



Romanticism on the Net

The Butter Bump, a Magpie, John Clare

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Abstract

The strategies of natural history are distancing ones, and, since Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*, the genre has been the subject of powerful modes of distanced reading. A corollary, perhaps, is that any instance of natural history writing, and especially, any single entry in a natural history compilation, can seem closed to "close" reading: in the field guide as in the taxonomic systems that inform its organization, the highly codified general descriptor, structurally equivalent to every other general descriptor in the set, swallows up the situated, the particular, the near. Within this arena, John Clare's natural history writing is, in Sara Guyer's phrase, "hyperbolically local." Readers have variously praised Clare's writing on natural subjects for its decentering of an anthropomorphizing perspective, for its mimetic fidelity to an experienced local environment, for what has been described as its proto-environmental or –ecological awareness. This essay pursues the forms of local attentiveness displayed in Clare's natural history writing in a different direction, to explore how his work engages in close, critical *readings* of the operations of natural history. My essay tracks Clare's pursuit of two odd birds, "the" butter bump and "a" magpie, each of which makes a "strange noise" that reverberates through its world, traversing borders, confounding equivalencies, and sounding both the power and the limits of an already-arrived natural order of things.

Biographical Note

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1. For a period during the 1820s, John Clare studied and found inspiration in a certain kind of natural history reference book—the early avatar of today’s gardeners’ handbooks and naturalist’s field guides, all of which share a familiar structure: an introductory overview of the subject followed by a series of discrete entries, organized either alphabetically or according to one or another classificatory system. Elizabeth Kent’s *Flora Domestica*, the introduction to cultivated flowers that initially sparked Clare’s own venture into natural history writing, is organized in this way, but during the period of its popularity it circulated with many other works similarly composed: these included an abridged 1792 English translation of the Comte de Buffon’s influential *Histoire Naturelle* along with a host of other volumes that pilfered from it, including three reference guides containing ornithological information to which we know Clare had access—Thomas Pennant’s *Genera of Birds*, the anonymous *Bungay Natural History of Birds* published in 1815, and J. Macloc’s *Natural History of All the Most Remarkable Quadrupeds, Birds, Fishes, Serpents, Reptiles, and Insects in the Known World*.¹ Clare’s extensive natural history prose writings, now collected by Margaret Grainger, suggest his thorough acquaintance with this literature. Although his first forays into natural history writing consist of letters initially composed for his publisher James Hessey and probably inspired by the latter’s admiration for Gilbert White’s epistolary *Natural History of Selbourne*, almost all the work he produced afterwards suggests that his interest had shifted to the creation of some sort of reference book: his drafts begin to adopt the form of the entry (for example, “Quail” followed by a short descriptive passage); longer passages (e.g., “Animal Instinct”) seem intended for the introductory or overview sections characteristic of the genre; and, when collating the work he has done, Clare borrows the organizational structures of and cross-references these other volumes, especially Macloc’s.²
2. The strategies of these natural history reference books are distancing ones: as described by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*, natural history of the Classical *episteme* abstracts living beings

from their environments to re-situate them in taxonomic “tables” organized around limited, precisely-defined axes of differences (131). Since the publication of *The Order of Things*, natural history writing has in turn been the subject of powerful modes of distanced reading. Catalyzed by colonial expansion, natural history practices and knowledges are, it has been argued, imperial in their own right, subsuming as they do the local “curiosity” into a greater administrative order.³ Thus natural history, its own history entwined both with the long history of western philosophy that, Jacques Derrida claims, is grounded on an absolute distinction between “the animal” and “the human”(5) and with that of the biological and physical sciences that emerged during the course of the later 18th and early 19th centuries, could be said to constitute the epistemic arm of the troika “capitalism, empire, and science” that, Jason Moore argues, seeks to “[render] Nature external—Nature with a capital N—the better that it could be subordinated and rationalized, its bounty extracted” (18). The operations by which the singular thing and its local provenances become absorbed or abstracted into the denatured or virtual kind, and by which these newly denatured particulars are sorted, categorized, and circulated, suggest for these critics the connection between natural history’s particular field of objects and emergent scientific knowledges and a broader range of overlapping conceptual fields and administrative regimes, ascendant in Clare’s own period, that together inform and structure the operations of capitalism and of modern biopolitical life. John Barrell’s important work on Clare has focused on the relation of the latter’s writing to the land management practices that changed the face of Helpston and the conditions of Clare’s own labor during his lifetime. Scholarly work on natural history suggests the relation between these forms of agricultural “improvement” and phenomena that can at first seemed removed from them, including the popularity of natural history and its transformation during this period into a modern knowledge system—one involving amateur practices and local knowledges (as is still the case with the physical and biological field sciences), but abstracting,

aggregating, and absorbing this data in a way that redounds to the complexity of a disciplinary system fashioned *out of* but engulfing local, singular experience.⁴

3. Natural history writing of this period thus bores into a vast and richly theorizable context. A corollary, perhaps, is that any instance of natural history writing, and especially, any single entry in a natural history compilation, can seem obdurate to our reading if by this we mean “close” reading: in the field guide as in the taxonomic systems that inform its organization, the highly codified general descriptor, structurally equivalent to every other general descriptor in the set, swallows up the situated, the eccentric, the “close.” Within this arena, John Clare’s natural history writing is, in Sara Guyer’s phrase, “hyperbolically local” (4).⁵ Readers have appreciated his descriptions of the natural world for their resistance to the abstracting gestures of natural history and of romanticism itself—in Moore’s terms, for their at least partial refusal to “subordinate” natural landscapes and creatures to human perspective and human consciousness, to “extract” their bounty for human use; his work has been variously praised for its decentering of an anthropomorphizing perspective, for its mimetic fidelity to an experienced local environment, for what has been described as its proto-environmental or –ecological awareness.⁶ Here, I pursue the local attentiveness of Clare’s natural history writing in a somewhat different direction, to explore how his work engages in close and critical *readings* of the operations of natural history. My essay tracks Clare’s pursuit of two odd birds, “the” butter bump and “a” magpie, each of which makes a “strange noise” that reverberates through its world, traversing borders, confounding equivalencies, and sounding both the power and the limits of an already-arrived natural order of things. Under Clare’s attention, the butter bump’s “noise” detonates within the impoverishing operations of taxonomic identification and suggests the excess that identification fails to contain. Concluding with an account of the bird that suggests the failure of natural history attempt to grasp the embodied, elusive creature, Clare seems to cast this creature as existing “outside” of

modernity and its projects. A magpie Clare meets in the woods complicates this claim, its singular predicament suggesting the enmeshment of creaturely beings in historical processes that are bound up with, and underpinned by, the epistemological distancing of nature.

1. The Butter Bump

4. I begin not with Clare but with J. Macloc, whose account of “the bittern,” the standard English name for Clare’s “butter bump,” appears in his *Natural History of All the Most Remarkable Quadrupeds, Birds, Fishes, Serpents, Reptiles, and Insects in the Known World*, a book Clare owned and frequently cross-referenced during the 1820s. Macloc’s entry opens with an appreciative, floridly descriptive comment on the sublimity of the bittern’s distinctive booming call: “It is impossible for words to convey an adequate idea of the terrific solemnity of the bittern’s evening call, which resembles the interrupted bellowing of a bull.” The paragraph proceeds to the bird’s size and plumage (smaller and less striking than a heron’s), and concludes with an equally appreciative if somewhat less florid comment about the bird’s daintiness as a dish. The entry goes on to describe the bittern’s habitat and nesting habits, and concludes with an energetic, detailed account of the “severe resistance” the bird puts up to the armed sportsman (or possibly, the specimen collector): “it does not retire; but waits the onset, and gives such vigorous pushes with its bill, as to wound the leg through the boot” (229-230). Elements of Macloc’s writing here—the pastiche of styles, the unembarrassed focus on the bird’s value (and expendability) with respect to human aesthetic and gustatory interests and desires—have not persisted into modern field guides.⁷ The apparent eccentricities of this entry are not eccentric to the book as a whole, however, and reading more broadly reveals its typicality within the field of extant natural history reference books: both in terms of its obligatory ticking through of what has become the conventional list of salient species markers (song, plumage, habitat, disposition, or what Foucault

identifies as the arbitrary and circumscribed “system of variables” that allow the naturalist to key out species within the taxonomic system according to relations of similarity and difference) (136), and more strikingly and tellingly, its recycling of descriptors in a way that suggests the book’s participation in the work of solidifying a knowledge-system. Macloc’s description of the bittern’s call, for instance, is reproduced practically verbatim from the 1792 English translation of the Comte de Buffon’s *Histoire Naturelle* (II, 102), to which Clare may have had access, while the appreciative account of the bird’s bravery reappears, slightly expanded, in the 1815 Bungay *Natural History of Birds* (II, 383), which Clare owned, as well as in Thomas Bewick’s *History of British Birds* (II, 49-50), where the language is identical to that in the Bungay volume. (All of these writers appreciate the bird as a “fashionable dish.”) Reading around in this literature shows “the bittern” taking shape as a category within an evolving classificatory system, and in the process, breaking free of any one setting and any one naturalist’s singular encounter with it.

5. This is the context against which we can set and appreciate Clare’s note, perhaps of 1825, titled “The Butter Bump”:

This is a thing that makes a very odd noise morning & evening among the flags & large reed shaws in the fens some describe the noise as something like the bellowing of bulls but I have often heard it & cannot liken it to that sound at all in fact it is difficult to describe what it is like its noise has procured it the above name by the common people the first part of its noise is an indistinct muttering sort of sound very like the word butter utterd in a hurried manner & bump comes very quick after & bumps a sound on the ear as if echo had mockd the bump of a gun just as the mutter ceasd nay this is not like I have often thought the putting to ones mouth to the bung hole of an empty large cask & uttering the word ‘butter bump’ sharply would imitate the sound exactly after its first call that imitates the word ‘butter bump’ it repeats the sound bump singly several times in a more determind

& loud manner—thus ‘butter bump búmp búmp butter bump it strikes people at first as something like the sound of a cooper’s mallet hitting on empty casks . . . [89]

The “some” who describe the bittern’s noise as “something like the bellowing of bulls” may well include locals (a video of 2014, “The Booming Bitterns of Leighton Moss,” includes voices of local farmers, one of whom declares that when he first heard the booming sound of the bittern he thought it was “a calf stuck in the water”), but Clare’s main target is surely the set of ‘natural history writers including Macloc.’ If the surprise and charm of this prose has to do with its refusal of the conventions, reading Clare against Macloc reveals this as tendentious, directed idiosyncrasy—an experiment in hyperbolic empiricism, the real naturalist assenting only to what he can himself verify, a “noise” the source of which, we learn later in the entry, he has not yet been able to trace back to an actual physical bird.

6. The virtuosity of this writing as well as its marked eccentricity to the genre has to do with its failure to progress through the by-now conventional markers of species identification: call, plumage, habitat, and so on, the markers, Foucault proposes, that allow the presentation of species as distinct from each other (134). Instead Clare remains ostentatiously stuck on the “noise,” and not, primarily, to select from an overwhelming background a notable, iterable call, although he does this as well. Rather, the writing proceeds by successively posited and interrupted relations of “likeness” that amplify as much as they discriminate or fix: “some” describe the noise as “something like” the “bellowing of bulls,” but Clare “cannot liken it” to that sound; it is difficult to describe what the sound is “like,” but the first part of the sound is “very like” the word “butter” “uttered in a hurried manner”; “bump” comes on the ear “as if echo had mocked the bump of a gun just as the echo ceased”; “nay this is not like”: a better likeness is to the sound made from putting one’s mouth to the bung hole of an empty cask; finally, the noise “strikes people at first as something like the sound of a cooper’s mallet hitting on empty casks.” Although the entry

proliferates analogies, the analogical coordinates it provides are an almost comically limited set (the bump bumps the ear like the bump of a gun; the sound that is like one made when blowing through an empty cask strikes one as the striking of an empty cask). This reiteration of a reduced set of counters effects a sonic redounding, a reverb—the echo that mocks after the cessation of a sound—that moves through Clare’s own prose (the muttering rhymes and assonance effects of mutter / utter / butter/ hurry; bump / gun / bung). Perhaps most typically and strikingly, and engaged with all these characteristics of the writing, is the shift the entry makes from likening the sound to one produced by another living creature—the bellowing of bulls—to hearing in it effects made by prosthetic, mechanical sounding devices that find their second-order equivalents in the generative analogical machine of the writing and the scansion marks, technical devices that “sound” stressed and unstressed beats in verse, that Clare introduces into his transcription of the noise.

7. Taxonomic writing and practices work by discrimination: relations of likeness and difference, along a set of variables delimited by the field, allow a naturalist to key out a species—to differentiate, say, a bittern from a heron, both in the class of waders. But here as often in Clare’s natural history writing, discriminations based on likeness within a given, delimited and subdividable taxonomic field (in Macloc’s book, the field of “other birds” and, within that, of “other waders”), where a call might function as one trait among many, give way to discriminations within a field heterogeneous to that of ornithology— “other similar weird sounds.” It is not that other natural history writers don’t invoke heterogeneous fields of reference in this manner: Macloc likens the bittern’s call to a bull’s. What distinguishes Clare’s move is the degree of his commitment to this plunge into a new arena: he redraws the field and in the process, tests the values and premises of a natural history reliant on the bounding operations of discriminatory identification. Elsewhere, Clare registers his appreciation for the way poetry can amplify a feeling

for nature through the introduction of poetic beauties into naturalist writing (38-42). In this entry, though, “the poetic” inheres not in ornamental beauties but within a writing practice that, foregrounding and imitating the non-significative, repetitively and mechanistically sounding dimensions of “noise,” links the “often heard” “very odd noise” coming from the fens to human play with percussive instruments like guns, casks, mouths, bungholes, sticks, and, beyond that, with the sounding, percussive, material dimensions of English. The aim of system is to reduce noise to information—to extract, say, something that can be identified as “the bittern’s call” from an ambient soundscape, and then to make this legible and communicable through language. In contrast, Clare’s natural history traces what “sounds”—noises connected by virtue of their shared relation to the mechanistic, the automatic, to the technical and prosthetic—across distinctions that conventionally and at the deepest level structure natural historical knowledge and practice: distinctions between the “animal” and the “human,” the natural and the technological, the programmed workings of (animal) instinct and the presumed meaning-making of (human) language. That is, this particular sonic field of discrimination suggests an affinity between the “odd noise” coming out of the fens and what Jacques Derrida’s later work identifies as a non-living trace-structure that sounds within and through bios, traversing what are important philosophical markers of difference between human and non-human, organism and machine—distinctions foundational to the discourse of natural history and its creation of a Nature opposed to “the human” or “the social.”⁸

8. It is striking how unfringed these particular traversals are for Clare, though, in this passage and in his natural history writing more generally: Simon Kövesi’s characterization of Clare as “decentering” representation of the natural world from an anthropocentric perspective is relevant here (99). The note on the butter bump is typical of his accounts of bird “noise,” which he regularly casts as alien, other-worldly, “strange,” a challenge to the naturalist who would capture

it but at the same time “like” the things humans do with mouths, limbs, tools, instruments, and language. At times he experiments with direct transcription, as above where he uses scansion marks to capture the stresses of the bump’s call; elsewhere he transcribes the entirety of a nightingale’s song (312). These experiments are limit-cases of what locals do all the time, naming birds after their songs, calling them in their own language, as it were: “the pettichap” is “so calld from its note which resembles that word” (115) and so is the “pink” (42); the landdrake makes “a low craking very much like that of a Drake from whence I suppose it got the name” (49); the “butter bump” is the human mouth’s approximation of the percussive “very odd noise” made by this “thing.” Here English words, chosen for their sonic qualities, mime bird song, but more frequently Clare evokes bird noise through relationships of “likeness” that recognize bird song as mechanical and technically complex, “like” the sounds humans can make with help of an instrument or other prosthesis, or, in the case of whistling, technique: the night hawk’s “dead thin whistling sort of sound,” which Clare, walking at night, “fancied was the whistle call of robbers. . . tho it was continued much longer than a man could hold his breath it had no trembling in it like a game keeps dog-whistle” (35); the “odd chittering note” of the “cricket Bird or Grass hopper Bunting” that “exactly resembles the noise that children make with their screekers” (114); the sound the owls make “with their beaks which I used to compare to cracking nutts” (98); “the Fern Owl or Goat Sucker or Night Jar,” which makes a “trembling sort of crooing sound which may be nearly imitated by making a crooing noise & at the same time putting the finger before the mouth to break the sound like stopping a hole in the German flute to quaver a double sound on one note” (33). “Have you never heard that cronking jaring noise in the woods?” he asks his naturalist friend Henderson at one point. “I discovered that it was the common green woodpecker busily employd at boreing his hole which he effected by twisting his bill round in the way that a carpenter twists his wimble” (63).

9. Writing on the butter bump, Clare's close attention to its "odd noise" engages and detonates within Macloc's account of the bird, to suggest that the bittern emerges in the latter's pages as a discrete and identifiable kind only by virtue of prior acts of enclosure—the delimitation of a narrow field of salient traits from out of a multiply and eccentrically sounding world. Clare's own figural strategies obliquely conjure the multiple provenances that fall away as a result of this abstraction: a "local" world, perhaps, in which humans have ready access to casks and bungholes and in which at least one human, a rude boy of Winander, is inspired to deploy these things, together with lungs, hands, lips, in imitation of strange swamp noises; a world where humans and animals share modes of intimacy and responsiveness as well as extremes of mutual distance and opacity (one might never see the "thing" that makes this noise), and for which the distinction human / non-human may register differently than it does in the reference books. If this cluster of associations begin to resolve into a familiar romantic topos (Nature as nostalgically-invoked salvatory counter-presence to an instrumentalized, administered, exploitable, inert nature), other scenes disturb this particular and idealized sense of place: "as if echo had mockd the bump of a gun just when the mutter ceased" conjures the sportsman or, perhaps, the specimen-hunter, whose depredations, Macloc and others claim, the bittern strenuously resists, and whose violence is here presented as undersong to the conceptual working that would abstract the creature into the virtual representative of a virtual kind, into "the" bittern, whose picture and description are included in the reference books Clare consulted and cross-referenced when producing his own notes and collations—smaller than a heron, with these and these nesting habits, whose bellows-like windpipe, "supplied with a thin loose membrane that can be filled with a large body of air and exploded at pleasure," could only have become known through dissection.⁹ Cumulatively, these evoked scenes mock the echo-chamber or autopoetic feedback loop of the emerging biological sciences. Ghosts in this particular evolving disciplinary machine, they are of, yet inassimilable to, it; they suggest the haunting of natural history by what cannot be reduced to or by it.

10. In the face of natural histories already written, bitterns already named, engraved, and circulated, Clare's entry on the butter bump could potentially appear reactive and untimely, a tendentious and rear-guard resistance to an already-arrived ordering of things. "This is a thing," his note begins, pointing to that which, he seems to insist, remains an as-yet-unidentified source of the odd noise often heard in the fens, as-yet-uncaptured by language, and nowhere in the text of this entry does he name the "thing" that is his subject. His insistence on the thing's solitude and inaccessibility and upon his own partial experience of it can seem at once perverse in terms of his own authorship (why would the naturalist make such a show of the gaps in his knowledge?) and quixotically allegiant to ways of knowing—insanely full with respect to some manifestations of a living thing, without purchase with respect to others—that have already been superseded by the multiple extant reference books, including ones he himself owned, that smooth out, regulate, and normalize what it means to "identify" something.¹⁰ Here as sometimes in his poetry, Clare would seem to take up the lost cause, invoking the richness of local experience in a way that seems tinged with an awareness that the circumstances in which it exists are already, and irremediably, altered.¹¹ At the same time, his natural history writing reminds us that the lived experiences and knowledges of actual naturalists—involving modes of intimacy and relation with non-human creatures as well as violence towards them and extreme uncertainties about them—continue to exist alongside the distancing operations of the guides and the disciplinary and exploitative regimes they underpin: if the latter represent a coming ordering of things, this advent is partial and uneven and to some extent always depends on work that does not appear in the taxonomic system and cannot be fully assimilated to it.

11. The provenances Clare gestures toward here are thus perhaps not so much decisively lost or doomed as thrust "outside" or to the side of the system represented by the reference book. This

push outside, however—the abstraction of species identity from the settings and interactions that produce a repository of data relevant to species life—can in its turn speed the attenuation and atrophying of local practices and knowledges.¹² In his biography of this bird, Clare on the one hand insists upon what must fall away for identification to proceed: in every lived encounter with the non-human creature, that which exceeds (the noise that cannot be reduced to information) and that which fails (the holes or gaps in our knowledge) that operation. At the same time, though, Clare’s characterization of the bird as “thing” evokes a kind of limit-case *internal* to the system—an instantiated category so perfectly abstracted, so perfectly reduced and virtualized, that it is perfectly divested of all particularizing detail. Thus in a manner at once reactive and prescient, Clare’s “thing” could be said to interrupt—both as “outside” and internal limit-case—the circuit of “identification,” the tautology or closed circle by which the named thing is that which possesses the qualities of the named thing, by which “the bittern” or “the butter bump” becomes the name under which a range of manifestations – a noise, a creature—is assembled into a distinct and recognizable kind.

12. One could counter that Clare does not actually withhold an identification of the bird. He titles this passage “The Butter Bump,” an alternative name for the bittern, often listed in guides and presumably the heading under which it would have appeared in the *Biographies of the Birds and Flowers*—along with other entries titled “Hawks,” “Larks,” “Sparrows,” “The Pheasant,” and so on. And yet, as one reads on in this passage, it continues to sound the limits of the field within which it also operates. Concluding his account of the butter bump, Clare finally pulls back from its strange noise to offer a more distanced reading of the creature in its habitat:

when I was a boy this was one of the fen wonders I used often to go on a Sunday with my mother to see my aunt at peakirk when I often wandered in the fen with the boys a bird nesting & when I enquired what this strange noise was they described it as coming from a

bird larger than an ox that could kill all the cattle in the fen if it choose & destroy the village likewise that it was very harmless & all the harm it did was the drinking so much water as to nearly empty the dykes in summer & spoil the rest so that the stock could scarcely drink what it left this was not only a story among children but their parents believed the same thing such is the power of superstition over ignorant people who have no desire to go beyond hearsay & enquire for themselves but the 'world gets wiser every day' tis not believed now nor heard as a wonder any longer—they say it is a small bird that makes the noise not much unlike the quail tho a deal larger & longer on the legs they say it puts its beak in a reed when it makes the noise that gives it that jarring or hollow sound which is heard so far I have no knowledge of its using the reed but I believe they are right in the bird I have startend such a bird my self out of reed shaws my self were I have herd this noise & afterwards the noise has been silent which convinced me that the one was the bird I never saw it but on the wing . . . [89-90]

The gap between the “thing” and the “strange noise”—between the physically elusive creature and the aural phenomenon of its call—generates another sort of “noise,” the hearsay that circulates about the kind of creature this thing is. In the days of superstition, a mere generation ago, the locals dreamed up the bird-as-wonder, a Paul Bunyan of the birdworld, well-disposed to humans if disastrously unaware of the impact of its appetites on a local farming economy. In these more modern times, Clare reports, the folkloric “wonder” has been supplanted by newly circulating accounts of the bird-as-technical adept, producing its noise through prosthetic mechanism. The local world of the fens here appears as a miniature version—figure and imbricated instance—of a rapidly-moving modernity, the knowledges of which solidify and mutate through a kind of echo-chamber effect that involves the recycling, amplification, and recursive adaptations of information and theories. Within this environment Clare keeps his ears open, experiencing strange noises that float free of origin, the cessation of sound that accompanies

the starting of a bird, the rumors that circulate about its source. Rather than assembling name, noise, and retrospectively-positing source of the sound, the conclusion to this entry called “the butter bump” once again points to gaps between noise, “thing,” and mute concept or “name,” and to their fusion as an effect of a feedback loop that allows taxonomical system to reproduce itself, engulfing the singular and eccentric experience as it does so.

2. A Magpie

13. At the end of “The Butter Bump,” the species identity of the bird is revealed as a human construction that speaks or answers, Clare implies, to a shifting economic and social landscape. (The vernacular, local relation to the bird is thus at best frailly resistant to an ordering of things that exceeds and engulfs the local.¹³) One could argue, however, that in spite of this apparently demystifying gesture, the privacy Clare grants the butter bump over and against the knowledge-system that would appropriate it paradoxically reinforces a ruse by which nature “itself” is understood to exist outside of—antecedent to and *in its generality* untouched by—history, that is, human history. Clare’s butter bump is something of an “immortal bird,” its “strange noise,” untraceable to a graspable being, functioning as a marker against which one can measure changes that concern hungry human generations—for instance, Peakirk’s experience of an accelerating modernity, with its partial, uneven effects on diverse human knowledges, practices, and relationships. While Clare’s natural history of the butter bump investigates this imbrication of its species identity with *human* history, then, the creature itself would seem to be without history. For Jason Moore as well as other ecological thinkers, this sense of nature as static and at most passively impacted by human projects, overlooks that ways in which “the web of life itself evolves historically” (18) in a dynamic and double relation to them.

14. My reading of Clare's natural history prose has necessarily been partial, and I want to complicate it now by turning to a different bird—a magpie that shows up in close proximity to Clare's notes on the butter bump in the Peterborough manuscript, within a longer note that suggests that Clare himself is not as averse to the abstracting, generalizing operations of knowledge-systems as I have been suggesting. He has just been describing the "natural antipathy" that exists between birds that have a kindred resemblance to each other: the raven, he claims, hates the carrion crow; the hens dislike the coots. Or, sometimes, he adds, birds will take an antipathy to one of their own kind that has been domesticated:

But there is another antipathy very strong & more wonderful a dislike & inveterate hatred to any of their kind that people have attempted to domesticate if a black bird escapes from a cage & flyes to the woods the wild ones male & female all shun its attempt to associate as if there was somthing about it that inspird terror & if a Mag pie flyes away after its confinement with man the wild ones will gather in a flock & destroy it instantly if its mean of escape be not very speedy this I have witnessd one morning as I was crossing a common calld the north fen I saw the greatest crowd of magpies together which I had ever seen & curiosity led me a long way out of my path to know their business they was all fighting one of their kind I was much surprisd at first but I found the bird was a tamd one & on its attempting now & then to call as it were for help the strangeness of the noise for it could talk made them flye up in a startld manner & then they would poor down agen with redoubld vengeance while some crows kept at a respectable distance making a croaking as it were to encourage them when I got up they seemd to fly reluctantly away & hoverd oer my head their noisey defiances when I pick up the poor beaten bird I thought they had killd it but it recovered after I took it up & on meeting a boy whom I thought to have given it too I found him the owner who was seeking it the bird & the boy seemd to be both satisfied at meeting with each other [93-94]

Like the butter bump, the tormented magpie at the center of this hubbub makes a “strange noise,” but in this case, that noise would seem to be English.

15. This remarkable story appears in a cluster of notes that Grainger has collected under the heading “Animal Instinct,” the title under which Clare himself gathered most of the entries she includes; it is possible they were intended for an introductory section for an ornithological guide he hoped to produce, either with Kent or separately. Some of these notes include beautifully detailed observations of the ways in which different species of bird build their nests, each species by a precise design: “each tribe of birds beast and insect,” Clare writes, “has an instinct of its own from which it never errs with an hairs difference” (92). The fact that each bird knows and perfectly repeats the particularities of the nest proper to its kind strikes us as marvelous, he asserts, although only, perhaps, because we cannot see dimensions of human life that are equally instinctual: “The instinct may not properly be defined in words yet it seems to be a natural sympathy that comes in the world with them.” “We see children try to walk of themselves & do not wonder, yet we see the bird build her nest in the spring & fall into sentimentality” (91). Although he does not propose this directly, the drift of the writing here, which as it proceeds begins to turn on a contrast between “instinct” and “art,” suggests that human instinct may be harder to isolate and identify than bird instinct because human experience appears to have more latitude for learned or acquired behavior. Characteristically, as with his entry on the butter bump, Clare is interested here in forms of expression aligned with a kind of automatism linked to what we might call *techné* and that he sees as informing both human and bird behavior. But, he claims in this passage, birds acquire their techniques of making through a “natural sympathy,” a “wonderful faculty” “nicer than mathematical accuracy” that from their very first effort at nest-building allows them to repeat, with precision, the pattern peculiar to their kind. (That a bird can function as an “immortal bird” of course has to do with this relative fixity of its habits, repeated from bird to bird, as well the

erasure of the reproductive labor and history of the species.) Humans are also pattern-makers but in contrast to birds, many of *their* patterns are learned ones, involving instruction, custom, and habit: “The instinct of the animal world is a most wonderful faculty & not to be accounted for its conclusions are nicer than mathematical accuracy; it seems even to be stronger than human reason. For the human mind to be perfect in any art . . . [it] is obliged to undergo long and laborious instruction.” “[S]ympathy and antipathy is a wonder with them but habits grow by custom” (91).

16. This distinction between *techné*-as-instinct and *techné*-as-art obviously bears on our poor artful magpie. Before taking up its plight, however, I want to note another distinction that organizes these passages on instinct, between “natural sympathy” and “natural antipathy.” “Natural sympathy,” an affinity for the ways of one’s own kind, is Clare’s first stab at a broad definition of “instinct” (“a natural sympathy that comes into the world with them”). The formulation then seems to spark a related line of thought about “natural antipathy.” The latter thread begins with the broad claim that bird species that are most like each other seem to show a natural antipathy for each other (91); the broad claim that follows is that many birds show a “natural antipathy” to certain predatory animals and birds of prey (the fox, the owl, the hawk), which will sometimes cause them to form alliances across species (including across species that would otherwise show a “natural antipathy” for each other) (92-93). Sandwiched between these general statements (and possibly not part of the original series) is an odd bit of hearsay about the behavior of red caps when their young are trapped for purposes of domestication and sale: birdkeepers, Clare claims, “assert as a fact” that red cap parents will poison their young *en masse* rather than let them be taken away in cages (92). Although this bit of hearsay is not explicitly linked to any general claim, its positioning in Grainger’s edition at first invites us to see in it an example of the red cap’s natural antipathy to a (human) predator—a heroic if deadly resistance to the capture and

subjugation of the brood. The final general claim about animals showing a natural antipathy to one of their own that has been domesticated, however, retroactively asks us to read this as a more complexly internecine drama: do the red caps attack their offspring as prospectively- or already-domesticated creatures of their species? Are they perhaps refusing the (unremunerated) reproductive labor that underpins the (cash) “value” of the species by killing off the next generation?¹⁴

17. Clare’s writing about instinct thus turns on suggestively-linked pairings of terms that are neither equivalent nor completely mappable onto each other: instinct, on the one hand, and habit (and/or custom, art) on the other; sympathy / antipathy; and, we could add, like / different. This last pair informs the other two. As we noted earlier, the axis likeness / difference is structurally central to the classificatory practices and knowledges of natural history. “Likeness” allows the most liquid, elaborated bird song to be recognized as “the nightingale’s song,” its elements repeated from individual to individual, just as the most complexly constructed nest is seen to be reproduced from generation to generation of the kind. Understanding relations of likeness and difference is thus critical to the naturalist’s expertise: keying out a sub-species or a nest involves recognizing the ways in which a given specimen resembles other specimens in this, this, and this way, but differs from similar specimens in these respects. (Although in the butter bump entry Clare shifts away from natural historical toward poetic or tropic relations of likeness, his writing, especially on nests, is full of rich examples of this practice, as here: “Jay birds & magpies both line their nests with twitch & small roots but the one covers her nest at top which she never forgets nor the other applies . . . crows build with sticks & use twitch as the others but she always makes the inside lining with a mixture of wool which is never found in either of the other” [90].) The pair like / different is also central to understanding relations of sympathy and antipathy. “Natural sympathy” is a kind of drawing of like to like, which causes, say, every jay bird to make its nest

to the standard of every other jay bird. “Antipathy,” however, also springs out of relations of likeness as well as of difference, according to Clare: thus in ways that are not always predictable, the pair like / difference maps onto the affective poles of like / dislike.

18. As is well known, however, the magpie does not always sound “like” other magpies: the particular characteristic of this and (many, if not all) other bird species is that it can add to its repertoire of noises by studying and learning to reproduce the sonic productions of others. The magpie, one could say, introduces “art,” study, and habit—that is, adaptive change—into the world of instinct. This possibility, widely acknowledged in other handbooks of the period, many of which are interested in the capacity of birds to learn other bird sounds and sometimes human languages, isn’t overtly noted by Clare in these notes on “animal instinct,” where he locates “art” (and instruction, custom, habit, laborious practice) squarely on the side of the human.¹⁵ In this he would seem to respect the divide between “the human” and “the animal” on which natural history writing depends. In his 1997 lecture series *The Animal that Therefore I Am* Jacques Derrida describes this divide as foundational to a much longer history of western philosophy, and his list of the capacities and propensities claimed to be proper solely to the former—a capacity for shame and as a result the embrace of clothing or *techné*, and “history, and work, and all that goes along with that”—is especially relevant Clare’s writing in this passage (5). But elsewhere Clare, unusually appreciative of the techniques of bird-sound production, is quick to recognize that bird noise is a matter of technique and that some birds, like the magpie, can learn to make new sounds by “art.” In a later note he describes his own tame magpie learning human language by means of application and industry, its efforts met at first by apparent frustration and its subsequent success with relief and delight: “It imitated many words readily & when it heard a sound or word that it could not imitate readily it would become silent & pensive and sit ruminating on an eldern tree & muttering as it were to itself some inaudible sounds till at length it got by heart the thing it was

aiming at & then it was as lively & as full of chatter as ever” (128). For a space the extroverted magpie becomes withdrawn, introverted, a bird rather “like” the pensive muttering hedgesparrows that “in a quiet mood . . . trie / An inward stir of shadowed melody,” or the white throat that “mutters inward melodys / That seem her hearts rich thinkings to repeat,” retracting itself from view so as to give itself over to compulsive practice, until it returns to its chattering self.¹⁶

19. Early on and frequently thereafter in *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, Derrida quotes Alice’s complaint about her little cat, which to every query answers with a purr: “how do you talk with a person if it always says the same thing?” (8). For Derrida Alice’s question opens a familiar question of response—and Alice, falling in with distinguished philosophical tradition, presumes the animal’s *lack* of capacity for meaningful response, as opposed to a presumed human capacity *for* response. The domesticated magpie, however, *doesn’t* always say “the same thing.” Does it then prove its capacity for “response,” at least to the extent humans could be said to possess this?¹⁷ Reading between the lines, we might speculate “well, yes.” Clare’s account of the bullied magpie suggests that its call consists of the word “help!”: as he approaches the scene he hears “its attempting now & then to call as it were for help . . . for it could talk.” But because this sound comes from the magpie, a true subaltern, it would seem that the status of its call, however perfectly apropos, could only be understood in terms of mimicry, as the unthinking, mechanical repetition of another language—it calls “as it were” for help. For all its art, its expenditure of study, its acquisition of technique, its attachment to its mastery of this new tongue, its English words would seem to take on the same status as the crows’ croaking that “as it were” seems to egg on the aggressive wild magpies; or as the “muttering” of Clare’s tamed magpie, “as it were” to itself. These “as it weres” that proliferate around the magpie, however, also suggest its possession of a certain power: its feat of language-acquisition produces a disturbance of the order

of things that ripples beyond its local predicament, as the whole scene in which it figures shifts out of the arena of instinct, the innately programmed behavior proper to the animal, and into that of mimicry, automatic or mechanical repetition *as opposed to* some imagined “authentic” song or speech; and from there into the imputations and interpretations that come under the heading of figuration, especially anthropomorphism. That is, into the arena of what we know as language, its possibility of meaningful response inevitably shadowed by an unthinking automatism, the necessary iterability and alterity of the trace structure that inhabits any code.

20. It is hard to avoid a particular anthropomorphic turn here—hard not to see this tormented magpie, caught as it is in a hard place, as a figure for the poet who can only ever be “the peasant poet,” the naturalist who will only ever assist Joseph Henderson or Elizabeth Kent, but whose work by its very existence causes a disturbance in the field of print culture. Instead of taking this path, though, I’d like to pause for a moment before the no doubt unanswerable question, “why do these wild birds respond to the domesticated magpie in this way?” It is the nature of the magpie to imitate sounds, all manner of sounds, including but not limited to those made by other creatures. (The entry on the magpie in the Bungay *Natural History of Birds* includes a story attributed to Plutarch about a magpie who learns to imitate the sounds of trumpets [I, 200].) According to Clare’s account, though, only the domesticated magpie inspires the fury and aggression of the tribe. The wild magpies, that is, seem here to form a temporary and strategic alliance with the philosophers, taking up and enforcing an absolute and categorical difference between “the human” and “the animal.” They seem, that is, to respond with violence to a category confusion that “inspires terror” and that occurs when the wild bird, through coercion or affection or something else, we cannot know, is drawn or thrust into intimacy with the human.

21. Without endorsing their violence, can we entertain its logic? To an extent unusual in natural histories, Clare's natural history prose enlists anecdotal accounts of particular living creatures: invoked to illustrate or represent a kind, but yet maintaining their status as singular beings—"a" rather than "the" magpie. Rather than exemplifying the "wild" creature in some pure state, moreover, Clare's animals tend to exist in local contexts marked by the crossings and interpenetrations of human and non-human species. Many of the characters that show up in his natural history could be designated by the evocative old name of "familiar," for the stories Clare tells about them suggest traditional, at times mutual or symbiotic arrangements between animals and people. In Clare's pages, robins looking for shelter, food or company take up residence with farm-laborers in their porous houses; while isolated birds, like, perhaps, our unfortunate magpie, are captured, tamed and kept, often uncaged, by birding boys or by Clare himself. A note on "Hawks" immediately preceding the entry on the butter bump suggests the complexity of these sorts of interspecies relationships, which exist in a context that also includes casual, random acts of cruelty toward animals on the part of humans, more systematic forms of domination of animal life, and acts of resistance on the part of non-human creatures to cruelty and subjugation. The note begins with Clare's general overview of the "great many different sorts of hawks" that live in the area, including "a very large blue one" that a local man had "stupefied" with a gun and brought home, and that subsequently "knewd the string from its leg & effected its liberty," having refused all food while in captivity (87).¹⁸ He goes on to describe two hawks he knew well, which "grew very tame & woud come at a call or whistle when they was hungry" although they wouldn't allow themselves to be touched. Clare and the hawks lived amicably together for some time, he reports, until eventually "a boy caught one by suprise & hurt it so that it dyd"; afterwards, "the tamest dyd while I was absent from home 4 days it refusd food & hunted for me every morning & came to sit in my empty chair as it woud do till I got up they thought it fretted itself to death in my absence but I think the meat I gave was too strong for it & I believd it was not well a good

while before I left it I felt heartily sorry for my poor faithful & affectionate hawk” (88-89). Having escaped other forms of human-inflicted hurt, this last hawk seems to die of intimacy: either pining away from thwarted attachment or poisoned by the “strong meat” provided by its affectionate human familiar, or, if we let the example of the earlier, stupefied hawk color this one, from a refusal of the food that had lured it into familiarity with a capriciously violent species.

22. In Clare’s world, these traditional arrangements coexist with and are threatened by others that speak of the management and commodification of animals on a different and more modern scale: the capture of certain wild geese for the purpose of breeding with and improving the stock of domestic ones (99); and significantly for the redcaps and the magpies, a spiking popularity of pet birds during this period, that, in tandem with losses of means of livelihood among the rural poor, led to an escalation of the capture and domestication of certain species. Within these various and rapidly mutating relationships between “the human” and “the animal,” humans can simultaneously occupy the roles of the predator to whom a bird might feel a natural antipathy; of the protector to whom it might become bound in relations of natural sympathy; or even, of a species “like” one’s own—polyglot, curious and outgoing—to whom one might nonetheless and instinctively feel the greatest antipathy, sensing the threat such a one poses to species life, when relations of apparently reciprocal sympathy are also scenarios of force. Within creaturely existence “the human” is an unstable category, categorically different from other species in that it wobbles between being a species like any other (like a crow, with whom one might form a temporary alliance, or like a fox, from whom one always knows to keep one’s distance), and the species that can always and arbitrarily declare a state of exception to these arrangements. The wild birds, one might propose, seek to restore an imagined clarity into species life by purging their ranks of collaborators with an ordering of things that they didn’t invent but that has become embedded in their worlds and history.

23. The categorical distinction between “the human” and “the animal” that Derrida sees as central to philosophical thought involves the abstraction of the rich variety of non-human species into “animality as such,” he argues. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, he sometimes marvels at how readily this tradition continues simply to overlook the information that the biological field sciences have gathered about the variety and complexity of animal life: “the animal” presses difference into the catch-all concept of the same, “in spite of the infinite space that separates the lizard from the dog, the protozoan from the dolphin, the shark from the lamb” (34). Natural history catalogs trump Derrida’s list in their particularity: “the lizard” can be the subject of an entire field guide; and then there is the exuberant linguistic and taxonomical profusion of Clare’s natural history writing, where one meets up with the butter bump, the pettichap, the pink, the cricket bird or grass hopper bunting, the clod hopper (“it hops from clod to clod”). Yet as Derrida acknowledges elsewhere and as any student of natural history knows, at the core of the assumptions and practices of natural history are operations of separation and abstraction that, albeit on a different scale, structurally resemble the philosophical move he identifies: the abstraction and reduction of the singular individual creature into the species category, so that any given “it” becomes “the” nightingale, “the” butter bump—a reduction shored up by the supposedly invariable instinctual life of animals that causes any one generation, any one individual, any one bird song, to seem “like” and substitutable for any other.

24. As we have seen, Clare’s writing, conversant as it is with natural history conventions, presses against the categorical logic that underwrites them and the customs and habits that operate to reify them. Birds are “like” others of their species, but “like” other things as well: drawing on a rich lexicon of local common names, his language veers between the naturalists’ ways of keying out specimens and poetic, tropic “likenesses” that suggest affinities that traverse species, genus,

phylum, and even the distinction between living and non-living things.¹⁹ His natural history notes, moreover, invite us to ask whether the apparent “likeness” one bird displays to another of its kind may be less a matter of instinct than of scale. Natural historians are schooled to see animals as representative of their kind. Clare’s biographies of the birds, however, even when they state general truths about a species, do so in a manner that holds onto a sense of the willful singular thing hiding in the category (making the nest, “she” “never forgets” to line it with twitch or cover it with wool); while most of his notes toggle between such general statements and accounts of the specific characters who, taking advantage of a broken window pane, move into one’s house for a time and commandeer one’s chair, or who escape such confinement only to find themselves subject to the violent hostility of their kind.

25. “Like,” that is, our magpie—no doubt possessed of a proper name, isolated from its tribe, the familiar of the boy who happens to come walking by. For this magpie rewilding is not an option: with no natural or authentic voice or home, at best it can only be “like,” in these and these particulars but not in others, the others in the communities in which it lives or has lived. Selected out for its particular talents, exposed to praise and ignominy, it can be recognized in its unsubstitutable singularity as neither fully absorbable into its species category nor as a figure for something else, say, “the human.” Whatever terrors this *unheimlich* bird inspires in its fellow-magpies and the greater bird world of Helpston, it raises for us the possibility that we recognize instinctual life by cancelling out the specificity of animal experience, for instance, of the strange noise made by a bird that instinctively responds to danger in an adopted tongue. Our field guides, like the romantic poets are sometimes claimed to do, by their very construction present Nature as static. But Clare’s birds exhibit a truth that now begins fully to come home to us: they are singular, precarious, and finite, and their noises and habits survive in the way any code survives, antedating and exceeding singular beings but ending with the species. Open to the world and to the rapidly

changing circumstances we call human history, like members of the human species they attempt to respond to precarity by adopting new customs, habits, sympathies and antipathies, which become absorbed into so-called instinctual life, that is, into the habitus of the disciplined, adapted body.²⁰

26. We cannot know what the magpies were thinking. But we can follow Clare, whose curiosity leads him “a long way out of [his] path” to investigate this remarkable ado in the woods. At the core of his report, it is as though he finds himself routed through the wild birds: he describes the “something” that startles, even inspires terror in them as “the strangeness of the noise” the isolated magpie makes—for, he adds belatedly, it was calling “as it were for help,” “it could talk.” Although the magpie would seem to make or at least simulate an appeal that might have been intelligible to him, Clare initially registers the sound it makes as a noise without determinate significance—“strange,” shocking, uninterpretable, incommensurably coming from the body of the bird. Within the space of this detour and delay—this path that takes him out of his path and through the startled, terrified response of wild magpies—he hears his human language as a strange noise, “like” the “strange noise” of the butter bump: eerie, mechanically reproduced perhaps, and exposing a gap between organism and what comes out of its mouth.

27. We may want to read into this scene an allegory of Clare’s predicament, to see in this domesticated bird possessed of strange powers of speech a figure of the peasant poet, also precariously situated in the world, whose coming into poetic voice brings with it a sense of displacement, of alienation from “kind,” of being not at home, anywhere. But Clare’s note does not appropriate the magpie in this way. The path of identification here moves through the animal voice, but not to arrive at a sympathetic grasping of the bird’s separate but recognizable subjectivity. Rather, the shock of intimacy he experiences with this singular being admits to a

shared “strangeness” or alterity. The moment fractures and estranges an entrenched order of things and his own place in it: in the words of a passage from the autobiographical writing Clare produced during this period, it takes him, and us, “out of knowledge.”²¹ This may be the value of Clare’s natural history writing: to take us out of our path, to sound the limits of our fields of knowledge. And, perhaps, to limn an ecological ethics and politics of resistance based not on protectiveness—Clare’s accounts of his animal familiars suggest that relations of sympathy are always also scenes of force—but on an allegiance to the obdurate “strangeness” that inhabits the web of life.²²

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¹Appendix Va of Grainger's *Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare* lists natural history texts that Clare owned; he also had access to books owned by friends and to the extensive library of Milton House.

² Commentaries on Clare's natural history writing by Grainger, Vardy, and Heyes piece together its history and the complex reasons for its failure, at least in terms of publication. Together with the writing itself, their essays also bring home Clare's gifts as a naturalist and the extent to which he was familiar with natural history writing of the period.

³ For a path-breaking version of this argument see Pratt.

⁴ In addition the work of Foucault, Pratt, and Moore, these various ways of thinking about natural history are reflected in systems theory, an overview of which is provided by Cary Wolfe. Noah Heringman provides a helpful overview of the "commerce" of literature and science in the period. Natural history's ways of "constructing" the natural order as well as the legacy of these strategies, including within contemporary theory, are the context for Frédéric Neyrat's *The Unconstructable Earth*.

⁵ Guyer's wonderful and illuminating book, which begins by announcing its allegiance to close reading, explores how Clare's complex situatedness under overlapping biopolitical regimes (as poet, as laborer, as "mad") allows us to read in his work a "biopoetics": a poetics that grapples with the power of / over life. The poetry and prose she turns to in Clare tends to foreground some precarity of the "I," of "the (human) subject." I'm struggling here with work (natural history writing more generally, Clare's in particular) that doesn't appear to care very much about the subject, the problem of which has so absorbed romanticism and the history of criticism about it: rather than challenging us (we close readers) in a way we think we have the tools to meet, the "challenge" of this work may have to do with the way it takes us out of our (disciplinary) knowledge.

⁶ For accounts of Clare's refusal to exploit the natural world for human use, especially for the use of romantic structures of consciousness, see especially Barrell, Kövesi, Vardy. For discussions of Clare's environmental or ecological sensibility see Bate, Kövesi, McKusick, Weiner.

⁷ Foucault describes Buffon's organizational logic, which Macloc borrows, as placing species in terms of their familiarity and usefulness to humans. Although he in this way differentiates Buffon from Linneaus, he stresses that both systems have in common a focus on the visible—on what appears on the surface and can be registered by the eye (132). Although in Clare's time this exclusive attention to the visible is giving way to biological classificatory systems based on "deep" structures, the visible remains central to natural history guides—making Clare's pursuit of the "odd noise" more striking.

⁸ See for example Derrida's account of "the animal" as a long-standing concern of his (29-35). Moore's work provides another account of how this divide shores up the projects of capitalist modernity.

⁹ Buffon II: 103. The description is repeated almost exactly in Montague: see "Bittern." This reliance on dissection suggests what Foucault describes as a shift toward "deep structure" classificatory systems emerging in this period, although the logic of the field guides remains primarily based on the visual.

¹⁰ Barrell describes Clare's syntax as a "manifold," refusing typical structures of subordination in ways Barrell connects to the Clare's particular relation to the open-field system that characterized Helpston (164-73). For a sensitive account of Clare's protectiveness toward his birds' privacy that is relevant here, see Zimmerman.

¹¹ Bewell's work on the "haunting" of Clare's poetry by lost or precarious natures is relevant here.

¹² The world continues to include naturalists, amateur and professional, whose work, supported by the handbooks, involves experiences that go uncounted as well as providing data that, when aggregated, enables the tracking of the health and fluctuations of species populations. But this work goes on in a broader context: the attrition of species, but also of amateur naturalists, which results, for instance, in the

choice of dictionaries to dump natural historical vocabulary to make room for technological terms. See Walls for a discussion of the waning of a “felt sense of the astonishing plentitude of nonhuman nature” from the romantic period to the present (187-88).

¹³ See Higgins for a relevant discussion of the way the English “local” cannot be thought outside of a global and imperial context.

¹⁴ That is, do they read their situation like Moore would?

¹⁵ See for instance the Bungay I: xxxii-xxxiii, for a discussion of the way birds learn sounds from other species.

¹⁶ The quotations are from “The Firetails Nest” and “The Happy Bird,” 212, 211.

¹⁷ For Derrida it is of course the assumption of a *human* capacity for response that is in question more than of the animal’s. For his relative lack of speculation about what goes on in the animal’s head he has been charged with a lack of curiosity by Haraway (20). But my reading is concerned here with a strain of Clare’s thinking that, like Derrida, explores the limits of human access to the animal. I would argue that Clare’s ecological ethics is built around this recognition of limits: for him, relations of “affection” or “sympathy,” especially those that foster the acculturation of the animal, are relations of force; “connection” to the animal resides rather in moments of recognition of a fellow “stranger,” of the “strangeness” of animal “noise” and its affinity, by virtue of this alterity to itself, to human “noise.”

¹⁸ This offers a new perspective on Heidegger’s description of the animal as “stupefied”! (and, I suppose, of its being “poor in world”).

¹⁹ See Kelley on this dimension of his natural history writing.

²⁰ Walls finds in the natural history writing of this period insights (and their suppression) into the connectedness of “natural” history and human action. See François for a reflection on “the margin” as a figure for the place and the limits of potential adaptability to environmental change.

²¹ See Barrell (120-22), Bewell (551-552) and Guyer (84-100) for suggestive and relevant readings of this passage.

²² I would argue that Clare’s sense of the animal voice differs from Menely’s account: again, his connection is almost always to the “strangeness” and automatism of the voice (which he aligns with human language and sound-making); and while he engages in relations of affection with animals his habit is to cast relations of “sympathy” and “sensibility” as ethically problematic.