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Citation: Stewart, David (2020) Poetry's Variety: Clare and the Poetic Scene in the 1820s and 1830s. In: Palgrave Advances in John Clare Studies. Palgrave Advances . Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp. 17-36. ISBN 9783030433734, 9783030433741

Published by: Palgrave Macmillan

URL: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43374-1_2 <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43374-1_2>

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Poetry's Variety: Clare and the Poetic Scene in the 1820s and 1830s

The later 1820s and 1830s has often been presented as a dead-end not only for Clare but for poetry as a whole. Publishers, many claim, were afraid of publishing poetry, and that which was published was trite religious sentimentality aimed at middle-class female readers. Clare, following the success of his first two volumes in 1820 and 1821, began to find himself isolated. The *London Magazine* circle dispersed, his plans to publish *The Shepherd's Calendar* and *The Midsummer Cushion* hit block after block, and, finally, readers seemed to have lost interest in him, their attention fixed by new fashions. Scholars have recently challenged this view of the period's poetry, its readerships, and its market, to reveal a culture that had indeed changed since Clare first appeared in print in 1820, but that was far more vital and far more varied than such a view allows.¹ This was a time of significant flux in the financial markets and real acceleration in print technology, changes that had knock-on effects on poets and publishers. It was also a period in which Clare was highly active as he sought to adapt to the changes around him. Rather than seeing Clare as a victim of a period too busy with steam-driven commerce to hear his voice, this chapter shows that he was productively engaged with this period of flux. The mid-1820s to the mid-1830s, a period often presented as one of retreat and isolation for Clare, a time when his plans to address the public seemed to be thwarted at every turn, was in fact one of remarkable experimentation during which he opened himself up to a changing and highly diverse poetic scene.

Poetry and its Markets

Clare's publishing career – beginning in success in 1820 before dropping off into ever greater struggles to find a market – seems to map neatly on to the history of sales of poetry in Britain. 1820 saw the highest number of individual volumes of new poetry yet published in a single year: 957.² The 1825-6 stock market crash took down a number of publishers, most famously Archibald Constable, but it also had a severe impact on Clare's publisher, John Taylor. After that, as Roger Sales puts it, '[t]he bottom ... dropped out of the market' for poetry.³ The poet, periodical writer and editor Thomas Pringle said as much to Clare in 1831: 'Poetry they say is quite unsaleable – and even Wordsworth and other well known writers cannot find a purchaser for their MSS'.⁴ The picture maps neatly onto conventional literary periodization of Romantic and Victorian eras: 1820 also saw volumes published by Keats, Wordsworth, and Shelley, but by 1835, when Clare's *The Rural Muse* finally appeared, a young Charles Dickens was on his way to fame as a new kind of prose writer.

Studies of the period between, roughly, 1824 and 1840, are beginning to increase, and in doing so to reveal a highly active literary marketplace. The idea that there was no market for poetry is simply untrue. When Clare published *The Rural Muse* in 1835 his book joined at least 569 new volumes of poetry published that year.⁵ Whatever Pringle might have said, Wordsworth's *Yarrow Revisited* (1835) was a success, but this did not come as a particular surprise to a poet whose volumes had been selling increasingly well right across the 1820s. 1835 was no sudden return to form for the poetry market; the production of new volumes of poetry remained largely consistent across the mid-1810s into the 1830s at above 500 volumes per year. Individual volumes of verse were not the only means by which poets reached readers. The literary annuals – elegantly-bound miscellanies published for the Christmas gift market, containing original verse and prose alongside steel-plate engravings of works of art – were one of the publishing phenomena of the era.⁶ Clare published at least 39 poems in

annuals in this period.⁷ There were many other periodical publications – daily, weekly and monthly – that provided a space for a wide variety of poets. Poetry anthologies found a market, many of them designed to sell in Europe and the British colonies.

There were a great variety of kinds of poetry that found substantial audiences in this period, all of which Clare was aware of. The fact most noted by Romantic and Victorian scholars is the success of female poets. Letitia Elizabeth Landon and Felicia Hemans, the two bestsellers, were joined by many others, including Mary Russell Mitford and Maria Jane Jewsbury. Other writers found success in different modes. Clare's friend George Darley produced ethereal, metrically innovative aestheticism. Such work proved common among relatively obscure poets such as Thomas Lovell Beddoes and Thomas Wade as well as subsequently canonical figures like Tennyson and Browning. Clare corresponded frequently with Darley, and enjoyed playing up to the aggressive rejection of a supposedly 'feminised' poetic culture such poets adopted, mocking the 'trumpeting clamour about her L.E.Ls. Hemans's Dartford Moorians'.⁸ Many critics have taken him at his word in his rejection of Hemans and Landon (L.E.L.) in this letter, but, as I will go on to argue, his poetry indicates a far greater openness to the 'feminine' poetry that dominated this era's poetry market, as well as a fascination with counter-positions like those Darley adopted.

Many other styles of writing were available to Clare. Thomas Hood may have rejected one of Clare's poems for an annual publication, but Hood's punning, comic verse – found also in the work of John Hamilton Reynolds (a friend of Clare's), or the work of Winthrop Mackworth Praed – was another success of the period.⁹ John Keble's *The Christian Year*, first published in 1827, went through 13 editions by 1835; Clare's friend James Montgomery had success in this vein of consolatory Evangelical poetry, often written with the colonies and missionaries in mind, as did Robert Montgomery and Bernard Barton. Political poetry remained important, though the publication format shifted. 1820 was a peak

for sales of individual new volumes because so many political poems were published in this year of crisis. Poets did respond to Catholic Emancipation and the Reform Bill in verse, but they tended to publish their poems in newspapers and magazines rather than individual volumes. Scholarship of these developments is growing, and the texts of this era are far easier to access as a consequence of scholarly editions and digital reproductions. Clare criticism is now well placed to rethink his relations with this complex, unstable, but productive era.

These literary developments from the mid-1820s were powered by technological, political and social shifts. The steam-powered press had been in use since 1814, but it was not until the mid-1820s and 1830s that it became widely used, increasing print runs and reducing costs.¹⁰ From the mid-1820s steel-plate engravings in annuals and periodicals diffused relatively cheap, high-quality reproductions of visual art to a much wider audience. Periodicals like the *New Monthly Magazine* and the literary annuals offered venues of self-fashioning for middle-class readers who assumed in this era a new cultural confidence. Ben Wilson describes, as an aspect of these changes, a new era of ‘cant’ dominated by a rising middle-class Evangelicalism that made the rambunctious early 1820s culture of Byron’s *Don Juan* and Pierce Egan’s *Life in London*, both of which Clare was aware of, seem increasingly inappropriate for mainstream consumption.¹¹ The radical political agitation of the Peterloo era had been largely defeated, but bubbled under and coloured the often anxious discussions about Catholic Emancipation (1829) and the Reform Bill (1832). The 1825-6 stock-market crash was a product of a new kind of speculative financial activity. Angela Esterhammer has explored how this period’s technological and financial shifts affected its literary productions such as improvisational poetry, the periodical press, and the Silver Fork novel. The dominance of the periodical press combined with a period of heightened (and often catastrophic) stock-market speculation prompted in literary writers a fascination with ‘hasty

action that lacks a solid or profound basis, that responds to contingencies and constructs its own (pseudo-) reality'.¹²

The principal characteristic of the literary market of the later 1820s and 1830s, then, was not its deathly quietness, but rather a speedy changefulness that made it bewilderingly hard to map. Clare's work was not stymied by his context, but drew creatively upon it. Clare scholars have recently become attuned to the ways in which his creativity benefited from his interactions with his contemporaries in the literary market.¹³ This scholarship has developed two aspects of Clare that I wish to build on here: these interactions present him as connected rather than isolated, and they also indicate Clare's openness to new forms of creativity. As Simon Kövesi puts it, this is 'a Clare who changed his mind and his models of creative conception, who theorised the writing of poetry and the forging of writerly identities'.¹⁴ Critics have not, so far, explored in detail the connections Clare forged in the literary market of the later 1820s and early 1830s, in part because this period, poets like Landon, and publishing venues like the annuals, have themselves been presented as being of marginal critical interest. It is important, I argue, that we explore Clare's engagements with that world, and that we value the new turns his creative self-fashioning took. By placing Clare in dialogue with his fellow products of this era of flux and doubt, a new sense of Clare's mobile interactions with his contemporary readers and writers emerges.

Clare's Poetics of Doubt

Jonathan Bate makes the intriguing suggestion that Clare in the later 1820s might have become a periodical essayist and revealed a manner with 'not only the personal touch, but also the sententiousness and insight, together with the humour and the gift of irony, that characterise the essays of Hazlitt and Lamb'.¹⁵ Something like that, combined, I will suggest, with an unfixing quality that marks the era as a whole, emerges in a prose essay Clare

prepared around 1829-30, which he referred to as the ‘Letter to A C’.¹⁶ The ‘Letter to A C’ is an unlikely addition to the Clare canon, little studied by scholars. I wish to present it as a model of the kinds of interactive creativity Clare developed in this era.

The ‘Letter to A C’ is a prose essay written as a letter to Allan Cunningham, a friend of Clare’s who began life as a stonemason in Nithsdale in Southwest Scotland before establishing himself in the literary and cultural scene of London.¹⁷ The essay is headed ‘On the Wonders of inventions curiositys strange sights & other remarkables “of the last forty days” in the Metropolis in a Letter to A Friend’. The format of the letter to a friend, and indeed the format of the country cousin writing about the trip to the city, was an established feature of the magazine culture of the 1820s.¹⁸ Clare enjoyed his fourth extended stay in London between February and March 1828, but the essay does not depend so much on Clare’s actual visit as it does on his knowledge of the metropolitan print culture of his era. ‘Of the last forty days’ suggests a Biblical timeframe – and indeed religion plays a central part in the letter – but it also hints at the central feature of the essay: its encounter with a culture moving so fast that any attempt to write about it produces at best baffled wonder.

Clare adopts the persona of the astonished rural friend hearing rumours and reading reports of the latest London phenomena. The essay becomes a headlong rush that leaves the reader grasping for a point of stability. Clare draws out what Esterhammer calls the ‘ephemerality, superficiality, and theatricality’ of the oft-discussed 1820s idea of the ‘march of intellect’, the relentless onward progress of a steam-driven age.¹⁹ Rather than the confident gaze of one who has mastered what he sees, Clare’s bemused, excited, mobile manner reflects an era in which there is no clear link to past traditions and no possibility of confidently projecting towards a future. ‘When will wonders have an end,’ he exclaims, mingling ecstasy with frantic despair:

when shall we become standard in knowledge when shall it be said – “The force of genius can no farther go” – the last forty days has left me behind a modern “Reading made easy” – where am I the units & common place materials of things hardly know me in my astonishments – can it be so far in the year of the world as 5590 – am I so far among the improvements of time & so ignorant. (27)

1825 saw the implementation of the ‘Act for Ascertaining and Establishing Uniformity of Weights and Measures’, and it would be the steam trains that Clare comments on in the essay that prompted the standardisation of time zones later in the century.²⁰ But these measurements seem not to provide a reliable method of accounting. ‘Where am I’ Clare asks: the question is about fixing a location in time as well as space, neither of which seem possible. Shadowing this doubt is another question: ‘who am I’?

Clare shows us a world in which quack doctors promise miracle cures, preachers preach eternal salvation and the coming revelation, and politicians promise the earth. The spirit of the age is one of multiplicity, of relentless change, and of doubt. At the end of one great list of signs and wonders (ghosts, learned pigs, Methodists), Clare remarks ‘not that their authenticities are beyond my belief – they are only left behind it aye very far behind it’ (24). The essay might be understood as an account of what went wrong with Clare’s relation with the literary market in the 1820s. An age of stock-market speculations, ephemeral wonders, fashionable poetry and even more fashionable ‘Silver Fork’ novels leaves Clare’s quiet rural observations behind. Instead, Clare is reduced to trying to follow the trend in this rather desperate way, in prose that makes a Bartholomew Fair show of him as a country bumpkin bowled over by modernity.

Yet Clare, as Kövesi has argued, was just as capable of flight and play as he was of ‘authenticity’; indeed, ‘authenticity’ becomes in Clare’s essay another element of the theatricality he adopts and reflects. Clare’s performative ‘anxieties’ (25) are a teasing

reflection on the speculative excitements and uncertainties of his period. In the 1830 annual *The Keepsake*, published towards the end of 1829, one can find an essay supposedly written in 2130 describing the extraordinary speed of modern life (it dismays Lord A that it took him a full seven and a half hours to travel from Edinburgh to London, beggars speak Latin and Irish street sweepers speak French, while Lord and Lady D have hired a steam porter).

Clare's essay works so well in this period because it suggests that things can only accelerate further. 'Booksellers perhaps thrive best on speculations' (29), Clare ponders, and the 'Letter to A C' was one of many literary speculations he essayed alongside his fellow writers for fellow readers who were often just as thrilled and overwhelmed as he is here. It offers us, in its ephemerality, its speculative quality, its theatricality, its embrace of a poetics of doubt, a model for reading Clare's interactions with a diverse, steam-powered poetic scene.

Clare in *The Anniversary*

In this section I will consider one speculative product of this era, one in which Clare's poetry rubbed shoulders with a diverse variety of types of culture. *The Anniversary: Or, Poetry and Prose for MDCCCXXIX* was published by John Sharpe of Piccadilly on the 1 November 1828, and was edited by Allan Cunningham. The book was one of the many annuals designed to be gifts for the Christmas and New Year markets. Annuals captured much of the mix of technological innovation and speculative finance that marked the era. The first British annual was published in November 1822 by Rudolf Ackermann. Annuals were beautifully bound and presented volumes that made use of the latest steel-plate engraving techniques to offer unusually high-quality reproductions of art. These were presented alongside original contributions commissioned by the leading writers of the age. The costs involved were enormous, and publishers had to sell many thousands of copies simply to break even. But

they were a huge success, and had a significant impact on the literary market, especially the market for poetry. By 1832 there were 63 annuals in the shops in Britain.²¹

The Anniversary was offered for sale at 21 shillings, bound in silk, and according to Cunningham's biographer it stood up well in a crowded market with pre-sales of 6,000 copies.²² Annuals were designed to be given as Christmas or New Year gifts. My own copy is inscribed for Eliza M. Clark by 'her aff^{te} Aunt Eliza', the dedication written on a beautifully presented inscription page featuring a wood cut by W. Harvey and J. Thompson of a stockinged cavalier offering a book to an elegant maiden with a large crucifix round her neck and a guitar cradled in her right arm, all embowered in a sylvan scene. The page might account for the half-buried scorn many Clare scholars have for this period and products of it like *The Anniversary*: the presentation of poetry as a matter of upper-class elegance; the performance of the tropes of feudal chivalry in a mercantile middle-class setting; the very beauty of the page suggesting that style matters more than substance; stylised 'sylvan' nature rather than authentic rural reality; poetry very clearly a matter of commercial exchange; the dominance of middle-class ideas of decorous femininity; the pointed artifice of the whole that claims nature as yet one more product for sentimental consumption; the large crucifix pointing to a society of religious cant keen to condemn those who stray from society's diktats rather than any spiritual feeling.

Clare had good reason to be angry with much of this, but he was willing to try the annuals on for size. He wrote to John Taylor that

these Annuals are rather teasing to write for as what one often thinks good the Editors returns back as good for nothing while another gives them the preference & what one thinks nothing of they often condescend to praise – Allan Cunninghams is the best Annual of the whole.²³

Writing for the annuals was not always easy (Cunningham sent him three sovereigns for a poem, though others forgot to pay him at all), but Clare is intrigued rather than enraged.²⁴ A closer look at the contents of *The Anniversary* lets us see the creative potential Clare found in such print places.

Cunningham includes an additional inscription page with a poetic and pictorial representation of the year. His idea was to evoke the recurrence of sentiment across the year (each month a reminder of the bond between giver and receiver that the book represents) mirrored in the recurrence of seasonal patterns ('anniversary' spelled out as twelve pictorial letters: 'anniversarie'). Alongside it, though, Cunningham offers instructions on how one might inscribe it: 'To Lady Teazle, on the Anniversarie of her wedding day, from Sir Peter'. The reference to R. B. Sheridan's satire of sentimental hypocrisy, and the particular reference to the rather less than ideal marriage between the Teazles in *School for Scandal* (1777), jars somewhat if we assume (as Sheridan, and Cunningham, do not) that sincere sentiment cannot coexist with worldly wit. Such humour is in fact common in the annuals and the poetic culture of the period. Frederic Mansel Reynolds, editor of *The Keepsake*, included, for example, a cynical and witty epigram on love in high society immediately following P. B. Shelley's essay 'On Love', and one finds similar humour in annual work by the likes of Maria Jane Jewsbury and Barry Cornwall (and, indeed, by Clare, as I will discuss below).²⁵ Beginning with the pages that frame the volume, then, *The Anniversary* is, as Clare put it, a 'tease', but it is a teasing game that readers and writers are invited to play together.

Cunningham drew on his connections in the London art world to secure outstanding engravings of paintings. These included T. Crostich's engraving of J. M. W. Turner's painting of Fonthill abbey and H. Robinson's engraving of Thomas Gainsborough's 'The Young Cottagers'. Caroline Bowles delivers one of her musings on country churchyards (a series that she started in *Blackwood's Magazine*), in which her gloom is suddenly dissipated

by a skylark. James Montgomery (a correspondent of Clare) offers a poem of religious sentiment about the longing for home that celebrates imperial missionaries. Mary Russell Mitford's 'Going to the Races' is a casually xenophobic sketch of provincial life: one sister accompanies a proud farmer to Ascot where they see King George IV ('the greatest sovereign of the world' (46), it seems), while her silly, vain sister, dressed up like 'a parrot tulip, or a milliner's doll, or a picture of the fashions in the Lady's Magazine, or like any thing under the sun but an English country girl' (51), makes a fool of herself by preferring a French dandy who proves unreliable. Clare's friend George Darley provides two poems, both of which depend on beautifully observed metrical patterns, and both of which link love, death and femininity in a slightly queasy mix. 'The Wedding Wake' describes a dead woman, the softly lulling rhythm evoking a scene in which time is slowed to a deathly crawl: 'Like a dark stream, her raven hair / Wanders adown her brow; / Look how the weetless, reckless air / Moves its dead tresses now!' (73). John Wilson's 'Edderline's Dream' is similar: it draws on Coleridge's 'Christabel' in its unusual metre, and its depiction of a woman frozen in time evokes the work of the two most important poets of the period, Letitia Landon and Felicia Hemans (and went on to influence Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Sleeper'). Local traditions and dialects often feature in annuals, though there is a slightly stronger emphasis on this in *The Anniversary* than in others, notably by James Hogg and Cunningham himself. T. Crofton Croker's 'Paddy Kelleher and his Pig: A Tale' is an amusing shaggy hog story set in Buttevant, County Cork. It provides in a comic key the theme so often found in Landon's and Hemans's poetry of someone returning from the dead.

It would be a mistake to assume that the politics of the annuals were simply quietist. Clare's favourite piece in *The Anniversary* was 'The Glowworm' by A. Ferguson.²⁶ The poem is in the 'standard Habbie' stanza associated with Robert Burns and written in a mix of Scots and English. It begins as a pastoral tale of local tradition, before accelerating outwards

into a strident condemnation of the class structure. The lower classes are in tatters, while others ‘with lordships in their pocket, / Rise glorious as a Congreve rocket’ (69): ‘The earth is yours, and all that’s on it: / Deep have ye plowed, and thick ye’ve sown it / With human bones’ (70). The burning rage about the injustice that creates ‘honest poverty’ stands in fascinating counterpoint to the poems and engravings elsewhere (Cunningham’s gloss on Sir William Beechey’s painting ‘The Little Gleaner’ for example) that find in poverty contentment and authenticity.²⁷ Robert Southey’s digressive, comic, miscellaneous ‘Epistle from Robert Southey, Esq. to Allan Cunningham’ (fascinatingly similar to Clare’s ‘Letter to A C’, written at the same time), offers a very different and defensively Tory political perspective. It too finds the annual a space of creative play. Annuals, more than many of their critics recognise, were diverse, and the form proved a place of experiment rather than a straitjacket. Clare’s work begins from a spirit of openness to these ‘teazing’ publication venues.

Clare’s contribution to *The Anniversary*, ‘Ode to Autumn’ (known as ‘Autumn’ in the MS version, opening ‘Syren of sullen moods and fading hues’), sits on pp. 75-79, following Ferguson’s ‘Glowworm’ and George Darley’s ‘The Wedding Wake’ and succeeded by Clare’s friend Eliza Emmerson’s sentimental ‘The Return’.²⁸ I will quote the poem as it appears in *The Anniversary*. It begins ‘SYREN! of sullen woods and fading hues, / Yet haply not incapable of joy, – / Sweet Autumn, I thee hail!’ (75). It feels like a triumph of culture over nature. The apostrophe to the personified spirit of the season, placed in small capitals and crowned with an exclamation mark, folds the natural passage of the seasons into a set of conventions that are functions of poetic cliché and the art of the printer. The poem that follows is rarely discussed by Clare scholars. That might be understandable: the voice that emerges seems so conventional (the laboured ‘haply’, the distanced ‘poetic’ inversion ‘I thee hail’, the feeling that he is producing an annual poem simply to make money), and it is

Clare's wild individualism that we have tended to prize. It is, I think, a poem that draws on conventions and habits, but we need not simply dismiss it on that basis.

'Ode to Autumn' does indeed fit very neatly into the annual mode: readers now will – quite rightly – notice the allusions to Keats's 'To Autumn', but annual readers would also have enjoyed this as one of very many annual poems on the seasons, and a fitting complement to the seasonal 'Anniversarie' frontispiece to the volume.²⁹ The autumn scenes that he presents are precisely habitual and are offered to readers as a communal experience that they can share not just with the poet but with other communities. Eliza M. Clark and her affectionate Aunt Eliza are one such community, and they form a wider community of the thousands of readers of *The Anniversarie* and similar annuals containing similar reflections.

Later in the poem we are invited to 'mark the hedger, front with stubborn face / The dank rude wind, that whistles thinly by, / His leathern garb, thorn proof, / And cheeks red hot with toil!' (77).³⁰ The precision of the depiction (a wind at once 'dank' and 'thin') is typical of Clare, though not unlike the rest of the annual. Mary Russell Mitford's provincial sketches were one of the fashions of the age, and they depend on a similar interchange between precise detail (a depiction of a wagtail 'with an up and down motion, like a ball tossed from the hand' (53)) and an impulse to track common 'types' of human behaviour (such as the spoiled young girl who has her head turned). Clare's hedger is similar: he is 'the' hedger, yet threatens to become a vivid individual. The description of labour here (or the fact that the hedge itself is a product of farming 'improvement' and enclosure) lacks the political charge of Ferguson's 'The Glowworm', though following that poem by only a few pages readers might well see Clare's 'Plough'd lands, thin travell'd by half hungry sheep' (77) a little differently. Equally, though, the seeming contentment of the cow boy with his 'unpremeditated song' (77) might recall the complacent vision of rural labour Cunningham

presents in response to the engraving of William Beechey's cloying painting 'The Little Gleaner' (58-59).

Clare's celebration of autumn is a season that is 'Disorderly divine' (78): this is the glory of 'dappled things' that have inspired poets before and after him. Clare's poem is many-hued too, a miscellany, and that miscellaneous quality emerges not from his resistance to the homogenising impulse of his period's print culture, but in collaboration with it. I have suggested some of the ways that the poem draws on modes of writing in the pages around him, in *The Anniversary* and in the other annuals on sale in the bookshops at Christmas in 1828. Clare frequently wrote, as he did in 'Ode to Autumn', of venturing into 'solitudes, where no frequented path / But what thine own foot makes, betrays thine home' (75). Such accounts fit well the idea that labouring-class poets were, as Clare said to Cunningham, 'intruders and stray cattle in the fields of the Muses' who had to find their own unique track.³¹ I do not wish to deny that, but Clare was in demand as an annual writer because he could create poems that sympathised with the desires of the thousands of *Anniversary* readers who took walks in the woods and liked to read poetry and prose that could guide them as they looked. As Richard Cronin has argued in his essay on Clare's interactions with Cunningham as part of the *London Magazine* circle, Clare enjoyed the opportunities for self-conscious play with identity, authenticity and belonging that many in this period employed.³² Clare's 'Ode to Autumn' is a highly conventional poem that describes habitual actions, but it is by means of these conventions and habits that he helped form a community with his annual readers. The poem's miscellaneous quality comes into being not because it has either resisted the annual mould or been forced into it, but because it is a collaboration with his editor Cunningham, with fellow writers like Mitford, Emmerson, Ferguson, Wilson and Darley, and with readers like Eliza M. Clark and her affectionate aunt.

Clare's Variety

I will finish this chapter by pointing to some of the ways that Clare's work comes into focus, in ways that are rarely considered by Clare scholars, when those works are viewed through the kaleidoscopic culture of this period. Clare had sent two poems to Allan Cunningham, intended for publication in the next volume of *The Anniversary* (due to be published at the end of 1829), before the publisher surprisingly cancelled the arrangement and began a magazine instead. Both of these poems suggest Clare's capacity to adopt diverse styles. 'Helpstone Statute or the Recruiting Party' is a narrative poem of rural custom very much in tune with Cunningham's writing, and with contributions to the 1829 *Anniversary* by Crofton Croker and James Hogg.³³ 'May Morning: Addressed to E. L. E. by the Northamptonshire Peasant' was eventually published in *The Amulet* for 1834.³⁴ The poem is addressed to Clare's regular correspondent (and fellow *Anniversary* author) Eliza Emmerson. It comes with an epigraph from George Darley's *Sylvia; or, the May Queen* (1827), an appropriate choice for a poem about May, but an unusual one too. As I have already discussed, Clare knew Darley and his work well. *Sylvia* is a highly varied verse drama, taking in dreamy-eyed songs to the fairies, drunken comedy, and references to radical reform. Clare's epigraph acts as something of a tease to readers who cannot be sure what kind of poem is to follow.

His poem is, in fact, relatively straightforward: a celebration of a female poet who has also supported the muses, with some consideration of the way that 'fashion's praise' has given laurels that 'never grew on Parnass' hill' (300). When Cunningham received the poem to E. L. E., he thought Clare had written a poem in praise of L. E. L., Letitia Elizabeth Landon. The mistake is an interesting one. Had Clare been writing to L. E. L., he really ought to have included more elaborate praise of the leading poet of the era than the brief mention that 'thou canst touch the minstrel-wire' (298). One might expect Clare, given his opposition to 'trumpeting clamour about her L.E.Ls. Hemans's Dartford Moorians', would react with

scorn to Cunningham's error: instead he says that Cunningham 'flatters me much by praising them & also by thinking them worthy of the Poetess', and that he would be 'proud' should Landon also commend them.³⁵ The mistake is revealing not so much because the poem sounds like praise of Landon, as because, in its rejection of fashion, its allusions to minstrelsy, its praise of Scott, Byron, and nature, and its hint of melancholy at the lot of this particular poet, it seems like an imitation of her. Landon's poetry frequently depended on the idea that the figures she represented are veils through which the reader views the real Landon. Although there is undoubtedly some truth in this, it was also true, as critics have recognised, that Landon enjoyed the theatrical possibilities of such a set-up.³⁶ Her references to minstrelsy and the medieval past are pointedly and self-consciously filtered through an awareness of the printed, mercantile products in which those allusions appeared. Clare, a poet so open to the possibilities of self-fashioning that print offered, learned much from this. His attitude to gender is a matter of ongoing debate, and his place in a market so dominated by female writers complicates that further. Clare enjoyed being rude about the dominant female poets of his era in letters to friends like Darley, but he was constantly fascinated by the poetic innovations around him. His work indicates his active sympathy with his fellow poets, male and female, and his fellow readers, many of whom were female.

Clare also wrote poems of religious sentiment in the later 1820s and 1830s, such as 'On a Child Killed By Lightning' that appeared in the *Forget me Not* for 1829.³⁷ The poem is typical of the poems often found in annuals and magazines in this period: a brief description of an event, followed by a consolatory moral: 'Thus Providence will oft appear / From God's own mouth to preach; / Ah! would we were as prone to hear / As Mercy is to teach!'. Felicia Hemans is perhaps the poet who did this best, but it is a highly common mode: one example in the same edition of the *Forget me Not* is James Montgomery's 'Epitaph on a Gnat, Found Crushed on the Leaf of a Lady's Album' that finds a deeper moral in this frail reminder of the

‘labour of Omnipotence’ (67). As Sarah Houghton-Walker has shown, Clare’s engagement with religion was complex and sustained across his career; a poem like this should certainly not be dismissed as piecework.³⁸ The form of the poem – the structure that moves from striking event to moral conclusion – is one that Clare picked up in the culture around him, and in doing so he was both engaging with readers who clearly found much value in such sentiments, and with a broader culture of religious revival in the period that Clare drew on in the prose essay he wrote at the same time, the ‘Letter to A C’.

The period offered Clare a highly miscellaneous culture of poetry writing, and his poetry responds to that. Clare’s poetry of this period is notably varied in tone, so much so that making a coherent ‘Clarean’ voice of it is difficult. Perhaps we ought, as Clare suggests in the ‘Letter to A C’, look for ‘authenticitys’ rather than a singular ‘authenticity’. ‘To Harry Stoe Van Dyk’ is a witty, spry verse epistle, but when it appeared in *The Pledge of Friendship* for 1828 it would not have stood out particularly. Comic verse was very common: in *The Amulet* for the same year, Thomas Hood offers a very loose translation of Horace that laments that ‘I hunt in vain for eglantine, / And find my blue-bell on a sign / That marks the Bell and Crown!’.³⁹ Clare’s ‘The Maid of the Hall’ (*Friendship’s Offering*, 1827) adopts bouncing anapaests to celebrate the social whirl of the dance; it kept good company with poets like Winthrop Mackworth Praed whose ‘The Fancy Ball’ (*New Monthly Magazine*, December 1828) and ‘Goodnight to the Season’ (*New Monthly Magazine*, August 1827) are notably similar if we permit the change of scene from rural dance to metropolitan ball. ‘Adventures of a Grass hopper’ (*Juvenile Forget me Not*, 1829, an annual for children) again adopts sprightly anapaests in a poem that is disarmingly unusual in its depictions of rural poverty, and yet highly suited to its place of publication in turning to the young female reader to suggest she learn the lesson of the grasshopper and make sure not to be idle. It is no

surprise to see the poem singled out for praise in a review of the 1829 annuals in the *Eclectic Review*.⁴⁰

The 1820s and 1830s was a bookish time, with the literary annuals and their steel-plate engravings, watered silk bindings and protective slip-cases standing as one example of the innovations that made books prized possessions to be shown off in the home. Critics have emphasised how bookish Clare was too.⁴¹ A poem written in 1828, 'Evening Pastime', hints at Clare's capacity to be at once a highly individual voice and also to fit his work neatly for the volumes in which he appeared. The sonnet describes the sociable pleasures of evening, the fire 'crackling', his wife brewing tea, the children 'who edge up their chairs' to tell stories and listen to their father reading from Thomson, Cowper or Bloomfield. The choice of Bloomfield is distinctive, and the children 'edg[ing] up their chairs' gives a touch of living reality that marks Clare out. But more than anything, I would suggest, this is an act of sympathy with the reader who holds the quarto volume of *Friendship's Offering* for 1829 in their hands, reading, quite possibly, in a very similar social setting.⁴² By tuning in, as Clare did so well, to the diversity of the period's poetic market, we can see more clearly both what marked Clare out from his peers, and what he shared.

In Clare's 'Ode to Autumn', he describes the season as 'disorderly divine'. The description might well be taken as an account of Clare's work in the mid-1820s and 1830s. The 'Letter to A C' is perhaps his most astonishing (and even bewildering) experiment, but the period as a whole was one of experiment in which Clare tested out the diverse set of forms thrown up by a print culture that seemed increasingly hard to map. I have presented a largely positive picture of Clare's creative encounters with poetry in this period, but I do not wish simply to overwrite the difficulties Clare found. But something is lost if we see Clare as being only either in opposition to his age, or forced to produce work against his better instincts merely to

make money. The idea that Clare was ever a poet interested in creating works independently of his readers misses the vitality that his creative processes took from such interactions with readers, publishers and other models of poetry. In recent years scholars have adopted a more open attitude to the poetry and print culture of this period. As that work continues, Clare critics have the opportunity to view his work's variety as a teasing, creative response to an age both 'teazing' and fascinating.

¹ See especially Richard Cronin, *Romantic Victorians: English Literature, 1824-1840* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), Gregory Dart, *Metropolitan Art and Literature 1810-1840: Cockney Adventures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Tim Fulford, *The Late Poetry of the Lake Poets: Romanticism Revised* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), Maureen McCue, Rebecca Butler and Anne-Marie Millim, eds., *Writing in the Age of William IV, Yearbook of English Studies* (2018), David Stewart, *The Form of Poetry in the 1820s and 1830s: A Period of Doubt* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) and Beatrice Turner, *Romantic Childhood, Romantic Heirs: Reproduction and Retrospection, 1820-1850* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

² I am drawing on J. R. de J. Jackson's digital *Jackson Bibliography of Romantic Poetry* <http://jacksonbibliography.library.utoronto.ca> [accessed 14/4/19] (based on his earlier print *Annals of Verse*), the fullest lists of book production in the Romantic period available. Work is ongoing on the lists, and these numbers do not include the literary annuals.

³ Roger Sales, *John Clare: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 7.

⁴ Quoted in Jonathan Bate, *John Clare: A Biography* (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 370.

⁵ For this figure, see Jackson.

⁶ For a thorough overview of the birth of the annual phenomenon, see Katherine D. Harris, *Forget Me Not: The Rise of the British Literary Annual, 1823-1835* (Athens: Ohio University Press 2015).. On Clare and the annuals see Lindsey Eckert, "'I'll Be Bound": John Clare's "Don Juan", Literary Annuals, and the Commodification of Authorship', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 69.4 (2015), 427-54 and Stephen Colclough, 'Designated in Print as "Mr John Clare": The Annuals and the Field of Reading, 1827-1835', *John Clare Society Journal* 24 (2005), 52-68..

⁷ I draw this figure from Harris, pp. 289-90. Eckert's figure of 45 includes poems in *Spirit and Manners of the Age* which is not strictly an annual.

⁸ Clare, John, *The Letters of John Clare*, ed. Mark Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 397.

⁹ Hood rejected Clare's 'The Rural Muse', suggesting 'one of your Songs to Mary... would be just the thing': *Letters*, p. 443.

¹⁰ See James Raven, *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade, 1450-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

¹¹ See Wilson, *Decency and Disorder: The Age of Cant 1789-1837* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007). On Clare's nostalgia for the earlier 1820s, see Sales, *John Clare*, p. 148.

¹² Angela Esterhammer, '1824: Improvisation, Speculation, and Identity-Construction', *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*. Ed. Dino Franco

Felluga. Extension of *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*. Web. [accessed 14/4/2019],unpag.

¹³ John Goodridge has explored these interactions most fully in *John Clare and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); see also Paul Chirico, *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), on Clare, other writers, and communities of readers, and Adam White, *John Clare's Romanticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), on Clare and the 'major' Romantics.

¹⁴ Simon Kövesi, *John Clare: Nature, Criticism and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 9.

¹⁵ Bate, *John Clare*, p. 352.

¹⁶ P. M. S. Dawson edited this essay from the manuscript and published it in 2001: 'Clare's "Letter to Allan Cunningham": An Unpublished Prose Work', *John Clare Society Journal* 20 (2001), pp. 21-37. Dawson's edition includes a very helpful introduction and much-needed explanatory footnotes. References are to this edition. An advertisement for its publication appeared in the *Stamford Champion* on 2 February 1830, though Dawson's is the first publication.

¹⁷ On Clare and Cunningham, see Richard Cronin, 'John Clare and the *London Magazine*' *New Essays on John Clare: Poetry, Culture and Community*, eds. Simon Kövesi and Scott McEathron (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 209-27.

¹⁸ For example, Peter George Patmore's series of 'London Letters to Country Cousins' in the *New Monthly Magazine* (1824-5). Clare may also have in mind Pierce Egan's Corinthian Tom and his country friend Jerry Hawthorn in *Life in London* (1820).

¹⁹ Esterhammer, '1824', unpaginated.

²⁰ The Act was passed 17 June 1824, and implemented on 1 June 1825. 5590 may refer to the Hebrew year, equivalent to 1829/1830 CE.

²¹ See Harris, p. 283.

²² The editions I have seen are bound in boards and leather, though it was offered for sale at 21s bound in green silk. See David Hogg, *The Life of Allan Cunningham*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1875), p. 281. A facsimile edition is available currently via Google Books.

²³ *Letters*, p. 451.

²⁴ For Cunningham's payment see *Letters*, p. 457. See *Letters*, p. 458 on S. C. Hall failing to pay Clare, and p. 424 on receiving 20 guineas a sheet for contributions to the *Forget me Not*.

²⁵ *Keepsake* (1829), p. 49.

²⁶ *Letters*, p. 457. Possibly Adam Ferguson, Esq., of Woodhill (1783-1862).

²⁷ A theme that Clare himself essayed in 'The Quiet Mind', a poem in the 1828 *Amulet* signed 'The Northamptonshire Peasant'; See Clare, *Poems of the Middle Period, 1822-1837*, eds. Eric Robinson, David Powell and P. M. S. Dawson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).3: 300-2.

²⁸ Clare, *Poems* 3: 258-68.

²⁹ John Goodridge has explored in depth Clare's relations with Keats, noting how deeply he was engaged with Keats's 'To Autumn': see *Clare and Community*, pp. 74-5.

³⁰ The comma before 'front' seems an editorial error.

³¹ *Letters*, p. 303.

³² See Cronin, 'John Clare and the *London Magazine*'.

³³ Clare, *Poems* 3: 163-174.

³⁴ It was also published in the *Stamford Champion* in 1830. The title given in the Oxford edition is 'To – on May Morning'; Clare, *Poems* 3: 279-85.

³⁵ *Letters*, pp. 397, 460, 461.

³⁶ See, for example, Glennis Stephenson, *Letitia Landon: The Woman behind L.E.L.* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995) and Jill Rappoport, 'Buyer Beware: The Gift Poetics of Letitia Elizabeth Landon', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 58.4 (2004), 441-73.

³⁷ Clare, *Poems* 3: 285-6; it appears on p. 272 of the *Forget me Not*. I quote from the *Forget me Not* version.

³⁸ See Sarah Houghton-Walker, *John Clare's Religion* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).; on this poem see p. 200.

³⁹ *The Amulet* (1828), p. 87.

⁴⁰ *The Eclectic Review*, 30 (November 1828), p. 477.

⁴¹ See, for example, Chirico and Goodridge.

⁴² The poem appears on p. 60 of *Friendship's Offering*, from which I quote; see Clare, *Poems* 4: 161-2.