaning more closely reflects the symbiotic relationship between himself and the birds: they provide pleasant music for him to enjoy without his having to ask for it. Although not about birds, the next section of the poem clearly illustrates Clare’s position in Helpstone:

[...]—wild flowers live
About as if for me—they smile and bloom
Like uninvited guests that love to come
Their wildwood fragrant offerings
Paying me kindness like a throned king (18-22).

While Clare is a member of the working-class, the simple pleasures of being part of a natural landscape can make him feel like a king. He feels that nature, in Helpstone, treats him with kindness, and this sort of reception is specific to his home environment. Later, he states that he longs to “be my self in memory once again” (41), indicating that location is a significant factor in establishing his identity. This line also indicates that at the time of composing this poem, Clare does not feel like himself anymore. The birds in this poem do not only bring joy to Clare; they also reconnect him to himself because they signify a place where he can interpret the birds’ actions and sounds with ease. He writes that “birds their passions pledge / And court and build and sing their under song” (45-46), displaying his keen interest and knowledge of birds’ habits. He also states that the birds are “spell bound to their homes within the wild” (49), establishing yet another parallel between himself and the birds. Both seem inherently to belong in the wildness of the outdoor world, and both feel safe when distanced from the busy interactions of the village. Clare’s statement that

“little meddling toil doth trouble here” (62) suggests peaceful solitude and echoes “Helpstone” in positioning birds as an antidote to labour. In addition, Clare and birds are residents of Helpstone specifically, with its “path of briar entangled holt / Or bushy closen where the wanton colt / Crops the young juicy leaves from off the hedge” (42-44). These concrete details represent a specific location in Clare’s life and memory, as he knows the exact area in which the colt plucks leaves off the hedge, employing botanical exactitude. The plants and animals, particularly birds, in this case, are distinct features of Clare’s home, and in this poem, he longs to be back in Helpstone immersed in his beloved wildlife.

Clare demonstrates his knowledge and affection for the robin and its environment by attempting to capture its emotions and highlight the abundance of sound in its habitat. Clare describes the sometimes joyful, sometimes fearful song of the robin, landing on a feeling of hopefulness similar to that of “Helpstone” above.

In heart content on these dead teazle burs
He sits and trembles oer his under notes
So rich—joy almost choaks his little throat
With extacy and from his own heart flows
That joy himself and partner only knows
He seems to have small fear but hops and comes
Close to ones feet as if he looked for crumbs (71-77).

In this passage, Clare provides a dynamic yet truthful portrayal of the robin’s song. Since he writes that the plant’s shoots are dead, it may not yet be spring, and thus, many birds may be silent. However, W.H. Hudson writes in *British Birds* that even in the autumn and winter months, the robin continues warbling “his gushing, careless strain, varying his notes at every repetition, fresh and glad and brilliant as in the springtime” (86), suggesting the truthfulness of Clare’s account. In addition, Clare’s verse approximates the lively quality of bird song: for instance, juxtaposing the words “oer” and “under” (72) creates a sense of

motion within the poem. When Clare describes the flow of the song, he writes that the bird's joy nearly "choaks his little throat" (73); this is an apt characterization of both the bird's song and the formal elements of the poem. The em dash following "rich" anticipates the choking of sound, while the word "joy" immediately following the break indicates the outpouring of song that reflects that emotion. Although Clare calls the bird's song joyful, he does not forget what the song's true purpose is. By stating that the bird and his partner share in the joy the song showcases, Clare reminds readers of the biological purpose for the robin's song: his joyful flourishes help him to attract a mate as spring approaches. Thus, while Clare claims the song is joyous, he does not manipulate the bird's experience to match his own feelings; instead, he connects the sound with a logical reason for the emotion he interprets. Moreover, he does not neglect other potential emotions the bird may be feeling; although the bird sings joyfully, he forages fearfully. Clare depicts complex components of the bird's life, including attracting a mate and searching for food, along with the changing emotions associated with each activity. His characterization is not reductive but allows for several possibilities. Finally, Clare continues to catalogue the soundscape of his environment, including noises other than song created by the bird. For example, he recounts the robin's "rustling on the leaves" (68) and the way he "claps his little wings" (81), emphasizing the dynamism of sound the bird helps create. He writes that the habitat "speaks in spots where all things silent be" (31), providing a contrast to the soundscapes discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. The techniques with which Clare describes the robin's soundscape demonstrate his sophisticated knowledge of the emotional complexity of the bird.

Furthermore, the trajectory of the robin's feelings offers insight into Clare's own emotional journey. However, it is important to remember that Clare does not make himself the focus of the poem; the focus remains on the bird, but his emotions happen to be revealed in tandem. He, too, is content in nature, and his poetry is similar to the bird's song. He often writes with extreme joy, especially about his own village, but there is an undertone of fear, just as the robin experiences. Nevertheless, the robin ultimately continues to be hopeful and to take risks, and Clare chooses to be hopeful at this point in his life, as well. While he writes about an environment in which he experiences ease and comfort, he is just like the hopeful birds. The space is also a nest for the poet, as he is again withdrawn from the bustle of society in a place where he can feel secure. Moreover, Clare's poem provides clues for deciphering his emotional state at the time of composition. Johanne Clare employs a similar approach when discussing "Emmonsails Heath in Winter" in her book *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance*. She contends that in "Emmonsails Heath in Winter," "we are given access to the wintry thoughts and melancholy feelings of the poet through the pattern and selection of the images" (186-187). However, she is careful to distinguish between this sort of analysis and one that supposes the poem's images to be symbols. She writes that the poem still details exactly what Clare observed in that location during the winter but that the collective images "may suggest the contrarities of reflection and creative release" (187). In the case of "The Robins Nest," Clare's description of the joyful robin in its preferred and natural habitat suggests the joyful state of the poet in that same habitat. Instead of choosing to focus on the bird's fear or possible destruction of habitat due to enclosure, Clare emphasizes the happiness and kinship present near the robin's home. As shall be discussed in Chapter 3, the bird imagery and description on which Clare

focuses later in his writing career are decidedly more confusing, angry, and silent than the poems of the Helpstone period. Hence, it is possible to decipher Clare's degree of comfort or alienation by examining the way he perceives and writes about birds.

Clare's narrative in "The Robins Nest" displays his adamant decision to focus on the bird and habitat rather than himself. For instance, after an extensive section in which Clare details the robin's song and search for food, he seems to return to personal narration: "And when in woodland solitudes I wend..." (82). However, it soon becomes clear that his commentary relates to his interaction with the robin and his feelings about the bird:

I always hail him as my hermit friend
And naturally enough whenever they come
Before me search my pockets for a crumb
At which he turns his eye and seems to stand
As if expecting something from my hand
And thus these feathered heirs of solitude
Remain the tenants of this quiet wood
And live in melody and make their home (83-90).

Clare calls the bird his friend and writes about him as if he and the poet are equal. He also reveals that he always tries to provide food for the robins, showing once more how deeply he cares for the birds and their well-being. Although the anecdote involving crumbs seems as if Clare might have imposed his own interpretation onto the birds and even personified them, this is yet another realistic incident. Hudson lists a distinguishing habit of robins: "coming about and entering our houses in quest of crumbs" (85). The robin in Clare's poem does not enter his house, but rather, Clare goes to his. Clare seems to acknowledge that, while the woods are ultimately the birds' home, they still act as a shared environment of refuge. Even if he is not one of the tenants he lists, he is certainly a welcome guest.

Few of Clare's poems demonstrate the soundscape of his native village more clearly than "The Landrail." It should be noted that the landrail is also called the cornrake, which

is the name Hudson uses to refer to the bird. He provides information that affirms Clare's accuracy once again: "But though not seen it is heard, its low creaking cry sounding incessantly from morning till night in spring from the meadows and fields" (378). Although Hudson writes that the sound is less prevalent after breeding commences, he also states that the nest is formed either at the end of May or in June, allowing the possibility of Clare's account to be true. Clare writes,

We hear it in the weeding time
When knee deep waves the corn
We hear it in the summers prime
Through meadows night and morn (5-8).

Interestingly, Clare only uses first-person narration to recount his observations and explain his enjoyment of the landrail's sounds. He finds the sound "sweet and pleasant" (1), and it is clear that he has spent time deliberately listening to it. In fact, he pauses for a minute to listen, and the landrail has now changed positions (11-12). Clare's ability to listen establishes the bird as part of the natural soundscape. He depicts this particular species's sound as a universal experience for the inhabitants of his village: it is "heard in every vale" (33) and is believed to be "a summer noise / Among the meadow hay" (60). While his onomatopoeic portrayal of the landrail's song is not particularly innovative, given that "craque" is part of another version of the bird's common name, it matches Hudson's closely. Clare calls it a "craiking sound" (29), while Hudson classifies the noise as a "low creaking cry" (378). Regardless of the ingenuity of his approach in recording sound, Clare has spent a lot of time listening to the landrail, solidifying its presence as part of the outdoor soundscape.

Although he calls the little-seen bird "[a] sort of living doubt" (14), Clare is rather specific about the landrail's whereabouts, showing his knowledge of the bird and their

shared environment. In this poem, Clare does not visually spot the bird, but he is able to keep track of its position. He notes that it begins calling in the grass (9), and then it moves to the grain (12). Hudson confirms the elusiveness of the bird: “it is rarely seen, for, of all skulking creatures, it is the shyest, swiftest of foot, and most elusive” (378). Hence, Clare’s characterization of the bird as elusive does not suggest laziness or lack of effort on his part, as the bird is known for remaining hidden. In fact, although Clare does not recount any personal sightings of the bird, he demonstrates that his interest in the bird is longstanding. He writes about the habits of the bird as one who has observed them for years: “It flies if we pursue / But follows if we notice not” (18-19). Clare seems to avoid looking for the bird because he respects its privacy and may not wish to cause it stress. While he does not explicitly state his disapproval of others’ interference in the bird’s life, he details a series of events in which others attempt to, or actually do, sight the landrail. Throughout his recounting, he seems to be advocating for the bird, not the humans who try to disturb it. Even so, he has more extensive knowledge of the bird than the rest of the inhabitants of the community. First, Clare explains that when boys hear the landrail’s call, they are unable to identify it even though they know several other birds’ notes (21-24). Not only does this exhibit Clare’s knowledge of the bird, as if its notes are a private secret between those two alone, but it also illustrates the value of listening. While the boys struggle to identify a bird that they cannot perceive with their eyes, Clare knows exactly which bird is making the sound. The notion that advocacy for the corncrake begins with knowledge of its behaviour is a feature of current ornithological research. Geographer and naturalist Jamie Lorimer provides a summary of declining corncrake populations as of 2008, stating that in the 1900s, many people were not motivated to save the corncrakes because they are essentially

invisible. According to Lorimer, “Speaking for the corncrake involved listening to its crake and creating visible ambassadors of its plight” (380). It is interesting that while the general population required “visible ambassadors” of the species to take notice of its decline, Clare was a skilled enough listener to care about protecting the species without seeing it. In Clare’s time, landrails may not have been in decline yet, but Lorimer writes that a significant reason for their diminishment was “the intensification of agriculture” (377-378). While enclosure loomed on the horizon, perhaps Clare anticipated the loss of his then ubiquitous ally and decided to include protectionary sentiments as well as appreciative ones.

Clare’s method of listening also supports his unique ability to value the privacy and protection of the landrail while retaining his desire for knowledge. Stephanie Kuduk Weiner presents a useful argument on the value of Clare’s listening skills. Weiner refers to Clare’s knowledge (based on hearing alone) as “incomplete certainty” (383), an apt description for someone with as much ornithological knowledge as Clare even without seeing the bird. Interestingly, she points out that obtaining knowledge about the species and hearing the bird’s call are not mutually exclusive. While the call provides partial knowledge, it leaves room for further exploration and learning. Weiner writes, “Listening without seeing keeps Clare listening” (383). Hence, in this case, Clare’s curiosity and thirst for knowledge are important factors in establishing an accurate soundscape of Helpstone. Had he adopted the mindset of the young boys who remained puzzled at the unknown song, the soundscape of his home parish would have been incomplete. In his Helpstone period, Clare blends skillful ornithological observation with the desire to extend and record his discoveries, resulting in optimistic and lively bird poetry. While critics such as Tim

Chilcott argue that the indeterminacy of “The Landrail” reveals Clare’s lack of knowledge of the bird, they fail to note that the lack of knowledge in the poem does not rest with Clare.¹⁶ In fact, in “The Landrail,” as opposed to his later Northborough poetry, it is Clare who has the upper hand. His references to the bird’s elusiveness do not hinder his knowledge, as the instances of ignorance do not belong to him but to other characters. Clare writes that the bird remains a mystery “to men and boys / *Who know not where they lay*” (57-58, emphasis mine), but he is not one of them. He has just shared, in the previous stanza, his personal knowledge of where the landrails lay, even describing their unique eggs. Rather than being puzzled by his inability to see (and, according to Chilcott, limited ability to hear), Clare seems to think of landrails with a sense of contented awe for the beautiful mysteries of nature. The elusiveness of the birds also serves to protect them from intrusion by these very men and boys, setting Clare apart as someone who respects their privacy.

In the concluding stanzas of the poem, Clare continues narrating others’ attempts to view the landrail, often characterizing their successes as accidental while his knowledge seems to be earned deliberately. He tells readers how a shepherd tried to see the landrail by using his dog to “fright it up” (37-40), but Clare shows his loyalty to the birds. Clare comments that once the dogs are “off and gone,” the bird sings even louder without revealing itself (41-44). He does not simply notice that the bird has resumed its singing, but he also notes the altered volume at which the bird sings. He then goes on to describe incidents in which weeders and mowers have happened upon landrails’ nests by chance (45-50), suggesting that he saw this happening. Similarly, it seems as though Clare has also

¹⁶ See “Indeterminacy in Clare’s ‘The Landrail,’” by Tim Chilcott.

observed the mowers who come across the landrails accidentally and “wonder what the bird can be / That lays without a nest” (51-52). Again, Clare possesses greater knowledge of the birds than other labourers; while they wonder at the bird, he does not seem puzzled by the bird’s habits. He states that the mowers do not understand the landrails and then continues to demonstrate that he does:

In simple holes that birds will rake
When dusting on the ground
They drop their eggs of curious make
Deep blotched and nearly round
A mystery still to men and boys
Who know not where they lay
And guess it but a summer noise
Among the meadow hay (53-60).

Although Clare has not explicated any moments in which he saw the landrail or its nest, he is able to characterize its nest and eggs. Once again, Hudson’s account verifies several of Clare’s details: “The nest... is placed among growing corn or meadow grass, and is formed of dry grass and leaves. Seven to ten eggs are laid, reddish white in ground-colour, spotted with bright brown and grey” (378). Clare’s familiarity with the bird is a testament to his familiarity with the environment both he and the bird inhabit. In addition, he knows the landrail’s secrets as if they two are confederates, while other residents are intruders, predators, or, at the least, less knowledgeable. As we will observe in Chapter 3, Clare’s superior knowledge of birds diminishes in Northborough, and he no longer seems to be a welcome observer. Instead, other people are the ones who gain access to and explore the landscape. In “The Landrail,” Clare still provides plenty of first-hand evidence of the bird, and he reveals that his relationship with the bird is closer than that of other residents.

In his Helpstone poems, Clare shows readers not just his knowledge of birds, but also his love for them. Although he remained interested in birds for his whole life (as

explained in Chapter 1), it is in Helpstone where he seems to understand birds most fully, to represent their songs with detailed and accurate description, and to feel welcomed by them. In his native village, Clare finds a nesting place similar to the birds' habitats where he is removed from human society. There are hints of joy in the bird poetry of other periods of Clare's life, but as he is a poet of place, his bird poetry is tied closely to his feelings of attachment toward his home. As Barrell discloses, Clare intended to be a local poet, and in his bird poetry and elsewhere, it is what he does best.

CHAPTER 3

Stranger Birds: Stasis in the Northborough Fens

In July of 1831, the gardener of Milton Hall informed Clare of a housing opportunity in Northborough and suggested that Clare ask the Reverend Mossop to intercede with the landlord, Lord Milton, to give the cottage to Clare. In October of that year, Clare learned that his request had been granted (Bate 360). In 1832, Clare, his wife, Patty, and their six children moved to Northborough. According to Jonathan Bate, Clare's accommodation in Northborough was far superior to his modest cottage home in Helpstone, as it had a large garden, an orchard, and a grazing pasture. However, despite these luxuries, there were several problems with the arrangement. First, some people in the community of Northborough felt that an outsider who was not attached to the Milton estate did not deserve such a commodious dwelling (Bate 362). In addition, Clare missed his parents who remained a few miles behind in Helpstone. Finally, and most significantly, this new landscape posed a serious threat to Clare's identity. According to Bate,

The change in physical environment was a serious concern for a man who had derived his profoundest sense of personal identity from his immediate surroundings. He was leaving the woods and heaths and favourite spots that had known him for so long. This was how he put it: not that he had known the environs of Helpston, but that the place *had known him*. 'The very molehills on the heath and the old trees in the hedges' seemed to bid him farewell. By contrast to Helpston, with its woods and lanes and secure nooks, Northborough was out on the fen. His first impression had been of a place of bleakness and exposure: 'there is neither wood nor heath, furzebush, molehill or oak tree about it, and a nightingale never reaches so far in her summer excursions' (363).

Even though Northborough was a mere three miles away from Helpstone, the changes in topography were clearly significant enough for Clare to mark many differences and feel a sense of loss and exposure. This chapter will explore Clare's representation of birds in

Northborough, which in turn illuminates the sense of alienation he experienced in his new home.

In his recent article “John Clare’s Sonnets and the Northborough Fens,” Simon J. White takes on Tim Chilcott and Paul Chirico to contend that Clare’s Northborough writing does not necessarily demonstrate his estrangement; instead, White believes that Clare’s Northborough writings display his adjustment to a new type of environment, for which a new writing style was more suitable. White writes that Clare’s assessment of the Northborough landscape as different from Helpstone was warranted, stating that “[t]he countryside around Clare’s birthplace consisted of hilly pastureland and woodland to the south west with flatter arable land to the north east. The area around Northborough... was made up of flat and featureless fenland” (56). While White recognizes Clare’s alienation, he argues that Clare’s emotional response was grounded in the true landscape of his new home. White concludes that Clare’s alienation “should not automatically be linked to the simple fact of his having moved, but rather to his complex engagement with a new and very different place” (56). Throughout his article, White discusses the relative emptiness of the Northborough fens, claiming that they were “sparsely populated [and] also rarely visited by human beings” (63). However, White’s main argument seems to centre around Clare’s shift into a new kind of poetry reflective of the large, empty fens with which he was surrounded, and he avoids discussion of Clare’s emotional response to the environment. While I agree with White’s evaluation of Clare’s Helpstone bird poetry as “organically linked to particular experiences, or to an emotional or moral response to the countryside, or both” (65), I am interested in expanding on this discussion to illuminate Clare’s emotional response to his new landscape as revealed in his bird poetry. In this

chapter, I argue that Clare's bleak representation of Northborough is rooted in both the physical details of his new home and the sense of alienation Clare experienced, leading to his inability to comprehend the songs and behaviours of unfamiliar birds. The quality of Clare's observations of birds reveal how well he knows a place, and what he can see and hear of the avian population acts as a measure of his rootedness in an environment.

Immediately after moving to Northborough in 1832, Clare composed "The Flitting," articulating explicitly the sense of loss he felt upon leaving Helpstone. This poem offers a mixture of Clare's longing for his old home and his sense of unfamiliarity with the aspects of his current landscape. I argue that the way in which Clare characterizes the birds of each location offers clues into his internal state. In describing the differences in birds between Helpstone and Northborough, Clare clearly displays his preference for the former, as well as his longing for his former environment. He writes of Helpstone, "the very crow / Croaked music in my native fields" (15-16). One can infer that the birds also sang in Clare's native tongue, a musical language that (in Helpstone) he understood effortlessly. In addition, the most unpoetic of creatures, "the very crow," serves as inspiration for poetry. Although it is not traditionally poetic, Clare values the crow and its music, partly because it was familiar and comprehensible to him. The crow represents the low and the rustic, aligning the bird with Clare as well, and displaying the ease with which he could understand and relate to its songs. In Northborough, he writes, "I hear bird music here and there... I hear but all is strange and new" (19, 21). Clare's "native fields" have devolved into uncertain territory, and the bird music Clare valued in Helpstone has become uncategorizable sound. In referring to the sounds as "strange and new," Clare reveals his inability to register the sounds of Northborough because of his lack of experience with

these birds. Although his lines may appear merely sentimental, Clare's observations align with current ornithological findings. For example, birdwatcher Tim Dee, summarizing recent ornithological discoveries as of 2017, notes developments in the area of birds' dialects. According to Dee, chaffinches and yellowhammers retain their accent, just as people do, when they are displaced from their original counties (11). In Clare's case, with a three-mile relocation, it is possible that the birds in Northborough had slightly different dialects and Clare's sharp ear detected the difference. In fact, Clare's dismay upon hearing the birds in Northborough could be linked to his love of Helpstone itself: Dee writes that, because of the way birds preserve their accents, they allow listeners to "hear the preserved sounds of the British countryside from a hundred years ago" (11). Hence, the birds of Helpstone become more closely tied to the location itself, making Clare less enthusiastic about the birds in his new home.

Clare goes on to discuss the differences between the birds of Helpstone and the birds of Northborough, clearly emphasizing the way they make him feel. He begins by writing that "[t]he sailing puddocks shrill 'peelew' / Oer royce wood seemed a sweeter tune" (23-24), referring to an area near Helpstone in which Clare's nightingales lived. According to Eric Robinson and David Powell's endnotes in *John Clare: Major Works*, "Royce Wood was one of Clare's favourite haunts" (492). In addition, Clare's decision to write the name as he did reflects his strong attachment to his home. The endnote also reveals that the area was usually written on maps as "Rice Wood," but Clare's spelling is tied to specific, local details in that it reflects "the name of the farmer after whom the wood was named" (492). Hence, Clare shows his attachment to his old habitat, as he knew not only the birds but also the landscape, the landlords, and the tenants so well. In addition, the

notion that Clare prefers the puddock's call in Royce Wood reflects obvious bias, but as mentioned above, it is possible that the bird sounded slightly different three miles away, suggesting his skill as a listener and sincere preference for the original sound. Clare provides more explicit evidence of his preference for his old home: "The nightingale is singing now / But like to me she seems at loss / For Royce Wood and its shielding bough" (26-28). Again, Clare's rhetoric makes him seem solely sentimental, but there may be logical reasons why he included such statements. For example, the "shielding bough" to which he refers could reflect a genuine sense of the safety inherent in Helpstone that was perhaps lacking in Northborough. The phrase "like to me" is also present in "Helpstone," displaying Clare's identification with the birds of his home; here, he acknowledges that both he and the birds shared the same outdoor world and received the same protection from Royce Wood's "shielding bough." Thus, Clare's elegiac description reflects a world that still possesses many of the same natural elements as Helpstone (for instance, trees, flowers, et cetera) but provides far less comfort and safety. This is especially true given Bate's account that Clare felt exposed in Northborough (363). Moving to a more open environment on the fen, without the trees, bushes, or hills that dominated Helpstone (White 62), must have been shocking for Clare, and his subsequent loss of security is clear in his poetry. He writes that his current environs contain "[g]reen sunny green" trees (31), yet his heart still returns to Helpstone (32). Within Clare's internal reverie in "The Flitting," he seems to travel through his old haunts, noting the specific characteristics of the landscape. Each image evoked brings him pleasure, a sense of safety, or a combination of the two:

My heart goes far away to dream
Of happiness and thoughts arise
With home bred pictures many a one
Green lanes that shut out burning skies

And old crooked stiles to rest upon
Above them hangs the maple tree
Below grass swells a velvet hill
And little footpads sweet to see
Goes seeking sweeter places still (32-40).

Clare is so attached to his former village that it is not his mind that wanders off to dream, but his heart. His suggestion that the green lanes could block out burning skies also hints at the profound protection one can experience in nature. Of course, Clare does not gain security from just any outdoor world, as can be observed in “The Flitting,” but from his own outdoor world in Helpstone: a world with sheltering woods, lanes, and nooks (Bate 363). Clare’s experience with Helpstone was also one of largely unrestricted physical access, as suggested in the passage above. For example, Clare discusses lanes, stiles, and footpaths, emphasizing the freedom of physical movement he enjoyed in Helpstone. It is significant that his pleasant experiences in Helpstone include a sense of transit, possibly revealing the unpleasant restrictions of Northborough. For instance, Clare writes that in Helpstone, there was “a brook to cross” (41), whereas in Northborough he writes, “No brook is here I feel the loss” (43). This quote supports White’s argument that the Northborough landscape was in fact different from Helpstone’s, but it also exposes Clare’s emotional response to his new boundaries. Furthermore, Clare’s capacity to traverse the environment is a measure of the knowledge he can gain from it. His ability to move across his native fields surely enhanced his experience and knowledge of the landscape, suggesting an incomplete interaction with the natural world of Northborough.

Just as Clare’s old home protected him, brought him joy, and allowed him unrestricted access to the land, it also quelled his loneliness. Moreover, birds seemed to be Clare’s companions in Helpstone, whereas they bring him little joy when he first moves to

Northborough. Here, Clare is “[a]lone and in a stranger scene” (49) even when birds are present. In contrast, Clare refers to robins as his “hermit friend” in the poem “The Robins Nest,” discussed in Chapter 2. Birds, in Helpstone, were Clare’s friends in “woodland solitudes” (82-83). However, in Northborough, they seem to be strangers who do not know or welcome Clare as the robin did. Clare’s interpretation of bird song has changed drastically since his relocation. According to Clare in “The Flitting,” “homebred pleasure fills the song / That has no present joys to heir” (63-64). In other words, the only way that song can bring him joy is by being supplemented with the sounds of his home. The sounds of Northborough are insufficient in producing happiness for Clare. He admits that a large factor as to why he dislikes the scenery and, by extension, the sounds of Northborough is that he is unfamiliar with them:

Strange scenes mere shadows are to me
Vague unpersonifying things
I love with my old hants to be
By quiet woods and gravel springs
Where little pebbles wear as smooth
As hermits beads by gentle floods
Whose noises doth my spirits sooth
And warms them into singing moods (89-96).

Not just sound, but familiar sound, is what seems to embody and illuminate the outdoor world for Clare. Even his writing changes in discussing his two homes. Clare’s sense of disjunction from nature and separation from familiar landscapes are reflected in the metre of his lines. In the passage above, his Northborough description (89-90) contains irregular stresses and choppy wording, whereas his portrayal of Helpstone features more rhythmical lines. For example, lines 91 to 96 are nearly perfectly iambic (with line 91 being the exception), containing a rhythmic ebb and flow that mimics the water and the sound that Clare depicts. In this passage, Clare demonstrates the ease with which he can articulate his

feelings about Helpstone in comparison to Northborough. In contrast, line 90 is especially irregular, as one word (“unpersonifying”) encompasses six out of the line’s eight syllables, five of them being unstressed. The term itself implies that Clare is unable to relate to the “shadows” of Northborough, nor is he able to write about them in a rhythmical manner. Moreover, the word implies the erasure of self that Clare experiences, as the natural elements of Northborough “unpersonify” him, compromising his identity and causing him to examine his position as an outsider in this world. To Clare, it seems, not knowing and not hearing put the self at risk. His difficulty in composition also calls into question his identity as a poet, which comprised a large part of his sense of self. In the above passage, Clare reveals his difficulty in writing about and feeling comfortable in his new home, as he feels alienated by his surroundings. His alienation is so severe that he cannot even identify the musicality of his landscape, even though he writes that birds are singing (19, 26).

Clare writes that he was compelled to sing in Helpstone (96), drawing a comparison between poets and birds and indicating that his expression has been stifled in Northborough. Clare specifically refers to his “spirits” singing, suggesting a link to his poetry and his own creative process. In Helpstone, the soothing soundscape served as a condition to poetic composition; Clare suggests that without these sounds to evoke feelings of joy, he cannot produce poetry. Many of his other poems connect birds to poets, including “To the Nightingale,” which was discussed in Chapter 1. Since Clare can better comprehend the sounds of Helpstone birds in contrast to those in Northborough, perhaps he does not find as much lyricism in their sounds and is therefore not inspired to create his own songs. Clare presented himself not only as a songster in Helpstone, but also as a

recipient of sounds from many elements of the landscape. For instance, in Helpstone, Clare heard maidens' songs and associated those songs with "sweet memories" (109-111). In his Helpstone poem "[Summer Evening]" (discussed above), Clare's ability to hear avian exchanges prepares him to record the sounds of village life. He did more than simply hear the songs in his native village; he interpreted them and interacted with them. Clare writes in "The Flitting" that "here [in Northborough] a memory knows them not" (112), referring to the pleasant ballads of Helpstone. Because Clare has no memories with which to associate the sounds of Northborough, they become less meaningful and joyous for him to experience. In addition, the landscape of Helpstone speaks to Clare, whether the creatures are inanimate or incapable of speech.

No—pasture molehills used to lie
And talk to me of sunny days
And then the glad sheep listing bye
And still in ruminating praise
Of summer and the pleasant place
And every weed and blossom too
Was looking upward in my face
With friendships welcome 'how do ye do' (121-128).

In this stanza, Clare adamantly refutes the possibility of his loneliness in Helpstone (as stated in the previous stanza) with a sharp interjection: "No" followed by an em dash. He firmly believes that, because of his profound relationship with Helpstone's natural scenes, he was incapable of loneliness. He seems to have been in conversation with the entire landscape: the molehills spoke to him about the beauty of nature (121-122); the sheep communicated feelings of praise toward the landscape (123-125); and the plants were Clare's friends, welcoming him and asking how he was. Clare shows that he not only listened, but also interpreted, understood, and felt welcomed by the landscape of Helpstone. In Northborough, each sound is isolated and fails to stir any emotions for Clare besides

loneliness and longing for his former home. Thus, Clare's comprehension of birds and their habitats is a measure of his rootedness and ability to emote and produce poetry.

Memories of Helpstone seem to be Clare's only inspiration for most images present in "The Flitting," and many of these images include birds; thus, Clare reinforces the notion that birds were landmarks in his beloved village and that he has no such map of Northborough. As previously mentioned, Clare states that "the very crow / Croaked music" in the fields of Helpstone (15-16), identifying a location with which he was very familiar. On the other hand, in Northborough, he hears the birds' music in the vaguely-identified "here and there" (19-20). Unlike his mystical experience of the landrail's call (discussed in Chapter 2), the sounds of Northborough's wildlife are "strange" and far less pleasant to Clare. He laments the fact that he lacks memories of having discovered birds in his new home: "Theres none where boyhood made a swee / Or clambered up to rob a crow" (99-100). Perhaps Clare's lack of discovery is also tied to reduced mobility within the landscape. Clare's early Northborough poems can be interpreted as nostalgic toward his childhood days and subsequent loss of the innocence of youth, but they are also indicative of a profound loneliness and passivity in his new environment. As shall be explored in later poems, Clare's Northborough bird poems often feature him as a removed observer rather than an active explorer. He loses his advantage of possessing more knowledge than other inhabitants of his village and becomes the alienated outsider. In lines 99 and 100 of "The Flitting," Clare reveals that part of his joy in Helpstone revolved around his explorations and discoveries of birds. Emotions were embedded in the very fabric of Helpstone:

No hollow tree or woodland bower
Well known when joy was beating high
Where beauty ran to shun a shower
And love took pains to keep her dry (101-104).

These lines demonstrate Clare's attachment to Helpstone and the way in which his experiences and emotions help trace the landscape. Moreover, in imagining a muse in perfect harmony with nature, Clare details her encounter with a "morehens sedgy nest" (171), writing that

She counts the eggs she cannot reach
Admires the spot and loves it well
And yearns so natures lessons teach
Amid such neighbourhoods to dwell (173-176).

Clare finds inspiration in the ordinary, sometimes unromantic elements of nature. For example, he mentions a "sedgy" nest, suggesting that it grows within a wild, watery environment (*OED*) and speaking of it as a place to admire. Since he knew the precise locations of so many birds' nests in Helpstone, he likely feels isolated because of his lack of knowledge in his strange, new environment. In addition, his desire to wander the landscape is embodied in the roaming figure of the muse who explores the nest while Clare observes from afar. He seems to be appealing to a deity as if he fears her desertion. She embodies the low and rustic, providing an indication of the subjects dearest to Clare's heart that are the agents of his inspiration. If Clare was unable to roam freely due to his work obligations or a lack of physical access in the landscape, then it is fitting that he can only pursue this bird's nest in his imagination.

Clare demonstrates the fearfulness of birds in Northborough in his poem "[Autumn Birds]," simultaneously evoking his own discomfort in the environment.

The wild duck startles like a sudden thought
And heron slow as if it might be caught
The flopping crows on weary wing go bye
And grey beard jackdaws noising as they flye
The crowds of starnels wiz and hurry bye
And darken like a cloud the evening sky

The larks like thunder rise and suthy round
Then drop and nestle in the stubble ground
The wild swan hurrys high and noises loud
With white necks peering to the evening cloud
The weary rooks to distant woods are gone
With length of tail the magpie winnows on
To neighbouring tree and leaves the distant crow
While small birds nestle in the hedge below

He begins the poem by discussing a duck, writing that it “startles like a sudden thought” (1). Assuming Clare means that the duck is startled, then the bird is portrayed in a hostile environment, perhaps even one that is unsafe. While becoming startled is not unrealistic or uncommon for a duck, Clare’s decision to record this behaviour suggests the possibility that he, too, feels startled by an environment in which he does not feel safe. In addition, the verb construction of the line allows for the possibility of another meaning: that the duck has startled Clare. This interpretation suggests that Clare and the bird suffer from a sense of estrangement and do not know how to behave appropriately around each other. Still another possibility is that Clare has frightened the duck into motion, further emphasizing his strained relationship with the birds of Northborough. It is significant that Clare does not articulate the reason for the duck’s fear, possibly revealing that he is unfamiliar with the landscape and its stressors; he may be uncomfortable in Northborough simply because the environment is unknown to him. Clare’s decision not to explain the reason for the duck’s fear also illustrates the difference in his bird writing since he relocated: in Helpstone poems such as “The Nightingales Nest” (discussed in Chapter 1), Clare was not only aware of concrete reasons for the bird’s fear, but he also took every possible measure to avoid frightening it. Here, he simply makes an observation and offers no clarification or solution for the bird’s fears. In the second line of “[Autumn Birds],” Clare says that the “heron slow[s] as if it might be caught.” Both birds mentioned in the first two lines of this poem

seem to be on high alert for some intangible danger. Since Clare seemed to identify with the birds in Helpstone and their safety, perhaps he is revealing his own paranoia in Northborough to unknown threats. Again, there is no reference to who or what pursues the heron or how its fears can be quelled. In focusing on vague fears, Clare offers a murky portrayal of a hostile environment in which he, too, now resides. Although Clare and the birds share an intimidating environment, Clare is isolated to a greater extent. While the different bird species in the poem are linked by fear and flight, Clare seems fixed in place in the midst of the birds' hurry. His stasis is especially unnatural compared to the birds' rapid movement, establishing a separation between species and decreasing his ability to relate to birds. In "[Summer Evening]," Clare and the birds reflect each other's sounds and activities when preparing to sleep, but in this poem, their only potential commonality is fear. Clare is unable to find a nesting place and establish a sense of rootedness that recalls the harmony of his community in Helpstone, which included both humans and birds.

Rather than providing cheerful depictions of birds that brighten the landscape, "[Autumn Birds]" portrays birds as expressions of terrifying or dangerous elements of nature. For example, Clare writes that "crowds of starnels wiz and hurry bye / And darken like a cloud the evening sky" (5-6). The murmuration described, which causes the sky to darken unnaturally, evokes a sense of dread. According to Thomas Littleton Powys, who wrote *Notes on the Birds of Northamptonshire*, "starnel" is a country nickname for the starling (129), demonstrating Clare's use of dialect in avian nomenclature. The starling is normally a dark-coloured bird, but Powys writes that the birds can also be white, partially white, or even fully white (131). Clare's reference to the birds darkening the sky could simply be a fact, given that they are dark in colour, but it could also hint at more portentous

implications. For instance, the poem takes place in the autumn, when starlings are known to begin their migration. Powys writes,

The great majority of our home-bred Starlings leave us early in autumn... [t]his species, as might be expected from the nature of its food, is one of the first to suffer from a sudden severe frost; and we have often picked up Starlings dead or dying about our spring heads after a few days of such weather (130).

The image of Clare's starnels hastening along and darkening the autumn sky becomes riskier when one considers their necessary departure before the chill of autumn arrives. Although many birds migrate to avoid the harsh temperatures of winter, Clare writes about a hurried exit that, if too slow, could have fatal consequences. This pressurized and relatively silent situation is starkly different from Clare's portrayal of the cheerful, singing robin he observed in the autumn in Helpstone (see Chapter 2). Moreover, in "[Autumn Birds]," Clare uses a simile to compare the ascent of larks to thunder. Instead of being used to embellish a beautiful landscape, the birds of Northborough create a storm-like environment. Clare's decision to privilege the recording of certain bird behaviours over others (all of them realistic) indicates his own mental state. With potential looming threats in Northborough, Clare writes about frightened birds being startled and making little sound, revealing fear and alienation for poet and bird alike.

Clare's poem features several species of birds, including their noises, but contains far less sound than many of his Helpstone poems. He uses scant onomatopoeia, and the birds' sounds seem to be loud noises rather than beautiful melodies. For example, Clare writes that "grey beard jackdaws [are] noising as they flye" (4) and that "[t]he wild swan hurrys high and noises loud" (9). Not only are Clare's characterizations decidedly un-descriptive, but they fail to identify distinct qualities of the birds' songs. In his *British Birds* book, Hudson refers to jackdaws' calls as "clear, sharp, querulous... something like

the yelping bark of a small dog” (234). Clare’s depiction suggests a high amplitude, but it is not specific to the jackdaw. In fact, Clare uses the same verb (“noises”) to describe the wild swan’s sound, though Hudson implies that the bird, also referred to as the whooper swan, has a rather distinctive sound: “He [Seebohm] compares the notes of the whooper to a bass trombone; but the notes are short—three or four trumpet-blasts, keeping time with the upward and downward beat of the wings” (324). Clare has proven himself to be a masterful observer of birds’ sounds, so perhaps his lack of description again hints at a lack of understanding. In his alienated mental state, he may be too anxious to register the nuances of birds’ songs, as he does not note specific sounds, speeds, or pauses in the song. In addition, he may not have enough experience observing the birds of Northborough to write about the subtle markers of each sound. In general, this poem is relatively silent apart from the two birds “noising.” Clare’s soundscape has shrunk significantly in terms of its participants, and Clare’s own relationship with the soundscape has changed, as well.

Instead of being an active participant in the soundscape, Clare is a removed observer whose listening skills have diminished. In all fourteen lines of “[Autumn Birds],” there is no direct mention of humans. While Clare’s bird poetry is usually focused on the birds rather than the speaker himself or other people, his Helpstone poetry often referenced his reactions or feelings toward the birds and their songs. Even though Clare was not a songster in the same way the birds were, he was a welcome guest who received the birds’ songs, even stating in “The Robins Nest” that nature hailed him and seemed to grace him with its presence for his enjoyment (see Chapter 2). In contrast, “[Autumn Birds]” is written in the third person, allowing the poet or speaker to detach himself from the events of the poem. Although Clare seems to be in the birds’ environment, they are fleeing and

leaving him solitary, showing his incompatibility with the birds of Northborough. Moreover, Clare's reference to the "distant woods" to which the rooks fly (11) implies that he does not know the precise location of their nests, further solidifying his status as a stranger in his new home. In Helpstone, the birds conversed with Clare, and he and the creatures seemed to have a symbiotic relationship. While the birds brought Clare joy, he often protected them and provided nourishment (see "The Robins Nest"). There is no longer a sense of camaraderie between them, nor can Clare protect them from harm. Although they must have legitimate reasons for scattering, Clare remains motionless, failing to take a warning from them. Although Clare may identify with the birds because of their mutual fear, as depicted in the poem, these feelings replace the shared joy of Helpstone. Clare can read their motion, but he cannot understand their song as effectively as he did in Helpstone.

In addition to Clare's distance from the birds, the various bird species seem to be dissociated from each other. As a result, the ecosystem does not feature the same level of companionship and cooperation as it did in Helpstone poems such as "[Summer Evening]," discussed in Chapter 2. Many of the birds in "[Autumn Birds]" are singular, and those that are plural do not communicate with each other. For instance, "the wild duck" (1), "heron" (2), "wild swan" (9), "magpie" (12), and "distant crow" (13) are solitary and have no companions even among their own species. Unlike the partridges in "[Summer Evening]" who greeted each other and guided the rest of the covey to their resting place, the birds here seem to be travelling in different directions. The solitary birds often take off in fear, while the flocks of birds are weary rather than peaceful or cheerful. For example, Clare writes that the "flopping crows on weary wings go bye" (3) and that the "weary rooks to

distant woods are gone” (11). The beautiful and purposeful actions of the Helpstone birds just before bedtime are reduced in Northborough to tiresome, monotonous routines. In addition, rather than enforcing a sense of community among the birds, Clare emphasizes their separateness. Many of his descriptions include birds disappearing out of sight and even leaving each other. Some of the birds are near each other but do not interact:

The weary rooks to distant woods are gone
With length of tail the magpie winnows on
To neighbouring tree and leaves the distant crow
While small birds nestle in the hedge below (11-14).

Clare’s portrayal implies that although the birds exist in close proximity to each other, they do not live in harmony. The level of discordance portrayed by Clare suggests a disconnection between the speaker and his environment, offering a glimpse of his mental state in Northborough.

Clare again writes about a solitary bird in his Northborough poem “[Wild Duck’s Nest],” but this time, the bird is outnumbered by disruptive humans.

As boys were playing in their schools dislike
And floating paper boats along the dyke
They laid their baskets down a nest to see
And found a small hole in a hollow tree
When one looked in and wonder filled his breast
And halloed out a wild duck on her nest
They doubted and the boldest went before
And the duck bolted when they waded oer
And suthied up and flew against the wind
And left the boys and wondering thoughts behind
The eggs lay hid in down and lightly prest
They counted more then thirty in the nest
They filled their hats with eggs and waded oer
And left the nest as quiet as before

The poem begins when a group of children become distracted from their playing due to their discovery of a wild duck. They find a small hole in a tree, peer in, and scare the duck

out of her home. It is clear that the relationship between the bird and the boys is strained; Clare positions the children as predators and the bird as the lone victim. Clare writes that “the duck bolted when they [the boys] waded oer / And suthied up and flew against the wind” (8-9). Based on Clare’s verb choice (“bolted”), the bird was certainly frightened by the children’s approach. Moreover, Clare’s description of the duck flying against the wind reinforces the difficulty with which the duck was faced, giving it an extra obstacle to overcome after being forced out of its nest. Clare’s depiction of the duck’s habitat also suggests a level of intrusiveness in the boys’ behaviour. For example, the only immediately visible aspect of the duck’s nest is “a small hole in a hollow tree” (4), suggesting that the duck did not want to be noticed or disturbed. Similarly, the nest is “hid in down and lightly prest” (11), highlighting the duck’s attempt to remain inconspicuous to intruders. The fact that the boys actively sought out a concealed nest with hidden eggs makes their crime seem more heinous than if the nest had been easily accessible. Clare’s repeated use of the word “waded” to describe the boys’ movement suggests intrusion, as it evokes the idea of a watery habitat. Thus, the boys have trespassed on the duck’s land, again demonstrating their wrongdoing for entering another creature’s home. Furthermore, this verb could signal the difficulty of the boys’ task, offering one possible reason Clare may not be inclined to explore the duck’s home for his own enjoyment. He is no longer the adventurous boy he was in Helpstone; perhaps he is even unaware of the duck’s precise location in Northborough. The boys also break a rule simply by being in the duck’s habitat when they should be in school, emphasizing that they do not belong here. Although one boy looks into the nest, his “wonder” is not enough to prevent the boys’ theft. They take the duck’s eggs, committing a cruel act against which the duck is defenseless. The fact that the boys

outnumber the duck is an important factor in their ability to take her eggs, as one boy would not have been able to carry thirty eggs by himself. Although Clare's estimation of the number of eggs seems a significant exaggeration, the boys took all of them, emphasizing the defenselessness of the duck, as well as its lack of foresight, when humans congregated to disturb it.

Although the implications of the poem make it clear that the boys have committed a crime, Clare offers no words of protection for the bird or admonishment to the boys. His impersonal reaction (devoid of his own feelings) highlights his status as an outsider in Northborough, as he may not feel close enough to the birds to offer them shelter. As discussed in Chapter 2, when Clare spoke of boys killing sparrows in Helpstone, he soundly entreated them not to harm the birds, calling them "my" sparrows. Here, Clare does not observe the duck himself, but he observes a group of boys observing it, establishing a further remove between him and the bird. In Helpstone, Clare was usually the active observer whose own experiences informed his bird poetry; in Northborough, he often writes in the third person, offering a far less personal account of his observations. In "[Wild Duck's Nest]," it is one of the boys who looks in the hole, and "wonder fill[s] his breast" (5) rather than Clare's. Readers are unaware of Clare's feelings on seeing the bird, as the poem is narrated through the boys' experience. Finally, Clare writes that the boys count the eggs in the duck's nest, again featuring an action of discovery performed by someone other than himself. Clare's joy and first-hand experiences of birds have diminished in Northborough. His decision to write in the third person rather than the first and to narrate the children's encounter suggests that he is too timid to approach the nest himself, and it is also a measure of his separation from his own childhood memories. It is clear in this poem

that Clare still cares for the birds of Northborough, but it is unclear whether he will attempt to protect the birds from dangerous intruders.

Clare's level of observation also seems limited in this poem, as he does not describe the duck's sound. In addition, it is unclear whether he sought out the bird or whether he happened to see the events of the poem unfold. For example, the boys see the tree in which the duck hides when they are playing, but it was not their goal to observe the duck. Similarly, although Clare chooses to write about the bird, he does not explicitly invite readers to join him as he ventures toward the duck's habitat; it almost seems as though he noticed the boys, who then noticed the duck. This portrayal is starkly different from some of his Helpstone poems, such as "The Nightingales Nest," in which Clare actively seeks out the bird, inviting readers to join him. In addition, Clare chose to record a moment in which the duck does not make any noise. Its lack of voice could suggest its fearfulness or even Clare's distance from the bird. In addition, the silence of many of Clare's poems written in Northborough is indicative of Clare's own limitations as a songster. Since wild ducks (or mallards) were so common in Britain, Clare would have been very familiar with the birds and their calls; however, he does not transcribe the sounds. He has become cut off from the soundscape, potentially no longer able to understand the duck's feelings. While it is possible that the duck did not make any noise for the duration of this poem, many of Clare's poems during this period are free of sound, suggesting that his participation in the soundscape of Northborough is limited. Perhaps he did not get close enough to the duck to provide an accurate transcription of its sound, or perhaps his feelings of alienation restricted his ability to register those sounds. Furthermore, the lack of sound also gestures toward the reduction in soundscape resulting from human interference. For

instance, in “The Nightingales Nest,” the eggs in the nest are “the old woodlands legacy of song” (93), and the nest itself is carefully guarded by nature (91); however, the birds who were stolen from the wild duck’s nest will not survive to grace the woods with song. They are not shrouded in the thorny protection of nature, but instead face decimation at the hands of humans. Hence, not only is sound not present in the poem, but the prospect of future sound is destroyed, as well.

Clare continues to demonstrate his isolation from the soundscape and landscape of Northborough when he describes a predatory bird in “[The Puddock’s Nest].” According to Robinson and Powell, Clare’s use of the dialect word “puddock” could refer to either a kite or a buzzard. Clare describes the puddock’s actions as if he observes the bird from afar: “The sailing puddock sweeps about for prey / And keeps above the woods from day to day / They make a nest so large in woods remote” (1-3). The fact that the birds remain “above” the woods suggests that they are not as friendly or welcoming as some of the birds Clare wrote about in his Helpstone period (see Chapter 2). The puddocks in Northborough do not pay Clare any visits, nor does he enter their habitats to visit them. Instead, the two seem as though they have no relationship, while the schoolboys interact with them instead. Moreover, Clare’s reference to “woods remote” automatically indicates that he and the puddock do not share the same habitat. Unlike the robin in Clare’s Helpstone poem “The Robins Nest,” Clare is isolated from the puddock and perhaps does not know its precise location. To his credit, Clare still knows exact details of the birds’ nests:

They find a hugh old tree and free from snags
And make a flat nest lined with wool and rags
And almost big enough to make a bed
And lay three eggs and spotted oer with red (7-10).

In fact, Clare's portrayal is still highly accurate despite his apparent distance from the birds. According to *Notes on the Birds of Northamptonshire*, the buzzard perches in trees awaiting prey, and its nest often contains two or three eggs. The eggs described by Powys also match Clare's description: "a dirty white, occasionally marked with spots of light reddish brown" (23). Clare's accurate depiction of the puddock's nest suggests that he has prior knowledge of the birds. This level of precision is especially impressive when one considers the declining population of both kites and buzzards around Clare's time of writing. Powys writes, "The Buzzard in this county has shared the fate of the Kite, and is now an exceedingly rare bird with us" (22). He goes on to state that he has seen one or two birds in his neighbourhood (within Northamptonshire) and that his last sighting was around 1846 (23). This decline in numbers could be reflective of enclosure stripping birds of their habitats. The puddock would not have been overly common even in Clare's early life, so the fact that he seems to have observed it closely is commendable, and his desire to record it could lend itself to the preserving of species through writing. According to Chris Washington, enclosure drives animals out of their habitats (666), making it likely that the biodiversity decreased post-enclosure. In addition, Sam Ward discusses the ecological value of onomatopoeic words in preserving soundscape under threat from change (26). However, Clare does not include any mention of its sound in "[The Puddock's Nest]." The puddock "has a plaintive wailing cry, to which it gives frequent utterance at all times of the year" (Powys 23). Despite the frequency of the bird's call, Clare neglects to note any details of having heard it. Especially significant is that in "The Flitting," Clare refers to the "sailing puddocks shrill 'peelew'" (23), using the same adjective ("sailing") as in "[The Puddocks Nest]," yet in the latter, the element of sound has been removed. Coupled with

the fact that “The Flitting” explicitly states Clare’s preference for the puddocks of Helpstone, the lack of sound reinforces his inability to properly perceive the Northborough birds’ songs, perhaps because of his distance from the birds.

The only sound recorded in the poem is a cry, highlighting a negative form of sound, and Clare is again removed from the first-hand experience of hearing it. Clare writes, “The schoolboy often hears the old ones cry” (11), but Robinson and Powell suggest that Clare might have meant to write “young” instead. Clare’s depiction suggests that the young might be begging for food, establishing an accurate biological cause for the sounds. Moreover, given the dwindling population of the species, perhaps their cries are also indicative of their plight. Hudson writes that “[i]t is impossible for anyone who loves wild bird life to write about the buzzard without a feeling of profound melancholy” due to its status as a vanishing species (283). Hence, the sound Clare records becomes even more upsetting, as its wailing cries suggest a lack of food or a lack of potential for the growth of the species, which contrasts greatly with the musical notes Clare recorded (most often in Helpstone). This melancholic form of sound is also a necessary cue for the schoolboys to abduct the birds. Clare does not record the sounds because they please him or because he wishes to learn more about the birds; in fact, he may not be hearing the sounds at all. Instead, it is the schoolboys who are present to hear the cries of the puddocks, and they treat them as cues that prompt their rapacious behaviour. As with “[Wild Duck’s Nest],” Clare portrays young boys as predators to birds but provides no protection or hope for the creatures. He does not include his opinion on the boys’ violent acts wherein they cut the puddocks’ wings and tie them up (13-14) and offers no hope for the birds to defend themselves. Unlike in “Helpstone,” Clare does not choose to remain hopeful about the

birds' fate and instead depicts a dire situation in which the birds are in immediate and long-term danger.

In "[Turkeys]," Clare presents an unflattering portrait of the domestic birds, largely because of the way they interact with humans and with other birds. From the start, the turkeys engage in predatory behaviour:

The turkeys wade the close to catch the bees
In the old border full of maple trees
And often lay away and breed and come
And bring a brood of chelping chickens home (1-4).

In Clare's Helpstone period, he seldom wrote about birds as predators; rather, they were often positioned as prey to other animals or to humans. Thus, his portrayal of the turkeys of Northborough is a marked departure, demonstrating the harsher realities of birds. Even the turkey's non-violent behaviour is intimidating:

The turkey gobbles loud and drops his rag
And struts and sprunts his tail and drags
His wing on ground and makes a huzzing noise
Nauntles at passer bye and drives the boys
And bounces up and flyes at passer bye
The old dog snaps and grins nor ventures nigh
He gobbles loud and drives the boys from play (5-11).

Clare's narrative takes an unexpected turn as the turkey becomes threatening even to those who likely mean it no harm. Its default volume seems to be loud, scaring anyone who comes near it. Clare's use of onomatopoeia ("huzzing") serves to depict the turkey's sound as perpetual, potentially irritating, noise. However, Clare's most repeated indication of sound comes from the word "gobble," which appears six times throughout the poem. Most of these instances involve the turkey's response to intruders on its territory, perhaps suggesting that turkeys are highly territorial. Despite his likely accurate assessment of the turkey's motives, Clare's lines do not feature any other sound-driven descriptors in relation

to the turkey. His decision to repeat the standard “gobble” noise instead of attempting a more detailed or nuanced transcription suggests a diminishment of his listening skills in his new home. The fully-domesticated bird’s sounds have simply become part of the village rabble, further separating turkeys from the wildness and freedom that Clare admired and identified with in his Helpstone poems. Other birds make sounds in this poem, as well, but all of them sound vicious and angry: the goose hisses (18), “[t]he old crow crawks around them every day / And trys to steal the turkeys eggs away” (39-40), and “[t]he magpie cackles round for any prey” (41). Hence, all the birds’ actions and sounds merge with the general cacophony of the village rather than existing at a slight distance in the wilderness. Clare demonstrates the strange, predatory behaviour the birds exhibit even around each other, again suggesting the hostility and lack of welcome he experienced in Northborough. This poem also highlights the potential differences between domestic birds and wild birds and, in so doing, suggests that Clare might be more homebound in Northborough than he was in Helpstone, unable to observe as many wild birds.

It is significant that Clare’s sense of sound seems altered in Northborough while the rest of his observational skills remain sharp. For example, although “[Turkeys]” is written in the third person like the poems previously discussed in this chapter, this time, Clare’s knowledge of the birds is greater than other residents of the village.

The idle turkey gobbling half the day
Goes hobbling through the grass and lays away
Five and red spotted eggs where many pass
But none ere thinks of turkeys in the grass
The old dogs sees her on and goes away
The old dame calls and wonders where they lay
The fox unnotices and passes bye
The blackbird breeds above a cunning guest
And hides the shells cause none should find the nest (29-38).

This passage is reminiscent of Clare's poem "The Landrail" discussed in Chapter 2. Distinguishing himself from the bewildered dog, dame, fox, and blackbird, Clare has used his keen eye to gain access to little-known information on the laying habits of the turkey. His knowledge of the turkey's number and colour of eggs, as well as their clever hiding places, shows that he has likely been observing them for a prolonged period of time. His continued interest in birds and their subtleties remains clear, but his relationship with sound seems troubled. Thus, his use of sound is important to analyze, as some of Clare's most impressive bird poetry (for example, "The Progress of Rhyme") includes highly detailed, onomatopoeic description of bird song, along with commentary about Clare's love for the birds. Clare's alienation in Northborough and subsequent distancing from its birds could be responsible for his inability to record complex representation of their sounds. In the case of "[Turkeys]," Clare uses the word "gobble" as a multi-purpose descriptor for virtually every sound the turkey makes rather than employing a more precise description. For instance, he does not comment on the duration or frequency of the turkey's gobbling, nor does he note any differences in amplitude; the sound is always "loud." Clare may feel particularly hostile toward turkeys, as they are not native to Britain (Ogden) and are thus strangers themselves. Ultimately, Clare's emotional state may have prevented him from fully registering and interpreting the complex sounds of the birds of Northborough.

While Clare nursed a love for birds throughout his life, his Northborough bird poetry illustrates his position as an unwelcome stranger in the village. He loses some of his favourite elements of the Helpstone landscape, as well as his profound familiarity with the environment, which allowed him to remember specific details about particular places and the birds that inhabited them. As a result, his poems written in or about Northborough

become quieter, less descriptive, and sometimes even violent, demonstrating the hostile environment in which Clare and the birds both reside. In addition, Clare does not always possess more ornithological knowledge than other residents of the community, and when he does, it rarely involves sound. His use of onomatopoeia and precise transcription of bird song are diminished, showing his isolated position outside the soundscape of Northborough.

CHAPTER 4

Bound Birds: The Silencing of Enclosure

Throughout his adult life, Clare suffered a series of disappointments in his writing career and social connections, causing him to become increasingly disillusioned with the world in which he lived.¹⁷ Eventually, Clare's mental state had deteriorated so much that his family and friends made the difficult decision to admit him to a mental institution. Clare was admitted to High Beech Asylum in the Epping Forest in 1837, where he remained for several years. In 1841, Clare escaped from the asylum and walked just under one hundred miles to his home in Northborough (Bate 457). After a few months spent at home, Clare was transferred to Northampton Asylum and remained there until his death in 1864. Although Clare often struggled to write during his asylum years due to physical and mental health issues, he still composed a great deal of poetry, including some of his most famous works (for example, "I Am"). In this chapter, I consider examples of bird poetry from Clare's asylum days, exploring the significant decrease in his bird poems during this period and characterizing those that exist in comparison to his Helpstone and Northborough poetry. This final phase of Clare's life functions as a form of enclosure for the poet, in many ways reminiscent of the enclosure of his beloved landscape. The way in which he writes about birds (or does not) illuminates his emotional state and offers clues into Clare's limited relationship with nature and the landscape. Clare identifies with birds in several ways, including their shared position as outdoor creatures, as well as their mutual status as both songsters and victims of enclosure. Thus, this chapter also examines the impact of

¹⁷ For a full account of Clare's struggles with mental health, see Jonathan Bate's biography.

enclosure on birds, Clare's representation of the birds around his asylums, and his personal identification with enclosed birds.

The enclosure movements of Clare's lifetime were briefly discussed in Chapter 1. As a field labourer, Clare was a long-time opponent of enclosure, writing often about the injustices of dividing and commodifying the land. Johanne Clare (1987) explores Clare's objections more fully, first stating that Clare portrays the working class as victims, justifying their feelings of moral superiority over those who victimized them. Next, she argues that Clare disagreed with the notion that the enclosers had more rights to the land than the labourers did.¹⁸ She writes that labourers like Clare felt that they deserved access to the land, "which [they] had inherited as their birthright, earned through their work, and secured through their profound feelings of local attachment" (37). Clare did not endorse the ownership of the land by any one group of people; however, he maintained a much closer relationship with nature than those who now determined the divisions of land, so it was only natural for him to feel disappointed and resentful. This chapter will begin with an examination of some of Clare's enclosure poetry, especially as these poems relate to birds, and conclude with an exploration of Clare's asylum poems and the way in which his own enclosure is manifested in them.

In one of Clare's enclosure poems written in the early 1820s, "The Mores," Clare contrasts the open, undivided landscape with the enclosed landscape to demonstrate the

¹⁸ In discussing enclosure, I follow Michael Turner's approach in considering mainly parliamentary enclosure. Thus, the term "enclosers" refers to those in power who enforced the land division. According to Turner (*Enclosures in Britain 1750-1830*), parliament hired commissioners who divided "the communal interests of the parish, township, etc., among the claimants of those interests" and enforced new tracks to direct movement. The commissioners were nominated by "the major interests in the parish, by the church in its position as a major owner of the tithes, by the lord of the manor as the owner of the rights of the soil, and by the majority in value of the freeholders. The commissioners employed a battery of administrators, surveyors, clerks, bankers, and so on" (Turner 11-12).

unnaturalness of the latter. Within Clare's characterization of the "unbounded" scene (i.e., the unenclosed landscape), he includes several images of birds. He begins by using a simile: "While the glad shepherd traced their tracks along / Free as the lark and happy as her song" (34-35). However, Clare's use of this literary device resists merely metaphorizing the lark and instead displays feelings and behaviours that were indeed shared between humans and birds. Clare emphasizes that both creatures (and several other animals, as well) used to be free to roam the landscape, which has now become restricted. Moreover, since he was an outdoor labourer himself, Clare could relate to the position of the "glad shepherd" roaming the fields. Thus, his reference to the lark's happy song holds even greater significance, as Clare both gained inspiration from bird song and mimicked its music in his poetry. If Clare, like the shepherd, is no longer "happy as [the lark's] song," perhaps he cannot produce poems as he used to. Hence, his mood and his ability to create art are affected by both the state of the landscape and by the presence of birds.

Clare goes on to stress the negative impacts of enclosure, furthering the connection between humans and birds as creatures who deserve freedom. In an ironic and potent section of "The Mores," Clare muses, "The hated sign by vulgar taste is hung / As tho the very birds should learn to know / When they go there they must no further go" (72-74). This passage is noteworthy for a number of reasons. First, Clare links birds with rural labourers in their right to freedom; just as birds should not be restricted to small sections of land, the members of the working class should maintain their ability to roam freely. Clare's description of "the very birds" suggests that they are fundamental parts of nature, and his rhetoric implies that it is especially preposterous to separate birds from nature in any way. However, the implicit comparison between the workers and the birds also

suggests that the labourers are as connected to nature as the birds are. Thus, they, too, should not be restricted in their access to the landscape. Furthermore, Clare establishes a contrast between the enclosers (victimizers) and the enclosed (victims), placing himself and the birds in the same category. The distinction is made clear by the difference in language employed by the two groups. Throughout the poem, Clare emphasizes the control embedded in the enclosers' mission by giving them their own language distinct from the language of nature. For example, Clare writes,

Each little tyrant with his little sign
Shows where man claims earth glows no more divine
On paths to freedom and to childhood dear
A board sticks up to notice 'no road here' (67-70).

Within this small passage, there are two descriptions of the language of enclosure. Clare's polemical rhetoric and ironic tone help to demonstrate the incongruity of enclosure with the laws of nature, further solidifying the injustice of the enclosers assuming positions of power and 'owning' nature. In writing that man "claims" earth glows no more divine, Clare emphasizes his belief that all of nature is beautiful and should not be subjected to commodification. In assigning ownership to the land, the enclosers effectively diminish nature's divinity. In addition, he highlights his own first-hand experience of nature, which the enclosers simply could not understand, by speaking of his childhood. In speaking of the sign, the board, and another sign, Clare punctuates the narrative with the words of enclosers who do not understand nature. As Clare points out, the birds cannot read their signs and obey their demands, nor should they be expected to limit their access to nature. As will be discussed shortly, Clare takes on the position of entrapped bird when he is admitted to an asylum, making his admonishment of enclosure's effects on birds even more potent.

Clare concludes "The Mores" by emphasizing (though implicitly) the importance of knowing and preserving the biodiversity of nature. He writes, "And birds and trees and flowers without a name / All sighed when lawless laws enclosure came" (77-78). The modifier "without a name" invites multiple interpretations. First, perhaps the wildlife of nature does not have a name in the eyes of the enclosers, as they are unfamiliar with nature and seem not to value it, thinking of it economically instead of lovingly (as Clare would). Another interpretation could be that nature's beings will lose their identities once enclosure takes place, as it could destroy their habitats and make them less accessible to the people who actually know their names. Unlike the enclosers with their controlling language, Clare and the other labourers speak the language of nature, which includes the local names of many different species of plants and animals. Clare underlines the enclosers' uninformed treatment of nature by repeating the word "and" three times in line 77. In doing so, he again implies that those now in control of the landscape do not even care to distinguish between different species, as they have only a superficial connection with nature. Finally, Clare incorporates the soundscape into his discussion by writing that the creatures 'sigh' as a result of enclosure. As discussed in Chapter 2, the sounds of nature in Helpstone are rich and dynamic, including noises such as birds singing and weeds asking how Clare is doing. Instead of these vibrant sounds of a harmonious ecosystem, the only sounds left to nature will be sighs. Of course, this choice of verb is metaphorical, but Clare was correct to think that the soundscape of his village would change after enclosure. Sam Ward argues that enclosure would certainly alter the sounds of a community, especially since land drainage would have decimated the habitats of birds dwelling in marshes and fenlands. In addition, he notes that physical barriers would block sounds from travelling as they did before (26),

again suggesting the accuracy of Clare's description of Helpstone's bustling soundscape being smothered into sighs.

"To a Fallen Elm" is even more explicit about the loss of sound Helpstone would endure as a result of enclosure, and Clare connects this loss with bird song and his own happiness. Clare begins in apostrophe, addressing the elm tree as a beloved part of the landscape. Throughout the first stanza, many of his reasons for treasuring the tree centre on sound:

Old Elm that murmured in our chimney top
The sweetest anthem autumn ever made
And into mellow whispering calms would drop
When showers fell on thy many colored shade
And when dark tempests mimic thunder made
While darkness came as it would strangle light
With the black tempest of a winter night
That rocked thee like a cradle to thy root
How did I love to hear the winds upbraid
Thy strength without while all within was mute
It seasoned comfort to our hearts desire
We felt thy kind protection like a friend
And pitched our chairs up closer to the fire
Enjoying comforts that was never penned (1-14).

Of course, this loving address is written entirely in the past tense, embedding a sense of loss into the lines. Clare speaks of the elm's sounds often as quiet and soothing, revealing it as a calming presence for himself and the other villagers. He also incorporates many violent or powerful elements of nature such as showers, tempests, darkness, and wind, establishing the tree as a steadfast landmark that seemed as though it would always be there. Although nature is powerful, it never destroyed the tree; that injustice remains with the enclosers alone. As with many of his other poems, Clare presents the humans as the wrongdoers and nature as the victim, again drawing parallels between himself and the tree as victims of enclosure. In addition, the comforts Clare mentions in line 14 show the

importance of both sound and everyday occurrences in his village; these moments were “never penned,” but are still capable of producing profound emotion for Clare. As a local poet, Clare’s attention to everyday sound leads to verse, which gets added to the soundscape itself. Clare goes on to discuss the other members of the ecosystem who relied on the tree for protection, shelter, or happiness:

The children sought thee in thy summer shade
And made their play house rings of sticks and stone
The mavis sang and felt himself alone
While in thy leaves his early nest was made
And I did feel his happiness mine own
Nought heeding that our friendship was betrayed (23-28).

As is characteristic of his Helpstone poetry, the members of the community work together in harmony, often enjoying symbiotic relationships with each other. Clare’s discussion of the mavis, a dialect name for the song-thrush (Powys 53), is especially noteworthy. He writes that the elm provided a secure location in which the bird could build its nest away from the interference of other animals or people. The mavis also sang, adding to the rich soundscape around the tree. Clare states that the bird’s happiness was his own happiness, suggesting a relationship based on affection, but he also implicitly compares himself to the bird. By cutting down the tree and destroying that part of the landscape, the enclosers are not only disturbing the bird’s habitat, but Clare’s as well. The bird had found a safe place to nest, and so had Clare. He, too, enjoyed the seclusion of the woody spot free from the bustle of a busy city environment. As showcased in “The Robins Nest,” Clare shared an outdoor home with the birds of Helpstone, and his comment that the enclosers have betrayed his friendship with birds conveys a deep sense of loss. It also raises the question of where the birds will go if their habitats are destroyed due to enclosure: for example, one wonders whether enclosure caused any significant decline in bird populations or, if not,

how they adapted. Clare anticipated the problems that the avian population would face after enclosure robbed them of their homes. His admission of feeling joy for their joy conveys his inevitable feelings of pain for their pain.

“To a Fallen Elm” seems to have been written before “The Mores,” and in the earlier poem, Clare characterizes a language of nature that stands in direct opposition to the language of enclosure. He writes,

Thou ownd a language by which hearts are stirred
Deeper than by the attribute of words
Thine spoke a feeling known in every tongue
Language of pity and the force of wrong
What cant asumes what hypocrites may dare
Speaks home to truth and shows it what they are (31-36).

In musing on the characteristics of a pure, natural form of language, Clare anticipates both the reduction of the soundscape and the loss of his own voice in future years. For instance, when the tree is cut down, it can no longer be an instrument of nature and stir the hearts of its listeners. Since Clare is so deeply moved by nature, the loss of nature’s music would affect his own ability to write, as was often the case in his asylum years. Pawelski and Moores argue that through Clare’s description of the tree as a “music making Elm” (65), “music is what we as listeners are left with even amid the glutting tyranny (11.70-71) of felling” (111). They go on to claim that Clare “finds well-being in sound” and that his use of sound to oppose painful experiences lends curative power to his poetry (111). Hence, the sounds of Helpstone act as antidotes to the harsh realities of enclosure, but as previously discussed, Clare’s relationship with sound declined when he left Helpstone. The enclosure movements in Helpstone anticipated many of the issues Clare would again encounter within the asylum, where he was cut off from vocal nature in an even more extreme manner. From 1837 until 1864, Clare himself was enclosed, which had a profound effect on his

writing and his emotional state. Clare's bird writings revealed much about his feelings in both Helpstone and Northborough, but how do those feelings change when Clare has less access to nature than ever before? What do his bird poems written in the asylum reveal about his own position as a poet?

In entering such a discussion, it is important to characterize Clare's stays at High Beech Asylum and Northampton General Lunatic Asylum in terms of his outdoor life. In both asylums, it seems that Clare's caretakers did not restrict his access to nature. Matthew Allen, the doctor at High Beech, informed his publishers in 1839 that Clare was physically well enough to work outdoors, a fact that Clare confirmed when writing in his notebook. Bate writes that "in his latter years at Allen's he did indeed undertake gardening and fieldwork, for which he was paid a few shillings per week" (429). Despite his continued participation in outdoor labour, Clare's own feelings about his surroundings and his confinement varied and often opposed the accounts of his caretakers. According to Allen, Clare entered the asylum suffering from a condition similar to mental exhaustion rather than madness; however, during his stay, Clare's delusions became more pronounced (Bate 432-433). In a letter that he wrote to Mary Joyce, his childhood love, Clare refers to her as his wife despite being married to another woman.¹⁹ In the same letter, he writes, "nature to me seems dead and her very pulse seems frozen to an iceicle in the summer sun" (qtd. in Bate 436). Bate reveals that the landscape surrounding High Beech Asylum "boasted gardens, pleasure grounds and sixteen acres of fields in which inmates could walk with their attendants," as well as abundant forested areas and other scenery (424). Similarly, the Northampton asylum "stood in an elevated position about a mile to the east of the town,

¹⁹ According to Bate, it is not entirely clear whether Clare intended to send this letter or whether it was a literary composition.

looking out over the park and woodland of Delapre Abbey, the vale of the River Nene, and Hunsbury Hill beyond” (Bate 468). Clare certainly had access to nature in both asylums, but his emotional state dictated his feelings about it and his ability to perceive its phenomena. In Northampton Asylum, Clare was placed in the category of patients who received the most freedom. As such, he was permitted to walk into Northampton by himself, which he did quite often, usually with his notebook in hand (Bate 469). But despite these freedoms, Clare is said to have pointed out a caged skylark to a visitor who came to the asylum, stating, ““We are both of us bound birds, you see”” (qtd. in Bate 475). Clare clearly felt entrapped in the asylum, even if others’ accounts deny any confinement. Around the late 1840s, Clare says in a letter home, “I loved nature and painted her both in words and colours better than many Poets and Painters and by Perseverance and attention you may all do the same—in my boyhood Solitude was the most talkative vision I met with—Birds bees trees flowers all talked to me incessantly” (qtd. in Bate 480). This is a highly significant confession that nature no longer speaks to Clare. Although he was often immersed in nature, his own troubled mental state prevented him from communicating with nature as he once did. Finally, Clare again compares himself to a bird in a letter to his friend, writing the following: “I would try like the Birds a few Songs i’ the Spring but they have shut me up and gave me no tools and like the caged Starnel of Stern ‘I can’t get out’ to fetch any so I have made no progress at present... I love the ‘rippling brook’—and ‘the Singing of Birds’—But I cant get out to see them or hear them” (qtd. in Bate 510). Since Clare was, in fact, writing during this period, and since he had regular access to nature, it is important to consider the role his mental state played in his ability to register the sights and, especially, the sounds of nature. As Bate puts it, Clare is both an enclosed man and “a

songster silenced” (510). The strength of his attachment to and identification with birds is a significant indication of his feelings during the asylum years.

Since the authoritative *John Clare: Major Works* does not differentiate between Clare’s High Beech and Northampton poems, I will approach them all as simply Clare’s asylum poetry. I shall follow the order of Robinson and Powell’s edition, assuming a fairly chronological listing within their “Poems of the Epping Forest/Northampton Period” section wherever possible. To begin, I will discuss one of Clare’s poems entitled “Song,” hereafter called “Song A.”²⁰ In this poem, Clare discusses his melancholy state of mind, mostly focusing on his love for Mary. Clare expresses that his life is joyless without Mary, demonstrating the dulling of his senses by unhappiness:

No peace nor yet pleasure
Without her will stay
Life loses its treasure
When Mary’s away
Though the nightingale often
In sorrow may sing
—Can the blast of the winter
Meet blooms of the spring (551-558).

This passage is starkly different from Clare’s earlier poems about nature and birds. Here, he displays his strained relationship with birds, as he reveals that nothing but Mary could bring him joy anymore. Before (particularly in Helpstone), birds were Clare’s companions who cheered his lonesome thoughts and provided pleasurable relief from his labour. His one mention of a bird in this poem is a reminder of beloved parts of nature to which Clare can no longer connect. As the nightingale is often associated with springtime, Clare’s own mental state is the “blast of the winter” referenced in the previous line. Clare is saying that

²⁰ “Song” was a popular title choice for Clare throughout his writing career, so the letters A, B, and C will be used to designate the three identically-titled poems discussed in this chapter.

although the nightingale is singing, the sound does not get through to him because of his own emotions. In other words, he is unable to register the sound because of his sorrow over Mary. The form of the poem further supports this interpretation. There is a single em dash in this poem, and it occurs between the lines about the bird and the following lines detailing Clare's disconnection from its song. Clare's moment of pause also conveys a sense of uncertainty as he suffers a momentary lapse in his writing, highlighting his position as a silenced songster. The nightingale may be singing, but in this moment, Clare cannot do so effectively, nor can he soothe his pain by listening to the bird's song.

Clare's interpretation of the nightingale's song as sorrowful also conveys the decline in his observational skills resulting from his feelings. Previous chapters highlighted Clare's unique ability to recognize a host of different emotions in bird song, including joy, sorrow, and fear. He also knew of several biological reasons that caused birds to make various sounds, such as attempting to secure a mate, calling other birds to return home, or signaling hunger. As discussed in Chapter 1, Clare's accuracy in recording bird song set him apart from other Romantic poets like Coleridge and Keats. However, Clare's portrayal of bird song in "Song A" is vague and simplistic, as he only notes that the bird sings in sorrow. He also uses the word "often" to explain when the nightingale sings, failing to focus on the specific details such as when the sound occurs. These vague descriptors and vast reduction in the specificity and emotional range of the song indicate Clare's altered emotional state. As mentioned previously, Clare's delusions often centered around Mary, his boyhood love whom he now thought his wife. If the nightingale sang to attract a mate, as Clare often described in previous poems, then Clare's inability to recognize this function could be a manifestation of his feelings for Mary. Since he fails to find his love, he no

longer comprehends the mating calls of his fellow creatures and instead interprets their song only as melancholy.

“Song B” further emphasizes Clare’s decline in mental health, as it plainly shows the way his feelings overwhelm his senses. This poem directly follows “Song A” in Clare’s manuscripts, and the two are grouped as part of a long sequence of poems on similar topics.²¹ Thus, “Song B” also dwells on Clare’s longing for Mary and inability to feel joy without her. Clare’s lamentations provide some insight into his relationship with sound and the landscape in general:

How dull the glooms cover
This meadow and fen
Where I as a lover
Seek Mary agen
But silence is teasing
Wherever I stray
There’s nothing seems pleasing
Or aching thoughts easing
Though Mary live’s near me—she seems far away (585-593).

Clare’s use of the word “glooms” presumably refers to the darkened landscape, but it is also evocative of his emotions: Clare’s own gloomy mental state could be darkening the landscape and preventing him from seeing it clearly. This interpretation is especially relevant given the following lines. In detailing the soundscape, Clare’s use of enjambment suggests both current and perpetual silence. He writes that “silence is teasing,” highlighting the silence in the present time, while the next line indicates that the silence never ends: “Wherever I stray.” For Clare to describe the silence as unending suggests that his senses are defective, as it is highly unlikely that the landscape would be quiet all the time regardless of where he goes. Hence, because of his personal grief over Mary, Clare is

²¹ Song A: MS 6, p. 15; MS 7, p. 47. Song B: MS 6, pp. 15-16; MS 7, p. 47 (Robinson and Summerfield, *The Later Poems of John Clare*).

unable to hear the sounds of nature, including bird song. The concluding lines of the stanza (lines 591-593) underline Clare's withdrawal from nature and his decreased perception, as situations now just "seem" to be, instead of being described as the way they truly are. For example, Clare writes that nothing "seems" pleasing, but this does not mean that nothing pleasing exists. Even Mary's physical location is questioned, as Clare comments that she lives nearby but feels distant to him. This line shows the decline in Clare's powers of perception (as he believes Mary is near him, yet he cannot detect her presence), but it also speaks to the larger issue of his confinement. No matter who or what was around Clare during his stay in the asylums, he would still feel isolated due to his physical enclosure. Although he most often yearned for Mary, he must also have felt disconnected from nature (as demonstrated in his letters above), highlighting his inability to use his senses for sharp observations and descriptions.

In the following stanza, Clare chooses to focus on Mary rather than the beauty of nature, again demonstrating his limitations in perceiving nature. Although he mentions gales and birds, he no longer includes them as subjects worthy of observation and instead enlists them to help him communicate with Mary.

O would these gales murmur
My love in her ear
Or a birds note inform her
While I linger here
But nature contrary
Turns night into day
No bird—gale—or fairy
Can whisper to Mary
To tell her who seeks her—while Mary's away (594-602).

Although he asks nature for help, it fails to rise to the occasion and makes no sound, indicating a faltering relationship with the landscape. The fact that nature must speak for

Clare suggests that he believes that nature can communicate with Mary in ways that he cannot. Clare idealizes nature and Mary, and since his fond memories of Helpstone likely involve both, they are closely associated in his mind. However, Clare is unable to communicate with Mary, and nature cannot help him now. He and nature do not seem to share a harmonious relationship anymore, so silence is still “teazing.” Clare even enlists the help of a fairy, showing his desperation in reaching out to supernatural entities because of his detachment from nature. The fairy recalls the figure of the muse that Clare needed to reclaim his bond with nature in his Northborough poem “The Flitting”; Clare implores both entities to intercede because of his distance from nature. Moreover, despite Clare’s desire for the gales or birds to produce sound, his primary interest lies with Mary. In his Helpstone and Northborough poetry (Chapters 2 and 3, respectively), Clare did not rely on birds to carry out human tasks; instead, he valued them as sentient creatures and recorded precise details of their lives. Here, his mention of birds is purely self-serving as he uses them as intermediaries to discuss his own life’s hardships, again illustrating his struggle to find beauty in the aspects of nature he once treasured. Clare’s withdrawal from nature is a result of his internal struggle, which manifested during his time in the asylums. In this case, his lamentations focus on his unfulfilled love for Mary. Although birds were once his allies, Clare indicates that they cannot help him any longer. His expectations for their intervention may be unrealistic, but this further demonstrates the delusions with which he suffered during his confinement. Clare’s depiction of birds in “Song B” exhibits his desensitized view of the outside world, which resulted from his inner struggle.

According to Jonathan Bate, within Clare’s asylum writing, he developed a poetic voice characterized by detachment, often neglecting to note any details of his internal plight

(494). Bate writes that “the customary voice of the asylum poems is more impersonal, almost disembodied. Clare was withdrawing into non-identity” (494). He also writes that the subject matter of Clare’s poetry changed, likely as a result of being dislocated from his native fields; only a few bird poems were written in the asylum years (Bate 495). As Bate points out, the moments in which Clare provides details of his torment are rare, but they are also useful in piecing together the details of his mental and physical enclosure. One such poem of the asylum period is “Sleep of Spring,” in which Clare compares his past and present selves. This poem reveals the sense of disillusionment Clare faced toward the end of his life and demonstrates that Clare was only able to connect with nature in memory.

O for that sweet untroubled rest
That Poets oft have sung
The babe upon its Mothers breast
The bird upon its young
The heart asleep without a pain
When shall I know that sleep again (1-6).

Significantly, Clare reveals that he once identified with the peacefulness of birds, yet now he is detached from such feelings. In *Helpstone*, he spoke of birds’ habitats as if they were safe spaces in which he, too, could nest. For example, in “The Robins Nest” (Chapter 2), Clare praises the untroubled solitude of the bird’s habitat, simultaneously demonstrating his own enfoldment and protection in the landscape. He is now separated from birds and, therefore, from a previous sense of belonging that mirrored the security of a nest. In addition, he longs for the rest about which “Poets” have sung, suggesting that he no longer identifies as a poet. In fact, at some points during his confinement, Clare essentially ceased writing. Bate reveals that “for several years prior to 1860 Clare did not write a single line.” Clare stated, “I have forgotten how to write... I’ll write no more” (qtd. in Bate 508). In “Sleep of Spring,” Clare envies both poets and birds for their ability to experience or

express peace. Clare has left his nesting places in both Helpstone and Northborough, an experience of alienation that increases the divide between himself and the birds. Although he once identified with birds' safety and ease of expression, Clare's current discomfort separates him from both birds and poetry. Thus, Clare's creative abilities seem to depend on his relationship with birds, which is determined by his sense of rootedness in his dwelling place.

Clare's notion of past happiness is bound with bird song, a pleasure that is presumably absent from his current environment. He opens the second stanza with another melancholy reflection on his present state: "When shall I be as I have been" (7). In forming a list of creatures of the natural world, Clare includes "The bird upon the green / The Larks that in the thistle's shield / And pipe from morn to e'en" (14-16). Aside from their importance to the overall soundscape, the birds that Clare depicts also enjoy the protection of the natural world. The larks sing from within the safety of the thistle, providing an image of emplacement that is presumably absent from Clare's current environment. As in the previous stanza, Clare's decision to focus on the locality of Helpstone birds suggests his relative estrangement and vulnerability in the 'foreign' asylum and its environs. The larks of Helpstone used to "pipe from morn to e'en," recalling the dynamic soundscape characteristic of Clare's early poems (see Chapter 2); however, in the asylum, Clare writes the following in a letter to his son: "I would write you a long Letter only I have nothing to write about... for I see Nothing and hear nothing" (qtd. in Bate 511). As discussed with regard to "Song A" and "Song B," Clare's ability to hear the sounds of nature seems to have been greatly reduced during his confinement, even though he still had access to nature

in the vicinity of the asylum. In "Sleep of Spring," Clare contrasts the rich sound and security of his "happiest hours" (22) with the silence and exposure of his present life.

Clare establishes another contrast, this time between the communal freedom of nature and the solitary imprisonment of his enclosure. In the following stanzas, he demonstrates his preference for wildness over cultivated nature:

I love the weeds along the fen
More sweet than garden flowers
Freedom haunts the humble glen
That blest my happiest hours
Here prisons injure health and me
I love sweet freedom and the free

The crows upon the swelling hills
The cows upon the lea
Sheep feeding by the pasture rills
Are ever dear to me
Because sweet freedom is their mate
While I am lone and desolate (19-30).

Clare presents a direct critique of his confinement, as he writes that garden flowers cannot match the beauty of weeds that grow in the wild. As mentioned above, Clare worked in an enclosed garden during at least part of his asylum stay, creating a contrast between the nature to which he had access during his institutionalization and the wild nature of his youth and early adulthood. Clare also connects the idea of freedom directly to images of nature (the glen, crows, cows, sheep), suggesting that perhaps a true connection to nature is impossible if he is not free to access it where and when he wishes. Moreover, the animals that Clare envies are all described in groups, highlighting the contrast between their sense of community and Clare's loneliness. Animals such as the crow are "ever dear" to Clare because they are free and perhaps connect him to his past self. Until the enclosure of the land, animals were freer to roam as they pleased, but Clare lost his freedom twice: first

when the land of Helpstone was enclosed, and second when he was institutionalized. While Clare says that the birds and beasts enjoy “sweet freedom,” he does not share this communion with them anymore. He expresses love for the animals in his poem but also envies their connection to freedom. By envying the birds’ freedom, Clare reveals that he has lost the ease of his former friendship with birds. He states in the final stanza that in his days of freedom, “toil itself was even play” (37), recalling the idea of the birds acting as antidotes to physical labour in “Helpstone.” Back then, Clare wrote that the birds “cheer’d [his] needy toilings with a song” (144), offering a respite from his strenuous labour. Because his current environment is silent, birds no longer have the power to cheer his fatigue and loneliness.

In “Sleep of Spring,” Clare’s loving descriptions of nature only focus on the past, revealing his current separation from nature. He says that he “loved the song which nature sung” (33) and that he “loved the wood” (35). As discussed earlier in the chapter, Clare still had access to the natural scenes surrounding both asylums, even though the above lines are written in the past tense. Therefore, something has clearly changed within Clare, as he is unable to gain joy from observing nature. Surely there were still birds present in the woods outside the asylums, but Clare speaks of nature’s song in the past tense, suggesting a diminished relationship with sound during his confinement. However, Clare also expresses longing to “see” the wood and plain (41), suggesting an inability to perceive with his eyes. Alternatively, the articulation of his desire to see the woods could refer to a specific location (likely in Helpstone); hence, he may not be able to comprehend the details of the landscape because it is not ‘his’ landscape of Helpstone. Similarly to his feelings in Northborough, Clare may have felt alienated in large part due to his unfamiliarity with the

outdoor scene. As such, Clare may be longing for the woods of his youth, in which he recognized every tree and nest and also felt himself secure in a nest of his own. His mentality is one of loss and nostalgia. Moreover, Clare thought of his stay in each of the institutions as temporary (Bate 511), and he waited impatiently for his return home (in this case, to Northborough); as neither environment was seen as a permanent home, he was doubly displaced. As a result, Clare was impaired in his ability to find what happiness was possible in the landscapes surrounding the asylums.

In “[‘How hot the sun rushes’],” the decay of Clare’s outdoor world mirrors his internal state. This poem discusses the heat of the sun as a destroyer of nature, essentially establishing nature as divided and conflictual, and showing Clare’s now-troubled relationship with nature.

How hot the sun rushes
Like fire in the bushes
The wild flowers look sick at the foot of the tree
Birds nest are left lonely
The pewit sings only
And all seems disheartened, and lonely like me (1-6).

This stanza portrays the sun as a powerful enemy to flowers and birds, suggesting an afternoon scene at the height of summer. The personification Clare uses in describing the flowers as “sick” serves to unite him with the wild plants, as his sickness (both physical and mental) must have been a prevalent topic of reflection while he was confined to the asylum. In addition, the birds, which Clare described formerly as the companions of sweet freedom in “Sleep of Spring,” are now described in terms of their loneliness. The nests could be empty due to the extreme heat, but this image also symbolizes the isolation Clare feels, since, like a bird, he has been abandoned by his companions. Moreover, “[‘How hot the sun rushes’]” can be contrasted with Clare’s Helpstone poem “[Summer Evening],”

discussed in Chapter 2. In the latter, Clare includes many different bird species and their songs/calls, portraying the scene as vibrant in terms of its soundscape. The birds in “[Summer Evening]” were often described in groups, and Clare recorded the cooperative, harmonious relationship that many of them shared. While it is true that more birds might have been present in “[Summer Evening]” because the temperature cools off later in the day, much of Clare’s language in “[‘How hot the sun rushes’]” is figurative, suggesting that his feelings influenced his perception. For instance, the descriptions of the flowers looking sick, the nests being lonely, and the entire environment seeming disheartened are projections of the speaker’s internal state. Again, Clare uses the word “seems” instead of “is,” further suggesting that his observation of nature may be unrealistic. In his lonely state of confinement, Clare writes that all of nature seems lonely as well. Even the image of the solitary singer (the pewit) mirrors Clare’s own position: as a poet who has been cut off from nature and his loved ones, Clare is a lonely singer, as well. Hudson writes that pewits vocalize during both the day and the night, most commonly during breeding season, which does not refute Clare’s observation of the bird singing in midday. Interestingly, however, Hudson also writes that pewits “have their nests near each other; and so gregarious are the birds at all times, that even during incubation, and when the young are out, they are to be seen associating together when feeding, and when indulging in their sportive exercises in the air” (394). Hence, Clare’s portrayal of the sociable pewit as solitary seems unlikely, suggesting instead that his own emotional turmoil influences his perceptive abilities. He struggles to find a connection with nature as he writes, as he is unable to relate to the creatures of nature such as birds. Presumably, the birds’ nests are not only lonely because the birds do not converge in them but also because, as a long-time observer of birds and

their nests, Clare has lost the pleasure of observing nests filled with birds and eggs. Clare's field notes in *John Clare's Birds* include accounts of full pewit nests in the springtime (84), raising the possibility that the nest is empty because the breeding season has ended. This detail in "[‘How hot the sun rushes’]" indicates that Clare's writing still contained accurate descriptions of birds, the legacy of earlier experience, but the moments he chooses to record also reveal his feelings of isolation. In the second stanza, Clare indicates that "[t]he crows nest look darkly / O'er fallows dried starkly" (10-11), again conveying the death of nature and his inspiration. He concludes the stanza by writing that "the sheep all look restless as nature and me" (12), emphasizing his inability to find peace in nature as he once did. His portrayal of the sheep as restless also indicates aimless movement as opposed to peaceful dwelling, again mirroring Clare's state of transience rather than secure nesting.

In the final two stanzas of the poem, Clare seems to shift into memory, describing a bustling natural scene in which he is happy and free. These stanzas describe the landscape that is dearest to Clare, raising the possibility that he is thinking again of Helpstone. The lines represent sound as an important agent in reading the landscape.

Yet I love a meadow dwelling
Where nature is telling
A tale to the clear stream—its dearest to me
To sit in green shadows
While the herd turns to gadders
And runs from the hums of the fly and the bee

This spot is the fairest
The sweetest and rarest
This sweet sombre shade of the bright green tree
Where the morehens flag-nest
On the waters calm breast
Lies near to this sweet spot that's been mother to me (13-24).

This description is in stark opposition to the hot, dark, lonesome landscape of the first half of the poem. Immediately, Clare presents a more dynamic environment and soundscape, a land that is inherently communicative: “nature is telling / A tale to the clear stream.” The use of enjambment allows multiple interpretations of these lines. First, in lines 14-15, Clare writes that “nature is telling” and then inserts a line break, indicating that as a listener in the overall soundscape, he received communication from nature; however, when the following line is added, nature tells a tale to the stream, conveying the internal conversations among elements of nature. Then, in lines 15-16, Clare could mean either that nature’s tale is dearest to him or that it is dearest to him to “sit in green shadows.” The former reading affirms his appreciation of the sounds of nature, while the latter conveys its effect: a sense of peace he gained from Helpstone’s natural scene. The volume of natural sounds and the brightness of the shadows both contradict the quiet darkness of the previous stanzas. Clare writes that the herd “turns to gadders,” which suggests a wild, aimless, or hurried sense of movement (*OED*). For the herd to become gadders suggests dynamic movement—perhaps in a place where the heat of summer is not so crippling as to slow nature down—and since the flies and bees are humming, the environment also features ample sound. The dynamism of the herd, though inadvertent, points to an unrestricted form of movement specific to Helpstone, as Clare could roam the land freely prior to enclosure. While the herd can run from an attack, Clare cannot, as he is immobilized in the asylum. Thus, the variation between “[‘How hot the sun rushes’]” and “[Summer Evening]” suggests irreconcilable problems for Clare in the asylum. Alternatively, the term “gadders,” which connotes “beast[s] being tormented by gadflies” (Robinson and Powell 511), presents an unromanticized image of rural life. These distressed animals act as an

unconscious link to the other irritations Clare discusses in the poem, showing his strained relationship with nature. Even this seemingly peaceful stanza contains an image of distress, emphasizing Clare's inability to idealize nature during his confinement.

While remembering the bustle of the Helpstone community, Clare also indicates his own personal attachment to the landscape, emphasizing the misery of his confinement. First, he writes that he loves a meadow "dwelling" (13), suggesting a permanent form of residence. This line is a reminder that Clare once lived within nature, just as the birds did, but now he is enclosed. Perhaps he still has opportunities to visit nature, but he recognizes that he does not and cannot live there anymore. Furthermore, Clare's decision to call the moorhen's home a "flag-nest" (22) demonstrates Clare's previous knowledge of its dwelling place. Robinson and Powell clarify that Clare's use of "flags" means "reeds, rushes" (510), which demonstrates the precise details Clare remembers about Helpstone birds' nests. As discussed in Chapter 2, the birds of Helpstone often acted as markers of the territory, and Clare knew precisely where each bird lived and what materials they used to build their nests. Perhaps observing just any nest is insufficient for Clare; instead, he longs for the nests of "this sweet spot that's been mother" to him (24). It is especially significant that Clare chose to focus on the moorhen, as this bird is known for living in a watery environment (Ward 379-380). According to Bridget Keegan in *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry, 1730-1837*, drainage of wetlands was often a precursor to enclosure of the land (149). John Barrell details the drainage of the fields in Helpstone: commissioners ordered two long drains that affected all six parishes that faced enclosure. He also writes that two streams were stopped at the source, which similarly altered the topography and sound of Helpstone (Barrell 108-109). As such, the moorhen's habitat

would be greatly threatened, potentially causing a decline in bird populations. Despite this threat, Keegan reveals that “Clare is the first English poet to celebrate systematically the almost universally despised wetland ecosystem” (149). Perhaps Clare’s appreciation for both the moorhen and its habitat caused him to reflect on a past time in which the bird was content and free, just as he once was. In his current state of confinement, Clare reflects on the pre-enclosure landscape of his beloved village, concurrently expressing his own desire for freedom.

In another of his “Song” poems (hereafter “Song C”), Clare connects springtime and its birds with Mary’s return, yet his melancholic tone suggests that these symbols of happiness are unattainable. The setting of the poem is autumn, and Clare notes that “[t]he summer’s voice is still” (4), as are the “[s]weet voices” of the vale and hill (10-11), suggesting that the birds are silent. This interpretation is confirmed when Clare writes that the “cuckoo’s note” has fled “[t]o countries far remote / And the nightingale is vanished from the wood” (13-15). Although the cuckoo and the nightingale both depart for migration between August and October (Ward 91, 270), making the lack of birds realistic for an autumn poem, Clare again chooses to write about this lonesome scene that matches his own feelings. He reveals the overwhelming influence of his emotions when he writes that his true love has “fled away” (19), even using the same verb with which he described the departure of the cuckoo’s song. This connection establishes a parallel between birds and Mary, and also between birds and Clare’s happiness. Clare believes that a return of springtime will mark Mary’s reappearance, as well:

But she’s coming when the happy spring is near
When the birds begin to sing
And the flowers begin to spring
And the cowslips in the meadows reappear

When the woodland oaks are seen
In their monarchy of green
Then Mary and loves pleasure will be here (24-30).

Clare connects Mary to springtime, but it is improbable that he will ever experience either the same way he did before due to his mental affliction. Clare knows that his current relationship with nature is strained, so he could again be recalling the nature of Helpstone; after all, Helpstone is where he first met Mary. Ultimately, Clare's references to birds, flowers, and picturesque nature all contrast the bleak environment he identifies with his time in the asylums. Because of his confinement, Clare never did see Mary again,²² creating further disparity between the world he described in "Song C" and the world where he lived. Although Clare's focus is on Mary rather than birds, his connection with both has diminished as a result of Helpstone's enclosure and his own entrapment. Mary may have already been dead when Clare composed this poem, but he would surely have difficulty accepting this. Still, on some level, Clare recognized that Mary was gone and could not come back to him, and the only way to reunite would be through death.

Clare's enclosure poetry written in Helpstone anticipated the loss expressed in his poems of the asylum years. To Clare, nature was dead, and he now failed to perceive it accurately with his senses. The lack of bird poems in the asylum years demonstrates his retreat from nature, just as the previous abundance of bird poetry emphasized his deep bond with nature. Although he was still spending time outdoors during his confinement, Clare's interior state prevented him from seeing or hearing nature as he did in Helpstone and, to a

²² When Clare fled from High Beech Asylum and walked for nearly one hundred miles, he was longing to see the two women he believed to be his wives (Patty, his actual wife, and Mary, his childhood love). However, Bate writes that not only did Clare not find Mary when he returned home, but she had in fact died in 1838, one year after Clare was first admitted to the asylum. Although he was informed of the incident, Clare refused to believe that Mary had died (Bate 456-457).

lesser extent, in Northborough. He sought to return to the former through his memories. Due to his unhappiness and perpetual hope of returning home to Northborough, Clare never experienced a sense of permanence during his confinement. While nature was present all around him, it was not Clare's nature, and his poetry reveals how difficult this disconnection was for the former poet of place.

CONCLUSION

Fledgling Scholarship

Oral culture was highly important to Clare as demonstrated by how many of his poems he called “Song.” As a long-time songster, it is fitting that Clare’s attention often turned to birds and especially their calls and melodies. He did not simply include birds in his writing, but he provided loving and highly detailed transcriptions of their songs. Birds formed an integral part of nearly every soundscape and landscape Clare depicted, and Clare often positions himself as a listener and receiver of their songs. By acknowledging his role in the soundscape, Clare is embedded in the natural world through his relationship with sound. He interprets complex emotion in the songs he hears, portraying birds as significant, sentient beings worthy of observation. When his role as a listener is compromised and the bird song in his poetry diminishes, there is a corresponding sense of loss in his poetry. Thus, not just song, but bird song shaped Clare and his relationship with nature throughout his life.

Clare’s ability to register bird song depended on his level of familiarity with and comfort in a specific landscape. Clare’s years in Helpstone feature his richest depictions of bird song, and I argue that this is possible because of his rootedness in the environment. Clare often described himself as enfolded in nature like a bird in a nest, but this sense of protection is exclusive to Helpstone. The natural world of Clare’s native village always welcomed him, offering a safe space in which Clare could observe wild animals and plants. Although enclosure was taking place long before Clare left Helpstone, the pre-enclosure landscape of Helpstone, in all of its diversity, became his model of paradise. Before the

outdoor world became tainted by dislocations to unfamiliar territories, Clare shared a rich, immediate relationship with birds and identified with their sense of safety and liberty.

Clare's relocation to Northborough in 1832 posed a significant threat to his identity and, in turn, his ability to listen. Without the security of his native fields, Clare experienced a sense of exposure and vulnerability in the landscape. In Northborough, he met with 'stranger' birds instead of his lifelong allies, and the division between human and avian species grew. Instead of describing the commonalities between birds and humans, Clare emphasizes the alienation he feels as an intruder in foreign territory. His uncertainty is clear from the lack of first-person pronouns in his Northborough bird poetry, as well as the omission of specific details he once gloried to record. Clare no longer understands the birds' behaviour or songs, as his ability to comprehend birds is a measure of how settled he feels in the landscape. In losing his nesting place, Clare loses his strong relation with birds and his ability to perceive their sounds clearly.

Finally, Clare's institutionalization from 1837 to 1864 parallels the bondage of enclosure, further disrupting his bond with birds. The enclosure movements in Britain affected both Clare and various bird species, not the least many wetland birds who lost their habitats as a result of drainage schemes. Enclosure also impacted the ability of bird song to travel, as the new barriers would block the transmission of sound. Similarly, Clare's personal confinement in the two asylums hindered his ability to hear the sounds of nature. Although he still had access to the woods and birds outside both of the institutions, Clare's relationship with nature and sound had been altered inextricably. His emotional state was so transformed that he sometimes failed even to notice bird song, and the range of his observations shrank immeasurably. Of course, Clare still wrote about birds, but his status

as a listener in the larger soundscape was destroyed because of his internal struggle. His confinement mirrored the enclosure of the land, both of which diminished Clare's relationship with birds and sound.

I have attempted to provide a new approach to studying Clare by following the emotional trajectory of his life through his bird poetry, but there is still further work to be done. Many of Clare's poems lack specific composition dates, so continued biographical research may provide context for Clare's feelings at the specific periods of writing. It is also possible that more of Clare's poetry will emerge, given how prolific a writer he was and that manuscripts still remain unpublished. In addition, further research on the impact of nineteenth-century enclosure on birds would provide interesting information regarding Clare's environmental foresight and empathy toward these creatures. Presently, it remains unclear how significant an effect enclosure had historically on Northamptonshire bird populations. Although important work has been done in the past two decades to compile Clare's bird writings, a further interdisciplinary analysis of his descriptions would be beneficial. This study would not only reveal the richness of a lost environment, but the originality of Clare's vision. Clare's body of bird writing is remarkable, and the flourishes of his songs mark the notes of a peasant poet's life.

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