

Clare's Mutterings, Murmurings, and Ramblings: the Sounds of Health

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Clare is valued as a poet of direct communication. His poems are filled with Northamptonshire dialect that fosters an instantaneous connection to his local environment, creating an immediate sense of place through sound. Likewise, Clare's representations of natural sounds, such as the 'whewing' of the pewit, the 'swop' of the jay bird as it flies, and the 'chickering crickets', have a mimetic quality that creates a direct experience of what he hears.¹ Seamus Heaney grouped Clare with what he called 'monoglot geniuses', meaning that he had a gift for conveying through poetry a 'univocal homeplace' that his readers could understand without necessarily belonging to that place themselves.² However, this idea of Clare as a poet of such direct coherency is complicated by his madness or, specifically, by his repeated usage of a vocalisation which carries connotations of madness. This essay will consider the ways that Clare represents health and madness at the level of sound, by bringing them into relationship with a mode of speaking that recurs throughout his poetry and prose: his use of muttering. It will suggest that Clare's poetic investment in muttering and the sub-vocal register as both a personalised, therapeutic mode of self-address, and a way to foster a deep poetic relationship with his natural surroundings, comes to complicate his formal representation of health as a clear 'strong voice'.³ The essay will explore muttering as a mode of communication that creates an indeterminacy of sound, which was considered a signifier of insanity by both nineteenth-century nosologists and visitors who conversed with Clare in the asylum. It will then go on to show how Clare's own investment in muttering and other indeterminate vocal sounds resists such clear distinctions between health and madness, specifically through his formal organisation of sound. Through an engagement with Gilles Deleuze's theory of 'stuttered' language, which argues that literary form can enable us to hear verbal idiosyncrasies rather than cover them up, the essay will consider how Clare's use of indeterminate

rhythms and syllables brings health and madness together in the same poetic voice.

In 'Crazy Jane' (1808-19) and 'To Health' (1808-19), madness and health are both represented as a voice speaking to Clare from the natural world, but appear to require two different ways of listening.⁴ The voice in 'Crazy Jane' eludes recognition, confusing the listener yet, through its incoherent quality, demanding an acute attention in order that the listener can 'discern' from who and whence it comes. In 'To Health', the listener is greeted by a clear, 'strong voice' that is comprehended instantly. These two ways of listening—one that searchingly tries to interpret sound, the other instantly assured of what it hears—are fostered in the way Clare organises sound formally in each of these poems. In 'Crazy Jane' there is no narrative of how or why Jane went 'crazy', nor any descriptions of mad behaviour, but instead a moment of intense listening:

Hark what shrill mournful strains
Sounds from yon lonely plains
Where the low-bending willow
Drips thro the mimic billow
Rais'd by the adverse winds that curl the stream
How mournfully and plain
Their dying langour on the breezes seem
Say from what throat
Or is this note?
The song of Crazy Jane! —

Ye swains from whence and where?
Comes this sad grief so drear?
It must be,—(O' so grieveing)
Some loss thats past reprieveing
Or hope forlorn that never will return
—They'r dumb; —Enquirey's vain
Then lead me on ye sounds and let's discern
And further know
If all this woe
Come's from poor Crazy Jane.⁵

The 'Crazy Jane' of this poem exists not as a fully realised character, but as a sonic presence, emitting sounds and notes that resonate in the natural world. Consequently, madness is presented as something that can be 'discerned' by listening for it and being attentive to its sounds. As if straining to hear the 'Jane' that lays outside the

bounds of this poem, the lines of it lengthen and shorten, stretching horizontally back and forth as if reaching out and feeling their way towards the source of the sounds they register. The sounds of the poem itself also have a searching quality. The 'strains' and 'plains' of the first stanza are returned to consistently throughout the poem, most significantly through the name 'Jane', with rhyme emphasising both the sense of confusion and persistence felt by the listener. Jane's sonic presence is reiterated throughout the poem, yet is upset by other rhymes that interrupt it, new 'notes' that make the listener question that which he thinks he is hearing. The meandering rhyme scheme of the poem is also amplified by its wandering rhythms. The iambic trimeter of the first two lines becomes complicated by the introduction of extra syllables in the third and fourth lines, making it difficult to know where the stress falls—especially as the words 'willow' and 'billow' create an open, feminine rhyme rather than an emphatically stressed masculine one. The restless nature of the rhythm only increases as line 10 stretches out into iambic pentameter, only to suddenly shorten to trimeter in line 11, trim down again to dimeter in lines 12 and 13, until finally returning to iambic trimeter in line 14. If Clare is representing madness as a voice here, it is an obscure, unstable one, speaking in irregular rhythms and extra 'notes'. Indeed, the exclamation of 'They'r dumb; —Enquirey's vain' suggests that the voice of madness is so inscrutable, it blocks the listener from comprehension and makes an enquiry into its meaning pointless.

Conversely, in 'To Health', the voice that Clare hears is mapped onto a neater, tighter organisation of sound:

Thy voice I hear, thy form I see
In silence, Echo, stream or cloud
Now that strong voice belongs to thee
Which woods and hills repeat so loud⁶

Here, the confident recognition of the 'strong voice' of health is expressed through lines that maintain a regular iambic tetrameter, as well as a secure alternating rhyme scheme. Whilst the sounds presumed to be made by 'Crazy Jane' linger incoherently around the edges of Clare's listener's perception, the sound of health is 'loud', clear, and easy to understand. It is a sonic presence so strong and easily recognised that Clare even personifies it and addresses it as 'Thy'. Yet whilst the voice of health and the voice of madness are represented differently in the sonic construction of these poems,

they still sound out from the same place for Clare—both are voices that emanate from the natural world. In Eric Robinson and David Powell's Oxford edition of *The Early Poems*, these poems are separated across two volumes, with 'Crazy Jane' appearing in volume I, and 'To Health' appearing in volume II because it was published later in *The Village Minstrel* (1821). However, the explanatory notes state that these two poems belong originally in the same Northampton manuscript (Nor MS 1) and were composed around the same time. Tim Fulford, Simon Kövesi, and Valerie Pedlar have all considered the impacts of similar 'editorial fragmentation', which removes Clare's manuscript poems and prose from their original contexts and hinders our understanding of the growth of his ideas and poetic development.⁷ When these two poems especially are read alongside one another as they would have been in their paginal manuscript order ('Crazy Jane' is on p. 118, 'To Health' on pp. 119-20), they reveal a certain continuity between Clare's representation of madness and health. Both are voices that speak out and meet Clare in the natural world, inflected with the sounds of the wind, streams and other natural phenomena. The rest of this essay will consider further how this continuity between health and madness might exist in Clare's poetry, exploring how the sounds of health and madness can be brought further into relation with one another rather than kept apart.

In *Sketches in the Life of John Clare*, Clare provides both an autobiographical account of his life and of his poetic development. As he traces his growth from childhood into adulthood - his education and reading habits, the various walks and discoveries made in his local natural surroundings, and his movement between labouring jobs—poetry is composed along the way. This composition is almost instinctive in some places, a reflex that occurs during moments of need. Such a moment is evident when Clare recalls how, aged around thirteen, during his first job ploughing for Francis Gregory, he:

always went by my self to weeding the grain, tending horses and such like. Once every week I had to go for a bag of flower to Maxey, a village distant about 2 Miles [...] I was of a very timid disposition [...] and I had two or three haunted Spots to pass [...] therefore I must in such extremitys seize the best remedy to keep such things out of my head as well as I could, so on these journeys I mutterd over tales of my own fancy and contriving into ryhmes as well as my abilities was able⁸

Clare engenders a therapeutic use of poetic composition here: making up 'tales' and turning them into 'ryhmes' is a defence mechanism, a protective 'remedy' against fear. This sense of poetic protection is suggested again later, when Clare describes the hours spent working for Francis Gregory as 'the Nursery for fostering my rustic song'—here the development of his poetic composition is facilitated by a softer sense of attentive care.⁹ Significantly, this caring poetic 'nursery' was a site of utterances similar to the one above: 'Here I got into a habit of musing and muttering to ones self as pastime to divert melancholy, singing over things which I calld songs and attempting to describe scenes that struck me'.¹⁰ If the young Clare is in the nursery here, he is not being tended to by others, but learning a particular kind of self-soothing. The soft sound of muttering' is the therapeutic recitation of an inner, personal language that is not necessarily supposed to be heard by anybody else: 'what I calld songs' suggests that they might not have been apprehended as songs outside of Clare's own moment of singing.

Clare was alert to a disparity between his private 'mutterings' and a way of talking that was acceptable to others:

I generally kept looking on the ground and I have been so taken with my story that I have gone muttering it over into the town before I knew I got there this has often embarrasd me by being overheard by some one who has asked me who I was talking too?¹¹

Later on, in 'Autobiographical Fragments', Clare also recalls:

I know not what made me write poetry but these journeys and my toiling in the fields by myself gave me such a habit for thinking that I never forgot it and I always mutterd and talkd to myself afterwards and have often felt ashamd at being overheard¹²

Clare's early, occasional habit of muttering to himself has become entrenched: the pastime and coping mechanism used to guard against feelings of fear or melancholy has also become an established part of the poetry-writing process. As Clare's admissions of shame and embarrassment suggest, the poetic method developed in *Sketches*, whilst therapeutic in solitude, becomes problematic when it is 'overheard' by other ears. Mark Storey's discussion of the tension between private and public communication in Clare's letters and poems characterises him as a poet who, to his readers,

often feels overheard, as though we are 'eavesdroppers' on his secret utterances.¹³ John Stuart Mill would later go on to define poetry specifically as that which is 'overheard', creating a special lyric seclusion wherein poetry can exist as 'feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude'. Mill also argued that 'there is nothing absurd, in the idea of such a mode of soliloquizing'.¹⁴ Through his own poetic method Clare pre-empts Mill's ideas about the nature of what poetry is, but certainly he does not lose a sense of there being something 'absurd' in the act of poetising. John Ashbery's comment that 'very often people don't listen to you when you speak to them. It's only when you talk to yourself that they prick up their ears', feels more pertinent as an indicator of the intriguing strangeness and indecipherability of Clare's poetic utterances.¹⁵ The mutterings Clare recalls provoke curiosity, but by their very nature do not invite listeners in. The various definitions offered by the OED suggest that muttering is nearly always difficult to hear and makes sense of. It can mean 'to speak in a low, barely audible tone with the mouth nearly closed', 'to express dissatisfaction covertly in low tone', to 'grumble in an undertone', 'to make a low, ominous rumbling sound', and 'to recite in low, indistinct tones'.¹⁶ What unites these definitions is the way in which muttering lingers at the boundary between language and sound. All of the above descriptions fall into use of the word 'tone' or 'sound', as well as 'speak', 'express', and 'recite'. To mutter is therefore to speak a sound, or rather to utilise sounds in a different way to standardised speech. Muttering does not necessarily invite others to hear and understand what is being said, as sense and meaning become subservient to the strange, incoherent sounds produced.

Clare's embarrassment at being 'overheard' muttering to himself might be tied to the way such speaking was interpreted by nosologists of insanity as incoherent or without sense. Clare's autobiographical writings lay out the progression of his poetics from a young boy muttering to himself in the fields to published poet, but they also hint at another significant development in Clare's life: his insanity. Thought of as potentially mad, with his love of reading and insistent pursuit of education within a rural labouring community considered 'symptoms of lunacy', this early suggestion of insanity, however unfounded, foreshadows the diagnosis Clare would later receive.¹⁷ The poetic muttering that Clare hones in *Sketches*, a self-soothing language forged in moments of solitude that helps him to process an aesthetic response to his environment, finds an echo in

the discourses surrounding insanity and its presentation at the time of his institutionalisation. One of the most dominant of these was the system of moral management and the language of 'self-reliance' adopted by those who sought to put it into practice. Matthew Allen, owner of High Beech Asylum where Clare was resident from 1838-1841, was one such practitioner and his *Essay on the Classification of the Insane* (1837), published by John Taylor, contains numerous observations and case studies of his patients. Although the below examples run across different conditions, cases, and symptoms, running through them is the continued reference to mutterings and murmurings as evidence of insanity:

almost always muttering to himself as if he held busy converse with his own thoughts [...] when any of his operations or mutterings are interrupted, like one whose studies are broken in upon at some unlucky moment, he seems vexed and unhinged[...] his present state of mind presents a strange mass of confusion from which nothing can be drawn or collected, except [...] from his muttering to himself [...] he seems stupid and churlish, always silent unless spoken to, and then he answers with abruptness and impatience, in a murmuring, grumbling, and almost unintelligible manner.¹⁸

There is no case study of Clare in Allen's writings on insanity, but the above passage would not look out of place amongst the reports made by visitors to Clare during his periods of confinement.

When 'mad' John Clare spoke, those who worked in or visited the asylums were interested in what he had to say. As Jonathan Bate shows in his biography, a letter from John Taylor to his sister in December 1835, precedes these accounts, in which Taylor expresses his concern about Clare's deteriorating health. In particular, he recalls conversing with Clare:

He talked properly to me in Reply to all my Questions [...] but his mind is sadly enfeebled. – He is constantly speaking to himself and I when I listened I heard such words as these pronounced a great many times over, and with great Rapidity – 'God bless them all' – 'Keep them from Evil' – 'Doctors' – But who it was of whom he spoke I could not tell.¹⁹

For Taylor, the greatest indicator of Clare's mental 'enfeeblement' is his speech, here deemed incoherent not simply because of its supposedly obscure content, but also because it does not adhere

to Taylor's sense of a proper 'reply'. One might consider an earlier remark of Clare's here, about Taylor's conversational skills:

he never asks a direct question or gives a direct reply but continually saps your information by a secret passage coming at it as it were by working a mine like a lawyer examining a witness and he uses this sort of caution even in his common discourse till it becomes tedious to listen or reply²⁰

It appears at times that Taylor has also been left talking to himself when in conversation with Clare. Although this autobiographical fragment predates Taylor's letter and Clare's imminent diagnosis, it is a helpful counter to the claims Taylor makes about Clare and his 'enfeebled' mind. What satisfied Taylor as 'proper' replies may have just been information discreetly and indirectly 'sapped' from Clare; what were interpreted as manic ramblings may instead have been utterances born out of boredom. This comparison of both men's opinions of the other's speech suggests that the notion of one dominant, fixed and totally coherent way of talking is a fallacy, and that 'conversation' might have other dimensions than just two sane people talking to each other.

However, within the asylum, the focus on the way Clare spoke and strung sentences together as evidence of his madness heightened. As Jonathan Bate reports, a clergyman who visited Clare in 1847 witnessed a 'man in middling stature [...] apparently lost in thought, muttering to himself in broken sentences', and later reported upon talking with Clare that his musings were delivered in a 'rapid and peculiar' tone. This clergyman's companion is reported to have said 'occasionally brings forth some fine thoughts in these perambulatory improvisations. But these must be caught the moment they are uttered, or they are gone forever'.²¹ The poet John Dalby tried to catch his moment of conversation with Clare in verse after he visited him along with Thomas Inskip and G. J. De Wilde, editor of the Northampton Mercury:

Let me recall him when Inskip led
The unconscious poet to your home, DeWilde,
And we sat listening as to some fond child,
The wayward unconnected words he said –
Prattle by confused recollections led...²²

The way in which these reported instances of muttered, wayward, unconnected, ephemeral 'prattle' confirmed for others Clare's mental deterioration echoes Allen's general observations in his *Essay*, and displays a dominant contemporary criteria for the diagnosis of insanity being imposed upon him. Michel Foucault argues that nineteenth century discourses on madness wrestled with a difficult problem—an 'essential gap between its presence and its manifestation', resulting in the need for recognisable signs. This, Foucault argues, placed emphasis on defining 'a recognisable type [...] the madman'.²³ In *Observations on Madness and Melancholy* (1809), John Haslam argued for one of the most unmistakable signs of the insane person: 'If to an ordinary observer, a person were to talk in an incoherent manner, he would think him mad; if his conduct were regular, and his observations pertinent, he would pronounce him in his senses'.²⁴ Dr Fenwick Skrimshire, Clare's village doctor and the signatory on his Northampton asylum committal papers, also observed that 'incongruity and incoherency in regard to, and in relation to, the former deportment of the individual in question', can be a key sign that they have descended into mania—the condition he diagnosed Clare with.²⁵

Whilst these treatises and diagnostic criteria sought to refine understandings of insanity, their representations of the incoherent 'mutterings' of the insane gloss over what this incoherency might actually sound like, replacing attentive listening with a generalised sense of incomprehension. Andrew Scull and Roy Porter both highlight this suspicious gap in representation, arguing that such accounts repress the patients' actual experience of their condition and substitute it with mere summary.²⁶ There is no room for variation, or sense of scale, but instead a conviction that there is either a rational, healthy, and sane language through which we can read the world, or a mad and manic diversion from it. The utterances of the mad are conceived of as what Salomé Voegelin terms a 'noisy voice', a language stripped of signification and reduced to mere 'noise' because it does not speak in the dominant, rational discourse.²⁷ Comparing these criteria to Clare's own recollections of 'mutterings' that he has heard, and uttered, reveals the different and special attention Clare is willing to pay to the noisy sub-vocal in his poetry and prose. It also creates a space for considering how these sounds relate to Clare's experience of health as a 'voice' that speaks to him from the natural world.

The important role listening plays in Clare's poetic engagement with his surroundings has been asserted by critics, offering a counter to the attention paid to his visual prowess. Sam Ward presents a Clare whose well-attuned ear serves to deepen his connection to his rural locality, as well as protect its important specificity.²⁸ Stephanie Kuduk Weiner argues that Clare's heightened attention to the sounds of the natural world allows him to create a poetics that lets the reader, or listener, in on this private soundscape through 'his use of onomatopoeia, to merge into a single utterance the sounds of poetic language and the sounds it seeks to portray'.²⁹ Both of these critics reveal Clare's deep investment in the direct potential of sound and the clarity of instantaneous experience to be found in listening. Whilst this kind of listening is important for Clare, there are also moments when he tunes into less immediately decipherable sounds. His appreciation and replication of birdsong throughout his poetry is well-known, and the 'chew-chew', 'cheer-cheer', 'cheer-up', and 'tweet tweet jug jug jug' of the nightingale in 'The Progress of Ryhme' (1824-32) is a prominent example of Clare listening to, and learning from, the songs of birds.³⁰ Hailed at the beginning of the poem as 'visions' that give 'health' to Clare, 'poesy' in fact comes to be learned not through the visual, but through attentive listening and imitation.³¹ The fields that 'seem to hum', the air that 'hummed melodies around', and the 'haunting' 'everlasting hum' of insects are all auditory inspirations and 'real teachers' for Clare, who seeks to map his own poetics onto this natural soundscape through his 'hummed or sung' responses.³² However, these sounds are at once arresting and vague, hanging around the edges of perception. To 'hum' is to make a sound that avoids clear meaning, to 'make an inarticulate murmur', to 'make a low inarticulate vocal sound'.³³ In wanting to align his own poetic utterances with these sounds, Clare deliberately places poetry into the realm of incoherency. Alongside the nightingale in 'The Progress of Ryhme' there is also a linnet:

My heart had love for poesy
 A simple love a wild esteem
 As heart felt as the linnets dream
 That mutters in its sleep at night
 Some notes from extacys delight
 Thus did I dream oer joys & lie
 Muttering dream-songs of poesy³⁴

By aligning his own poesy with the sounds of the 'muttering linnet', Clare seeks access to a register of sound that does not have to communicate one clear meaning, but dwells in 'notes' of 'exstasy', 'delight', and 'joys'—the incoherent insanity heard by Allen and those who visited Clare in the asylums is preceded by this assimilation of muttering into a poem that adopts the sub-vocal as an important mode of poetic expression, significantly one that ultimately gives Clare back an experience of 'health'. Perhaps the sound of health has more nuances than just the clear 'strong voice' Clare hears in 'To Health'.

Yet even though Clare might privilege private incoherency over clear public utterance in 'The Progress of Ryhme', muttering and sub-vocal utterances do not avoid completely an association with madness in his poetry. In 'Crazy Nell: The Maniac' (1820), Nell's descent into madness is marked by a shift in her speech and reasoning capacities: 'She muttered her terrors – her eyes rolled wild... / Her sense & her reason forever was lost... / A Maniac restless & wild... Now Crazy Nell rambles & still she will weep'.³⁵ 'The Crazy Maid' (1819-20) displays a whole range of 'mad' utterances: 'laughing & howling at she knows not what', she utters 'wild gushing joys' that 'burst' suddenly from her, 'Will scowl look dark & mutter wild revenge' if she feels she is being 'contrould' by those who do not comply with her seemingly mad requests, and is occupied intensely with a set of stones to which 'Shed mumble to each some pretty story'.³⁶ Although the vocal idiosyncrasies uttered by these characters sound like those in Allen's case studies, Clare does not simply observe them and denounce them as mad. In the case of 'The Crazy Maid', Clare instead portrays madness through the sub-vocal in order to further explore how this affective register of speech is related to poetic composition. When the maid mutters to her stones, she does not utter streams of gibberish but instead, we are told, begins to 'cite striking passages that pleasd her much'.³⁷ Muttering becomes not simply mad, meaningless sound, but a personalised form of poetic recitation recalling Clare's own admissions of how he 'mutterd' poems and scraps of songs to himself as he worked in the fields, or to guard against his youthful fears.

In his natural history prose, Clare describes muttering as that which gives him a specific and poetic relationship with his surroundings:

the man of taste looks upon the little Celadine in Spring & mutters in his mind some favourite lines from Wordsworths address to that flower he never sees the daisy without thinking of Burns [...] the clown knows nothing of these pleasures he knows they are flowers & just turns an eye on them & plods by therefore as I said to look on nature with a poetic eye magnifys the pleasure she herself being the very essence & soul of Poesy if I had the means to consult & the *health* to indulge it I shoud crowd these letters on Natural History with lucious scraps of Poesy from my favourite Minstrels & make them less barren of amusement & more profitable of perusal. [my emphases]³⁸

What muttering offers here is a special kind of poetic recall, a way to bring poetry back into relationship with what one experiences in the natural world. Rather than the generalised realm of mere recognition inhabited by the 'clown', who only looks for what he can immediately understand as 'flowers', muttering poetry to oneself offers a deeper connection with one's environment. Clare implies that this personal poetic memory is something that requires one to be in a state of 'health' before they can 'indulge' in its pleasures. What Clare describes as 'to look on nature with a poetic eye' bears a resemblance to what John Conolly defined as 'the poetical temperament'. Prior to Allen's *Essay*, Taylor also published *An Inquiry Concerning the Indications of Insanity* (1830), in which Conolly discusses the common contemporary notion that 'excesses' and 'diseases of the imagination' can lead to displays of insanity.³⁹ The intense role of the imagination in Romantic poetry has made it fertile ground for discussions of the relationship between poetry and madness, in both its contemporary reception and more recent criticism.⁴⁰ Yet Conolly, a radical supporter of the 'non-restraint' movement who sought to implement more humane treatment in nineteenth-century asylums, actually cites the benefits of poetic imagination. He suggests that 'it will be found that those poets, who have been the most highly gifted with imagination, have been least prone to its diseases', arguing instead that poets gain 'vigilant attention' as well as 'a memory most retentive' and 'a judgement highly correct'.⁴¹ Clare's suggestion that a personal recall of poetry, muttered to oneself in the natural world, might require a state of health, together with Conolly's argument for the mentally improving qualities of poetic imagination, creates a space for the muttered sounds of madness within a poetics that embraces health as a key sonic experience. I will now turn to how I think Clare

poetically creates those muttered sounds in his poems, and how we, as readers, are able to 'overhear' them.

As Andrew Scull and Roy Porter both argue, the use of words such as 'muttered', 'murmured' and references to other sub-vocal utterances of asylum patients do not fully capture what was actually said, or what it really sounded like, signifying instead an unwillingness to engage with the expressions of the mad as well as a potentially biased misrepresentation. Whilst Clare frequently employs the sub-vocal register throughout his poetry and prose, the words that he uses to represent the sounds that he hears in his surroundings do keep the reader at a certain distance. When Clare declares 'Hail gentle winds I love your murmuring sounds', or hears the 'beetle' make 'Enquiries ever new / Teazing each passing ear with murmurs vain'; when he listens to the 'hasty brook / That mutters through the weeds', overhears the bird who 'mutters inward melodys', recalls a brook that burst its dam 'in rushing gushes of wild murmuring groans', or revels in the secret words of the 'gipseys' as 'they mutterd wi wild witching grin', he lets his readers in on these secret sounds whilst simultaneously flagging up their incoherency.⁴² Clare's investment in listening as a crucial element of his poetics allows him to produce faithful recreations of the sounds he hears in his environment, such as the nightingale's song in 'The Progress of Ryhme', whilst at the same time placing him in the privileged position of one who is allowed to hear these other, untranslatable sounds. How, then, might Clare let us in on these secret mutterings and murmurings?

In 'He Stuttered' (1998), French philosopher Gilles Deleuze is interested in the ways in which authors represent speech in their texts, especially when that speech is represented as fragmented or obscured. He argues that when vocal obscurities are represented in written language through one signifying word, in his case 'stutter', an intersection is created between written language and speech. For Deleuze, when written language tries to become speech through these signifiers of verbal ticks or fragmentations, the intent is not to cover up variations, but to make them resonate:

For when an author is content with an external marker that leaves the *form of expression* intact ('he stuttered...'), its efficacy will be poorly understood unless there is a corresponding *form of content*—an atmospheric quality, a milieu that acts as the conductor of words—that brings together within itself the quiver, the murmur, the stutter, the tremolo, or the vibrato, and makes the indicated affects reverberate through the words.⁴³

With its divine conceptions till they rise
Forgetting earth & mix with paradise⁴⁵

Deleuze argues that it is the *form* as well as the verbal signifiers of a text that work to convey what is being 'heard'. If applied to Clare's frequent use of sub-vocal utterances, Deleuze provides a framework for thinking about how Clare's poetic form might work to make the murmur it represents resonate within it. Indeed, Clare's representation of the voice of 'Crazy Jane' as an odd 'note' that confuses its listener is echoed in Cyrus Redding's report of Clare's own speech when he visited him at High Beech asylum in 1841. Redding observed that Clare's conversation was erratic, switching between topics 'abruptly' and becoming 'dislocated, so that one part of it got off its pivot, and protruded into the regular workings; or as if a note had got into a piece of music which had no business there'.⁴⁴ This alignment of Clare's speech with irregular, musical notes also recalls muttering's tonal qualities and how it blurs speech with sound, creating an indeterminacy of meaning. Whilst Redding can only interpret this irregular, unfixed sound of speech as a symptom of madness, Clare comes to assimilate it into his poetics and explicitly into relationship with health through his indeterminate use of rhythm and sound. To conclude, I now offer a reading of 'A Spring Day' as an example of how Clare makes his poems 'mutter'—that is, how he uses sound deliberately to create a poetics that avoids one fixed regular sound, but instead brings the sounds of madness and health into coexistence.

In 'A Spring Day' (mid -1820s—early 1830s), madness and health are brought into direct relationship with one another through sound. Significantly, Clare aligns the process of wandering through the landscape in search of the promise of health with an uncontrolled flow of speech, a 'ramble':

Now forth the Poet rambles with the spring
Southern the morning speeds on easy wing
With winds soft whispering sunshine all the way
In glorious promise of a healthy day [...]
His thoughts gush out by starts in various moods
Now eddying like a runnel thro the woods
Dallying with pleasant things as it with leaves
Then starts till wider space its glow recieves
& like a cataract dashd with maddening ire
As almost kindles water into fire
His thoughts start out with joys unfelt before
& maddening raptures makes his soul run oer

While Redding was concerned by the 'irregular' workings of Clare's speech, here Clare's rambling search for health is full of metrical irregularities and ambiguities. In the above extract, 'maddening' can be scanned with either two or three syllables, with an overall effect on the length of the line. With three syllables enunciated, 'madd-en-ing', the iambic pentameter becomes upset by the extra beat, whereas regularity is maintained by glossing over this extra syllable. That this metrical ambivalence should occur over the word 'maddening' is extremely important. Clare, whose speech Redding claimed sprung up erratically 'as if a note had got into a piece of music which had no business there', inserts such odd notes into the very word that indicates his future diagnosis. There are other important words in the above passage which also contain such metrical uncertainties. The word 'glorious' creates a metrical trip in the line that contains the word 'healthy' hinting that an experience of health is even to be found in such moments of irregularity. This idea is emphasised by the way that the 'promise' of health is communicated through a sub-vocal 'whispering' that again holds an indefinite syllable count depending on how it is stressed. If Clare sets up a search for health here, he does so through a poetic voice that resists strict regularity or fixity. His rhythmic indeterminacy avoids a distinction between a clear 'strong voice' of health and a voice of madness filled with wandering 'notes', to create instead sounds that blur the lines between the two.

To conclude, 'overhearing' madness and health in Clare's poetry might not just consider the relation of the reader to a poet who locates his craft in muttering to himself, but might also be about defining a particular quality of listening. 'Over-hearing' comes to mean not just listening in on something, but over-listening, being particularly attentive to the different sonic possibilities residing in Clare's poems. Those who listen to Clare's voice should be open to a kind of auditory ramble, mutter, or murmur, allowing the ear to wander attentively over the words and rhythms in order to uncover their multiplicities. If we listen to Clare in this way, we hear that the voice of madness and the voice of health are not so different to this poet whose career began in soft, therapeutic mutterings.

NOTES

- 1 *Middle Poems*, III, p. 472, l. 19; *Middle Poems*, III, p. 568, l. 68; *Middle Poems*, III, p. 156, l. 152.
- 2 Seamus Heaney, 'John Clare: a bi-centenary lecture', *Haughton*, pp. 130-147 (p. 131).
- 3 *Early Poems*, II, p. 25, l. 31.
- 4 These dates relate to the date of composition, not publication, as indicated by editors Eric Robinson and David Powell in *Early Poems*, II, p. 783.
- 5 *Early Poems*, I, p. 184, ll. 1-20.
- 6 *Early Poems*, II, p. 25, ll. 29-32.
- 7 Tim Fulford, 'Personating Poets on the Page: John Clare in his Asylum Notebooks', *JCSJ*, 32 (2013), 27-48 (27); Simon Kövesi, 'Beyond the Language Wars: Towards a Green Edition of John Clare', *JCSJ*, 26 (2007), 61-75.; Valerie Pedlar, "'Written by Himself" – Edited by Others: The Autobiographical Writings of John Clare', *New Approaches*, pp. 17-32.
- 8 John Clare, 'Sketches in the Life of John Clare', By Himself, pp. 1-31 (p. 9).
- 9 'Sketches', *By Himself*, p. 12.
- 10 *Ibid*, p. 8.
- 11 *Ibid*, p. 10.
- 12 'Autobiographical Fragments', *By Himself*, pp. 34-165 (p. 73).
- 13 Mark Storey, 'The Poet Overheard: John Clare and his Audience', *JCSJ*, 10 (1991), 5-16 (8).
- 14 John Stuart Mill, 'Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties', *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, eds. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (University of Toronto Press, 1981), Vol. I, pp. 343-365 (p. 348).
- 15 David Lehman, 'John Ashbery: The Pleasures of Poetry', *New York Times Magazine*, 16 December (1984), 64.
- 16 'mutter, v.1', *OED*.
- 17 'Sketches', *By Himself*, p. 5.
- 18 Matthew Allen, *Essay on the Classification of the Insane* (London: John Taylor, 1837), pp. 118-195.
- 19 Letter to Elizabeth Taylor, December 9th, 1836, quoted in *Biography*, p. 406.
- 20 'Autobiographical Fragments', *By Himself*, p. 132.
- 21 *Biography*, p. 473.
- 22 *Ibid*, p. 482.
- 23 Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalfa; trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 178-79.
- 24 John Haslam, *Observations on Madness and Melancholy*, 2nd edition (London: J. Callow, 1798; 1809), p. 38.
- 25 Fenwick Skrimshire, *The Village Pastor's Surgical and Medical Guide* (London: Ibotson and Palmer, 1838), p. 203.
- 26 Andrew Scull, *The Most Solitary of Afflictions: Madness and Society in Britain, 1700-1900* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993); Roy Porter, 'The Voice of the Mad', in *Mad Men: a Social History of Madhouses, Mad-Doctors & Lunatics* (Stroud: Tempus, 2006).
- 27 Salomé Voegelín, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 71.
- 28 Sam Ward, "'To list the song & not to start the thrush": John Clare's Acoustic Ecologies', *JCSJ*, 29 (2010), 15-32.
- 29 Stephanie Kuduk Weiner, 'Listening with John Clare', *Studies in Romanticism*, 48.3 (2009), 371-390 (372).
- 30 *Middle Poems*, III, p. 500, ll. 243-246.
- 31 *Middle Poems*, III, p. 492, l. 4.
- 32 *Middle Poems*, III, pp. 494-98, ll. 68-186.
- 33 'hum, v.1', *OED*.
- 34 *Middle Poems*, III, p. 496, ll. 118-124.
- 35 *Early Poems*, I, pp. 468-69, ll. 110-117.
- 36 *Early Poems*, II, pp. 453-456, ll. 38-84.
- 37 *Early Poems*, II, p. 456, l. 91.
- 38 *Natural History*, pp. 39-41.
- 39 John Conolly, M.D, *An Inquiry Concerning the Indications of Insanity, with Suggestions for the Better Protection and Care of the Insane* (London: John Taylor, 1830), p. 148.
- 40 See Frederick Burwick, *Poetic Madness and the Romantic Imagination* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); see also Ross Woodman and Joel Faflak, *Sanity, Madness, Transformation: The Psyche in Romanticism* (University of Toronto Press, 2005).
- 41 Conolly, *Inquiry*, p. 147-49.
- 42 *Early Poems*, I, p. 185, l. 1; *Middle Poems*, III, p. 157, ll. 157-59; *Middle Poems*, III, p. 428, ll. 41-42; *Middle Poems*, IV, p. 249, l. 7; *Early Poems*, II, p. 300, l. 44; *Middle Poems*, III, pp. 393-94, ll. 496-517.
- 43 Gilles Deleuze, 'He Stuttered', in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith and Michael. A. Greco (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 107-114 (p. 108).
- 44 Cyrus Redding, *English Journal*, 20 (15 May 1841), 305-9; 22 (29 May 1841), 340-3, in *Critical Heritage*, pp. 247-256 (p. 248).
- 45 *Middle Poems*, II, pp. 316-17, ll. 1-28.

