



Romanticism on the Net

Toward a Poetics of Disappearance: The Vanishing Commons in John Clare’s “The Lament of Swordy Well”

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Abstract

This essay suggests that various ideas emerging in recent ecological critique – such as the Anthropocene, the near-term extinction of humanity, and the world without us – take for granted a future human observer, even though these ideas put the existence of such a person in doubt. To take the prospect of human erasure seriously, thought must go further and think its own dissolution. It may do so in part by exploring a poetics of disappearance, a model for which this essay finds in the final stanza of John Clare’s “Lament of Swordy Well.”

Biographical Note

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1. Those of us who live in this terminal period of history, facing what may well be the near-term eradication of the human race, confront the rather intimidating challenge of how to conceive of our cultural inheritance in these new conditions. One could argue that those who study the literary heritage must learn how to read it after its era has passed, after it has turned into ash, for it is unquestionably the case that every term in that legacy is under duress. At the very least, the enabling contexts for the emergence of modernity and its heirs are beginning to collapse, threatening the privileged premises on which that entire trajectory relies, and accordingly in recent years Romantic scholarship has attended to a range of alternatives to familiar renditions of subjectivity, humanity, knowledge, and the object, pushing past the legacies even of post-phenomenological theory, posthumanism, and materialist criticism.
2. The task of thinking the exigencies of our moment, however, is more difficult than might at first appear. Even in our explorations of the new situation of thought, we may still rely on too comforting a notion of thought itself. Recent attempts to capture our new condition, for example, have often relied on the idea of the Anthropocene, a term that is meant to name a new geological era. But even this notion is insufficient. To satisfy the criteria for naming such an era, the designation must refer to specific signals in the geological strata that a scientific observer can use to distinguish one layer from another. Such signals might include changes in the rock itself, the altered chemistry of material remains, evidence of an altered situation for life, or a change in the arrangement of strata from a sea level rise (Zalasiewicz). Defining an era on the basis of what is evident to a future observer, this designation takes for granted that there will be such an observer – a future human being. But the existence of such a person is precisely the assumption that is no longer tenable. As Srinavas Aravamudan observes, the notion of the Anthropocene requires one to “anticipate . . . some future standpoint that could very well be a vantage point beyond human

existence” and thus exemplifies what he calls *catachronism*, or “the inversion of anachronism, [which] characterizes the backlash of the Anthropocene as post-human nomenclature” (8). This insight, however, goes at least one step further than Aravamudan himself suggests: if to capture the logic of our moment, one must conceive of a geological record that will shortly be offered up to no one whatsoever, that record in consequence disappears as an object of observation, except perhaps for a mode of reading that might transpire after the disappearance of human beings (cf. Colebrook 24). Our activity is not merely producing a new geological era; it is on the verge of erasing the human capacity to apprehend the geological record *tout court*.

3. Similar objections arise to positions that seem to shift their perspective outside humanity. Consider an apparently unobjectionable version of such a perspective: the notion of a possible future human extinction caused by anthropogenic climate change. Because that notion emerges alongside modern geological and biological knowledge, which demonstrated on the basis of the fossil record that species do indeed come and go, one must rely on the framework of those disciplines as one conceives of human extinction. But the prospect of that event cannot remain entirely within such a framework, for the notion of extinction assumes a geologist or biologist who can trace the emergence and disappearance of the species, even though human extinction would obviously befall the scientist as well. That event thus exceeds any discourse of extinction, any purely biological or geological account, for it bears on the possible undoing of scientific knowledge itself. Our framework for that event must therefore shift to something other than science and our name for the event to something other than extinction.
4. This problem also bears on more recent developments in apparently non-anthropocentric thought. The attempt to conceive of a world without us, for example, which apparently designates a future

without human beings, continues to assume that such a world can still be known in anticipation, as is the case with Alan Weisman's *World Without Us*. That world, while given to no audience like ourselves, is nevertheless offered up to our consumption in advance, so that it quietly relies on a mode of observation it only seems to cancel. Because this attempt insists on the continuity of what can be known, even in the absence of an observer, relying on the fundamental assumptions of modern science, it keeps out of view the problem of the one who knows and thus silently passes over a contradiction in its own stance. For its part, even speculative realism falls prey to this same impasse, for it insists on a purely material reality outside humanity – the reality of an arche-fossil or the death of the sun (Meillassoux 8-27; Brassier 223) – that it can nevertheless conceive only thanks to the labors of human scientists.

5. In his reflections on the problem of extinction, Eugene Thacker has touched on a similar critique. Pointing out that no one could ever “[give] testimony” to human extinction, he goes on to propose that it “can never be fully comprehended, since its very possibility presupposes the absolute negation of all thought.” The thought of human extinction, then, creates a dilemma that Thacker calls “speculative annihilation,” in which “the thought of a negative condition or negative state . . . entails within it the negation of thought itself” (144-45). This thought, however, applies to more than extinction per se; indeed, to do it justice one must expand it to a much wider frame. It applies, for example, to the world that speculative realism gives us: insofar as the latter broaches the notion of a world without us, or a world that has no need for us, it reveals that human extinction is a founding condition and ultimate prospect of human existence. But to think beyond human reference is already to negate human existence, including human thought; it thus leads inevitably to the prospect of the annihilation of thought itself. At the limits of all these recent

trends, then, beyond the notion of the world without us or a world outside of thought, there lies the annihilation of thought – that moment when thought encounters its own erasure.

6. While in some measure Aravamudan and Thacker broach this necessary critique, few other thinkers on these various fronts have done so. This relative absence of attention to the impasses that arise from thinking of a materiality beyond the human reveals that so far our ways of writing the world-without-us almost always continue to smuggle a relatively stable human observer or theorist into the world in which it seems to be absent, that we still conceive the world-without-us as tacitly available to us after all. It is possible that the hesitation to take up this further perspective arises from the suspicion that doing so implicitly urges us to enthrone the human once again, to insist on the privilege of the knower. This critique might appear to be regressive, taking us backward into discredited modes of thought rather than into greater rigor. But in fact, by drawing attention to how such stances still retain a tacit version of that privilege, this argument points instead to the necessity of an even more radical stance – one that suspends not only human privilege but also a notion of the world without us that, despite itself, still relies on that privilege.

7. How can one take this further step? What measures are available to us? I would suggest that in wrestling with the near-term disappearance of humanity we have little choice but to consider the undoing not only of human privilege but of knowledge itself, indeed of the capacity to make knowledge claims about any developments or events in the nonhuman world. As long as one speaks in such a manner about these presumed objects of knowledge, one remains in the framework of the human construction of that knowledge and tacitly maintains a sense of humanity's survival. Such a problem applies to more than scientific discourse, for even a commonsensical apprehension of the world retains a similar assumption that the human

perspective determines the framework for the arena of our experience. Overcoming that privilege therefore requires one to go quite far in a new direction: indeed, it asks one to do nothing less than fashion a way of thinking that could stage the disappearance of thought or of the person who thinks it. Since that kind of thinking would belong neither to the framework of knowledge nor of commonsensical apprehension, it would have to cultivate a novel, even paradoxical style of articulation. Insofar as it would attempt to capture its own cancellation, radically undercutting itself, it would be forced to rely on figures of its own undoing, anticipations of its falling into silence. It could stage itself, in short, only through some version of what I will call a poetics of disappearance.

8. To engage such a difficult scenario would require us to try new avenues into familiar questions; it would be necessary, for example, to embark on a series of speculative arguments, rethink a host of theoretical stances, and experiment with a wide range of further means of expression or evocation. Here I would like to work through aspects of this scenario by returning to the cultural tradition familiar to us and finding within it a mode of articulation that figures something analogous to this disappearance. After all, students of the Anthropocene have by now frequently explored prior analogues to our moment of anthropogenic climate change, plundering the cultural past to help conceive of the present and future. We might do the same with a poetics of disappearance as well.

9. In such an effort, I suggest, we could do worse than turn to “The Lament of Swordy Well,” the first major enclosure elegy of John Clare, dating from the poet’s middle period (Clare 147-52). This text is suitable for these purposes for many reasons, not least because it already articulates so many phases of critique corresponding to recent developments in anti-anthropocentric

speculation. Indeed, it provides an almost exemplary model for reconceiving of the entire problematic of human habitation within the nonhuman world, as well as the cultural and economic contexts for understanding our present environmental dilemmas. Within those contexts, which have already received a fair amount of commentary I cannot invoke or explore here, in its final lines it nevertheless takes a brief but crucial further step, proposing its own version of a poetics of disappearance.

10. To provide the context for understanding that further step, we must first pause to trace several phases of the poem's intervention. The "Lament" is presented in the voice of a commons that has been forcefully invaded, depleted, and undone by enclosure. Using a figure of speech scarcely anticipated in the literary tradition, Clare gives the place and its commons a human voice (Simpson). This gesture allows the place to foreground the costs of enclosure for the common people, to align itself with rural plebeian resistance to the assault on the commons. It thus adopts the stance of a certain common right – and of plebeian protest – that pervades its period. To confirm its engagement with contemporary social concerns, the poem frequently alludes to them across many of its stanzas, evoking dispossession, begging, poor relief, and the workhouse; mocking the pride of recently elevated gentry in comparison to the ancient rights of the commons; capturing the brutal consequences of wartime inflation, the emphasis on profit, and the neglect of charity; and touching on themes of slavery and freedom, the prospect of rebellion, and the fundamental insistence on common right. In its allusions, the poem is virtually a primer of the rural politics of its moment, outlining with singular intensity a poetics of the commons.
11. Yet in having the *place* speak in this way, the poem greatly expands that politics, treating the human commons as a figure for a more encompassing collective. In its view, enclosure

dispossesses local people of their access to a common place and all it represents, but that event is only a narrower instance of what destroys the networks of shared life, as well as the intensities of nonhuman relations – and the relations between the human and nonhuman – that flourished there. Without attempting to idealize its former condition, the poem eventually makes clear that the commons is an activity shared by human beings, bees, rabbits, trees, stones, even sand – along with the water in the well, the movement of the sun and the seasons, and the availability of space to passersby and of time to countless generations. In its widest range, the commons expands well beyond those forms of subsistence or of life within the limits of a specific plot of land to include vaster reaches of space and time. As a result, the poem expands a narrow into a broader version of the politics of common right, bringing into play a sense of how the human is embedded in nonhuman relations and how the language of property and freedom rest upon less noticed but even more significant affordances. The poem thus stands out as a signal moment in the history of discourses of the nonhuman, making it an important reference for those who in our own time seek to foreground and expand our sense of this vaster collective.

12. One might point out that within these broader contexts, “The Lament” deploys a subtle strategy; by translating the nonhuman into the human, it produces a series of figural ironies. For example, by suggesting that the place, like a pauper, might “fall upon” the goodwill of the parish, the poem foregrounds the status of newly displaced paupers but also hints that this status can only stand in as a limited figure for that of the newly enclosed landscape, a place that could scarcely “fall upon” the mercies of the parish, enter the workhouse or receive any form of poor relief – or fall gravitationally on anything but itself. Yet this figure has a certain viability: the place can speak in this way because alongside the human recipients of enclosure, it too has lost its former status, its ancient dignity, and has become something unlike what it was. The poem reinforces this

complex figural strategy when it evokes a human form of dispossession not exactly available to the landscape, which can “hold no hat to beg a mite / Nor pick it up when thrown” (9-10), but also not simply unavailable to it, for the voice can still say, “Though Im no man yet any wrong / Some sort of right may seek” (41-42). Here as elsewhere, the poem foregrounds a complex rhetorical negotiation between human and nonhuman dispossession, hinting in this way at a certain unrepresentable commonality across divergent domains. In doing so, it outlines a subtle negotiation between the demand for common right and the insistence of the network of relations more generally, hinting at a politics that operates on two registers at once. At once keeping the human in view while displacing it, reinforcing the movement for common right while voicing the greater demand of a wider collective, the poem at once delimits and expands upon the political discourses of its moment, creating a doubled, almost uncanny rhetoric as a result.

13. The poem’s strategy in this respect, however, leads to a further exploration of how this overall scenario operates within a complex, nearly untraceable temporality. The voice of Swordy Well, which speaks of a commons that thrived before the modern, laments within the modern, for it endures after its own erasure. In this region of its temporality, the poem gestures toward the ironies of what, following Bruno Latour, I have called the nonmodern, that is, the long continuity that obtains despite modernity’s belief in its discontinuity with the past. In the English context, the nonmodern insists most obviously in such shared practices as the moral economy, conventions of reciprocity between the gentry and the plebeian and between the human and nonhuman, and in the collective acknowledgment of common right. As I argued in *Monstrous Society*, the attempt to cancel such practices could not simply succeed, for that negated commons continues to speak, even if only in monstrous or ghostly form, in reply to those forces that would erase it. Katey Castellano suggests that a similar logic operates elsewhere in Clare in the molehills that mark the

ghostly endurance of the commons (168-69). In similar fashion, what enclosure erases continues to speak in this poem even after its disappearance, as if what is eclipsed and undone can continue to make its voice heard.

14. In such depleted persistence, “The Lament of Swordy Well” begins to take up the question with which I began: how can a poetic figure depict a voice that speaks of its own disappearance? One way, the poem suggests, is to allow a voice to lament its own undoing, its passage into what has been evacuated and undone. In the tradition of criticism inaugurated by Paul de Man, one might say that the poem moves from personification to its closely associated figure, *prosopopeia*, in which a figure for the dead addresses the living. But the poem undercuts this figure, for it features not a dead body buried under a stone on which might be engraved a few verses (in which may appear an instance of *prosopopeia*) but a body vulnerable to an even more radical procedure. Alluding to the conversion of the site into a quarry, the voice recounts that when “grain got high the tasteless tykes” dared to “turn[] me inside out / For sand and grit and stones / And turned my old green hills about / And pickt my very bones” (59, 61-64). The voice speaks not for a buried corpse, then, but one that has been *disinterred*, violated, deprived even of the status of the dead. Rather than speaking from a stone, even its stones – these bones of the landscape – have been unearthed, turned about, picked clean. If, as Sara Guyer suggests, figures of personification animate the inanimate, making life a matter of rhetoric (17), here the poem *disanimates* that animacy, hollowing out the personhood rhetorically available even in death. The poem thus deploys a sophisticated procedure, first establishing a mode of rhetorical address that expands the figure of personification to the nonhuman, then treating that address as coming from the voice of a dead or dispossessed ensemble of the human and nonhuman, only to eviscerate this already complex figure by revealing that it has been *undone*, that even the prospect of giving the site the

dignity of personhood has been destroyed through a violent exhumation. If prososopeia is artifice, the passage suggests, it is a crucial or even necessary one, a fictive relation that enables a host of embodied relations to emerge and endure; for this poem, at least, violation takes place with the dismemberment of this artifice, the scattering of this fictive body.

15. This tone does not pervade every region of the poem; in certain passages, it refers to how this landscape is still producing grain and livestock for human consumption, even though such production transpires without any return: “If I brought harvests twice a year / They’d bring me nothing back” (47-48), much as “Stock eats my struggles every day / As bare as any road” (117-18). Yet at certain moments it insists that its being reduced to a moment in a system of extraction denudes it even more radically, suggesting that it has not only lost its own mode of thriving but has also been evacuated of the opportunity to provide hospitality to life, for in its new condition it can no longer “get a weed to grow” or “possess a yard of ground / To bid a mouse to thrive” (148-50). In such passages the poem hints that the desecration of the commons erases an interplay of reception that once enabled a shared sustenance, producing instead a landscape that can host nothing at all. The process of enclosure that imposed itself according to the logic of agrarian abundance – and thus of a certain economy of biopower – turns out to exemplify thanatopower as well, or more radically a process that overrides both life *and* death, suspending the entire problematic under the aegis of a supremely indifferent and dissonant principle.

16. Yet even this mode of address – this staging of a place lamenting its disappearance – still gives that evacuated domain a face and voice, even if it places that personhood repeatedly under erasure. Only in the poem’s final lines, then, does it move past that figure, evoking a state that lies beyond it, deploying at last a voice that directly asserts its own future disappearance:

Of fields I am the last
That my own face can tell
Yet what with stone pits delving holes
And strife to buy and sell
My name will quickly be the whole
Thats left of swordy well (203-8)

This passage suggests that the process of destruction it outlines must eventually lead to a moment in which any face or voice even of the evacuated commons will disappear, leaving only a name. Here the poem marks that element in the name that undoes even this erased prososopeia, this evacuated voice or cancelled hospitality, in favor of a mere remnant of what was, the name of a place that has disappeared. Behind an apparent “whole” that is this name will lie only “holes” in the ground: the name will designate something that no longer exists, or rather a site where something has actively destroyed the referent of that name (cf. Barrell 118). The dispersion of hole into “holes” indicates that the location no longer has a central well that can figure its wider field, for it is now a shapeless series of pits, a terrain of gaps and absences, that nothing can totalize into a whole, that nothing can capture even in a name. By profiting from this landscape, by disinterring its stones and overturning all its forms of life, this force has reduced even the name to a mockery and thus debased the very language in which it seems to have survived. Insofar as the endurance of this name hints at the surveying and mapping that accompanies the process of enclosure, a process that in this case also included lumping Helpston with five adjoining parishes in a single enclosure bill (cf. Barrell 70-71, 106), it suggests as well that whoever places this name on a chart designates a domain that is no longer truly local at all, no longer its own place, so that in the poem’s view the map becomes a chart of nowhere and of nothing, a guide merely to its own uselessness. In contrast to all that has come before it in this poem, this stanza enters an even

more severe conceptual terrain, or rather a mode in which the very possibility of an enduring terrain – for sustenance or for thought – disappears. Here language dissolves into a multiplicity of holes without logic or orientation, as thought itself collapses into a shapelessness without remainder.

17. This poetics of disappearance radicalizes the poem's previous account of displaced temporality as well. By invoking a future evacuation of presence which registers a hole already appearing in the time of the commons, it hints at a non-time, a temporality without endurance, within the apparent time of the poem itself. In doing so, it takes us past the thematic of farewell or last thought that Jacques Khalip has explored in his recent *Last Things*, in which the subject endures the thought of what is "now no more" (2-3, 7), for while it alludes to its status as the last face left in these fields ("Of fields I am the last / That my own face can tell"), it pushes past that moment, undoing even the now of such a thought, subjecting the voice that would articulate it to a process that will leave only a useless name. Undoubtedly, by placing that process within the context of the market, suggesting that the place will disappear thanks to the "strife to buy and sell," these lines evoke the temporality of the agrarian capitalism that imposed enclosure with unusual rapidity over the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But the poem hints that this entire history so greatly evacuates place, person, figure, and speech that it in some sense cancels the time in which any of them might be given significance. This process is so destructive, the poem suggests, that it eradicates the moment in which even the assaulted commons can speak, subsuming that possible articulation under a stunningly indifferent and faceless unfolding.
18. While the poem delays this level of its critique until its final stanza, in these lines it dares to expose a disappearance that has already taken place before its voice speaks – an erasure that

already undoes this voice throughout the time of its address. In effect, because the voice will lapse into a name as soon as it ceases, dissolving almost instantaneously into the blankness of the page, the reader becomes aware that it only animated what was already gone. As a result, while one could read this poem in the terms of the Anthropocene, the sixth great extinction, and the dominance of capitalism, as Richard Irvine and Mina Gorji have done (121-22), the final stanza encourages us to consider a more severe alternative. Where the languages of political demand or scientific knowledge fail, the poetic may succeed, if only because it may take form as a distinctive genre, the lament proper to a voice that speaks of its own dissolution.

19. Yet while this poem anticipates the dilemma of our own time, providing a model of the poetics of disappearance, it cannot fully outline the situation of our own moment. However sharp the poem's critique, it applies first to a specific location, then to the overall process of enclosure taking place across the landscape of a particular nation. Today, however, we endure the enclosure of the entire biosphere under the actions of the market in an ongoing event that may leave no human being to lament what has transpired. So far we have seen how the poem offers us a voice that speaks for a place under erasure – and thus ultimately for nothing, for no one. But a similar voice today, murmuring in our own time, speaks as well *to* no one, for today such a lament of the commons can address no one who will endure its disappearance. The poem anticipates an erasure even of the form of address inherent in human and nonhuman sites or agencies, whereby landscapes, for example, in offering themselves up to one and all, implicitly evoke the give and take of hospitality and thus of a certain incalculable reciprocity. Where such hospitality is erased, as in this landscape, which “scarce [has] the room to say sit down” (159), much less the ability to host the lives of weeds or mice, the hospitality of language is erased as well, for it welcomes no listener, no response, nothing that can survive. Accordingly, if we attend to this poem's

resonances within our own moment, we might say, to invoke Derrida, that this voiceless voice speaks in a time without survivance, without even the prospect of living on. The name of “Swordy Well,” a metonym for many others that will refer to nothing, now invokes a hole in the very possibility of survivance. Such a poetics thus hints at a time beyond Derridean time, beyond the temporality of tracing, which brings with it the prospect that even the apparently endless iterations of tracing may lapse and disappear.

20. Such developments unquestionably bear on how we think of our place within a history that includes a certain modernity, that produces that vast and unlimited enclosure leading to the prospect of human disappearance. Read today, this poem suggests that such a modernity, in evacuating the commons, picks the bones on which it too must live and thus ultimately erases itself as well. The poem does not depict something that triumphs over tradition, subsuming place into a logic of general equivalence that henceforth ramifies without limit, for it shows that such a proliferation ultimately erases the space in which it expands. Furthermore, rather than confronting us with the ghost of what modernity has attempted to cancel, it traces a development that evacuates the domain in which even a ghost may appear, cancelling tradition and modernity alike. If we have never been modern, as Latour suggests, this poem hints that in becoming what seems to be modern, we have ceased to be: modernity arises and vanishes in the same movement. The history of capitalism, it turns out, is the history of what erases the very possibility of history. In the wake of that last stanza, perhaps we can say that modernity has been a practice of erasure all along, a process that one can capture only through a discourse of the vanishing.
21. On some level, this poem’s evocation of a disappearance to come hints at a devastation intrinsic to human existence; as I argued above, the “speculative annihilation” to which Thacker refers,

taken in its widest reference, arises in part in relation to the world without us or a world that has no need for us – the world in which humanity emerged in the first place and in which it was always fated to dissolve. A version of such annihilation thus applies throughout all human discourse, making itself felt in the erasure that, under the sway of this perpetual and endemic disaster, unworks every human effort (cf. Blanchot). But since such an annihilation obtains as well for every nonhuman form of life and (if one takes rocks and sand into account) every form of physical persistence, it unworks their modes of thriving as well. In his sonnet “Obscurity,” which I have explored elsewhere, Clare acutely registers the force of this power of oblivion, attending closely to a process that wastes human and nonhuman life alike (Collings “Blank”). In “The Lament,” however, he foregrounds a contingent process, one not inscribed into the conditions of life or of physical persistence as such but rather one that arises as a result of specific political decisions, the sustained decision to impose the logic of the market onto the commons. This poem thus helps bring into focus that gap between the oblivion that awaits all things and the erasure that our specific history of enclosure brings about; it highlights a certain *will* to oblivion that animates – and dissolves – our singularly evanescent modernity.

22. Read in this way, “The Lament” makes clear how our current historical trajectory brings an elusive, scarcely felt oblivion to the fore, making us intimate with what we might never otherwise encounter. In doing so, it alters our sense of human fragility and of history alike, showing how they now intersect in an impending awareness of our collective disappearance. It accentuates this conjunction through its form: by working through its evocations of the commons, both human and nonhuman, before evoking its poetics of disappearance in its final stanza, the poem cancels virtually every prior context for its own intervention, leaving us gasping, entirely without recourse. In consequence, as we read it today, it accentuates how for us it is not only the

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Anthropocene that disappears; our very task of reading dissolves, for both we and the text, in what we hold in common, are vanishing as well. The face or name that appears here is from no one; it speaks to no one. In its final lines, “The Lament” gestures toward that moment when thought, in thinking its condition today, unthinks itself, leaving nothing but a blank and nameless name.

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