

**“Mild health I seek thee”: Clare and Bloomfield at the Limits of Pastoral**

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Robert Bloomfield and John Clare both endured and witnessed episodes of mental and physical illness, and were acutely aware of the impact their suffering had, at times, on their ability to write poetry. Both poets were also trying to compose and publish verse within a literary culture that considered physical and mental illness as markers of creative talent, and sought to codify the body, mind, and verse of the labouring-class poet within that culture. This essay will explore how Clare and Bloomfield navigated the nineteenth-century literary and cultural currency of illness and tried to find a voice within it, paying particular attention to how this inflected their vision of, and participation in, the pastoral tradition. I begin with a reading of Clare’s early poem “To Health” in order to uncover his hesitant poetic voice within the pastoral mode. Then, through attention to Clare’s contemporary reception in particular, I consider how the body and mind of the labouring-class poet was subject to simultaneous cultural narratives of robust health and sickly weakness. I then explore Clare’s ambivalent depictions of rural labour in relation to this cultural bind and, finally, turn to his inheritance of Bloomfield’s poem “Shooter’s Hill” (1806) in a sonnet from the 1830s. Comparing Bloomfield and Clare’s attempts to represent a pastoral vision of rural healthiness also reveals their alertness to the naivety of this ideal. Their poems, I suggest, claim ostensibly to locate health as a blessing emanating from the natural world but, in doing so, destabilise this location and imbue it with uncertainty.

Clare's early poem "To Health" — first published in *The Village Minstrel* (1821) — has received very little critical attention, and extant discussions of it are not particularly favourable. Mark Storey, for example, describes the work as "an instance of Clare's unhealthy reliance on a tradition that has little to offer him" (*The Poetry of John Clare* 32). The poem consists of thirteen stanzas, which address and describe health in relation to multiple natural phenomena: health is hailed variously as the "soothing balm" of the breeze in Clare's opening address (line 1 *EP* 2: 24)<sup>1</sup>; as the "voice" of "stream or cloud" and "woods and hills" (lines 30-32: 25); as evident in "The leaf the flower the spirey blade" and as "hanging drops of pearley dew" (lines 33-34: 25), in just these few examples. For Storey, this poem fails primarily as a Clarean vision of nature, lacking as it does (in his view) Clare's particular, idiosyncratic mode of description as he struggles to find his voice in relation to both the tradition of eighteenth-century topographical poetry and a "Romantic" personal response to nature:

There is nothing to distinguish this from the host of similar third-rate verses on this theme. If we expect concision and particularity from Clare, we don't get it here. The remorseless quatrains skate over the surface of the natural world, leaving her tastefully decorous and undefined, uninteresting because the poet shows no real interest himself. The stock nouns, collective and generalised, the stock adjectives, weak and comforting. Comforting is perhaps the point. So long as he can resort to such formulae, Clare feels relatively safe; he doesn't need to think out an attitude to nature, it is already supplied for him by the implications of an inherited vocabulary. It is clearly a dead end, even though it is one to which he repeatedly turns (32).

If "To Health" is merely a poem about "nature," then Storey has a point – it does not contain much evidence of the singular attentive vision and, as Seamus Heaney put it, sense of the "one-thing-after-anotherness of the world" that we find in many of Clare's other poems from the 1820s and 1830s (Heaney 137). This is not just a poem that tries to "think out an attitude

to nature” however, but also an attitude to health, and as such presents a more complex representation of its subject than Storey recognises.

As an ode, “To Health” personifies health through the use of apostrophe and offers an ostensibly confident form of devoted address:

Hail soothing balm – ye breezes blow

Ransack the flower and blossom’d tree

All, all your stolen gifts bestow

For health has granted all to me

And may this blessing long be mine

May I thy favour still enjoy

Then never shall my heart repine

Nor yet thy long continuance cloy

[...]

Ah well may they who do possess

Sweet health thy joy-inspiring balm

Lavish thy praise in such excess

‘Hail hail, wild woodlands native charm!’

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 loud

The leaf the flower the spirey blade

The hanging drops of pearley dew

The russet heath the woodland shade

All all can bring thee in my view

(lines 1-36 *EP 2: 24-25*)

This is a poem steeped in classical and pastoral tradition, perceiving, in a manner reminiscent of Thomson's *The Seasons* (1730), health as a result of the bountiful and regenerative nature of creation. In "Spring," for example, Thomson celebrates the ushering in of new "green days" where "Reviving Sickness lifts her languid head; / Life flows afresh; and young-ey'd Health exalts the whole creation round" (lines 891-894 *The Seasons*: 44). Clare, an avid reader of Thomson,<sup>2</sup> sings similarly of a health that infuses and exalts the natural world, and is hailed by the speaker as a restorative force that returns on the breeze. There is also a perceptible nod to the Horatian desire for health as a form of peace and contentment, a mode that William Christmas argues is often taken up and developed among "low-class versifiers" in the early to mid-eighteenth century (Christmas 98; 221). Clare's letter to Allan Cunningham in 1824, where he referred playfully to himself, Cunningham, Hogg, and Bloomfield as "intruders and stray cattle in the fields of the Muses" (*Letters* 303), made it clear that he had "no Latin and Greek to boast of" (303). He did, however, possess a copy of Philip Francis' English translation of *The Works of Horace* (1815).<sup>3</sup> It is possible to hear echoes of the "Ode XXXI To Apollo" in particular in "To Health," with its emphasis on being content with what you have and health as an aspiration equal to, if not more important than, material wealth: "Nor ask I more, than sense and health / Still to enjoy my present wealth" (lines 21-22: 40). This poem is more, however, than an opportunity for Clare simply to rehearse and show his awareness of earlier literary traditions. He draws on a familiar poetic form in order to test and explore the nature of health, and in doing so presents a less confident and settled appraisal of its subject than first appearances might suggest.

Through Clare's adoption of the ode form, presence, absence, distance, and proximity are all dramatized in "To Health," where emphatic claims of health's potential abundance ("All all can bring thee in my view") also hint at its more diffuse and uncontrollable nature, as though it were everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Helen Vendler's notion of "vertical address," where "the speaker's apostrophe is directed to a person or thing inhabiting a physically inaccessible realm existing 'above' the speaker" (Vendler 2), is a helpful way of reading the tone of "To Health" if not the circumstances it evokes. Manifest in natural elements, health is made material and accessible as much as it is God-given ("Then thank thy God exulting soul [...] / [...] Who gives this Health as seasons roll" (lines 21-23)) but, at the same time, its overwhelming ubiquity troubles the subject's ability to pin it down. Invocation and apostrophe take on the sense of the conditional rather than the given: "may," "shall," "would," and "can" construct an approach to health as an abundant *possibility* rather than a state that has actually been achieved by the speaker.

Vendler argues that the "intrinsic and constitutive ability of the lyric to create intimacy is perhaps most striking when the object of intimacy can never be humanly seen or known, yet can be humanly addressed"(4). Each subsequent stanza in this poem, with its attempts to see and feel health in the natural world, can be considered either as a confident address, or as yet another attempt to grasp health and to invoke it before it shifts into a different guise, revealing a constant striving for intimacy with something elusive and protean. There is too, I suggest, a hint at the limitations of traditional utterance in the ode's repeated refrains ("Hail soothing balm"; "Then hail sweet balm" (lines 1; 37; 49: 24-26)). In the poem's seventh stanza — quoted above — Clare's speaker declares "Ah well may they who do possess / Sweet health thy joy-inspiring balm / Lavish thy praise in such excess / 'Hail hail, wild woodlands native charm!'" (lines 25-28). These lines rehearse and put pressure on the stock phrases of "praise" (what Storey might class as the "inherited vocabulary" of the poem)

associated with health, by insisting that they are the utterance of a collective “they” (i.e. perhaps *not* the speaker of the poem) who already possess it. The self-conscious use of quotation here reveals a poetic subject perhaps disassociated from a “they” who have health and are free to sing its praises; this is a poem that ventriloquizes the experience of health it reveres rather than voices it from personal experience. What Storey hears as empty platitudes in this poem’s descriptive language, then, can also be read as Clare’s self-conscious awareness of its limitations. If Clare struggles to be convincing in this poem—if its tone and diction do not quite ring true—it is not simply because he lacks originality, but because he is alert to, and performs, both health’s precarious, elusive nature and a difficulty in speaking authentically about what it feels like to be healthy in the forms and language he has inherited.

It is perhaps not surprising that health is a subject where Clare struggles to find his voice. He did not see himself as a particularly healthy poet. Clare’s madness and eventual institutionalisation at High Beach and, later, Northampton General Asylum in particular have been much discussed. Yet his correspondence shows that he also suffered from numerous physical complaints throughout his life, and was highly attuned to the comings and goings of various symptoms. Headaches and stomach aches especially are described in vivid, imaginative detail: “numbness & stupidity in the head & tightness of the skull as if it was hooped round like a barrel”; “I awoke in dreadful irritation thinking that the Italian liberators were kicking my head about for a foot ball”; “an aching void at the pit of my stomach keeps sinking me away weaker and weaker” (*Letters* 347, 537, 300). There are fevers that course through Clare’s family as well as other households in his local village: “I have just got over a very bad fever that is now raging from house to house in our fenny villages like a plague” (*Letters* 245). Coughs and colds come and go frequently (“I have just fell in with a bad cold & I cannot shake it off sufficiently” (*Letters* 559), as well as more sinister sounding “fits” and faintings (“I was taken in a sort of apoplectic fit & have never had the right use of my

faccultys since” (*Letters* 300)). Clare’s frustration and seeming despair at his persistent ill-health is expressed particularly strongly in response to an unpleasant outbreak he suffered in 1821:

I am again on the stool of repentance but how long I shall keep so I dont know – I am like Job broke out in b[o]ils from head to foot & have been for advice to Dr Michael who tells me its the nettle fever (*Letters* 211).

Clare finds in the Biblical story of Job not only a vivid comparison for this new, alarming ailment—one of the most memorable tests of Job’s faith and devotion to God is when Satan “smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown”—but also identification with his sustained trial and suffering.<sup>4</sup> By aligning his experience with Job’s, Clare finds a model of repeated affliction that allows him to utter his own feeling of being somehow singled out for pain and illness.

Clare’s private worries about his health had to compete, however, with a critical and cultural reception that made both illness and health fundamental to his public poetic identity, albeit in conflicting ways. Introduced to his reading public in *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820) by John Taylor as a poet for whom “Penury and disease” was a constant threat, sickness and fragility seemed to follow Clare throughout contemporary critical reviews of his work (*PD* ix).<sup>5</sup> Also in 1820, *The Morning Post*’s review of *Poems Descriptive* told how “Clare’s health is very much lessened of late,” claiming that he “can alone look for support to the further sale of his excellent little volume” (*CH* 83).<sup>6</sup> *The Quarterly Review* warned Clare against straying from the “quiet scenes of his youth” in subsequent publications, lest he be co-opted by the “haunts of men” that might “distract his attention and impair his health” (*CH* 99). The public image of him as a vulnerable, sickly poet pursued him through to the publication of his final volume, *The Rural Muse* (1835). A review of this work in *The Druid’s Monthly Magazine* stated that “Clare has suffered for

some time from ill-health, the heir-loom of many a genius; it is the effect of that intensity of thought that preys upon the physical frame of the gifted” (*CH* 243).

Even these few examples of Clare’s reception in the periodical press show how health, and the lack of it, are key to two dominant cultural narratives surrounding him as a labouring-class poet. The first is that the circumstances of poverty might condemn Clare to a life of physical and mental suffering unless his poetry continues to find the commercial success, or support of willing patrons, that could sustain him and his family. Taylor’s introduction to *Poems Descriptive*, for example, made much of the threat of parish relief that loomed over Clare as it had his father, Parker Clare, a “helpless cripple, and a pauper” in Taylor’s words (*PD* viii). It is no coincidence that “health” and “wealth” are a recurring rhyme for Clare (we have seen this already in “To Health”); in “The Progress of Ryhme” he addresses “soul enchanting poesy,” and declares “When poor thy presence grows my wealth / When sick thy visions gives me health” (lines 3-4 *MP* 3: 492). Although “poesy” is invoked as its own rewarding kind of “wealth” and well-being in the face of other deprivations here, Clare is alert too to the necessary relationship between his craft, his income, and his health. The second narrative plays into an existing notion of the labouring-class poet as an unlikely genius. Kirstie Blair and other scholars of labouring-class poetry, especially John Goodridge, Bridget Keegan, and Scott McEathron, have uncovered a tradition of prefaces that introduce labouring-class poets to their readers as rare geniuses possessing innate poetic ability in spite of unfavourable circumstances (to which they are bound by “destiny” (Blair and Gorji 1) rather than socioeconomic inequality), and celebrate that their poetry has been rescued from obscurity by discerning patrons and publishers. In this case, Clare’s “ill-health” is a symptom of a spontaneous poetic gift, not a product of his circumstance. This line of thought is also indebted to wider debates about and interest in the mental and physical pathologies surrounding the figure of the poet and the “man of genius” in the nineteenth century, where,

as Sharon Ruston discusses, “the body of the man of genius, with its infirmities, illnesses, and physical flaws, very often became the focus of attention” (Ruston 300). Joseph Crawford, too, reveals how “from the 1820s onwards, it became increasingly common in Britain for poetic talent to be described in basically medical terms, as a consequence of the unusual physical development of a poet’s brain or nervous system” (Crawford 2). For James Whitehead, the prevalent notion that a poet is “born not made [...] or is “fated” to be mad in other ways [...] can be traced back along tangled chains of influence to Romantic images of madness, or images of Romantic madness, and their own complicated participation in a sense of the poetically “inevitable”” (Whitehead 157).

Poetry and illness (both mental and physical) are therefore closely entwined in Clare’s contemporary reception and culture. Either the composition and sale of verse, for a labouring-class poet, is a crucial remedy for the debilitating effects of poverty, or illness is instead a necessary pre-requisite for the poetic faculty that marks Clare out from the rest of his labouring-class community. Octavius Gilchrist complicated these narratives further in an exchange of letters with Clare after the publication of *Poems Descriptive*. Less than a week after this volume was in print, Clare claimed to have fallen ill; his letter to Gilchrist shows already how mental and physical health and the pressures of publishing and writing would become entangled for him:

I intended to send you a Copy of my Poems but am very poorly & cannot get over to Stamford for one [...] I am very near being laid up what with the anxiety of the fate of the Book & a bad winter cough it has nearly confined me to my bed tho it is not a little that will do it (*Letters* 26-29).

Gilchrist’s reply attempted to rouse Clare but, in doing so, introduced another expectation about the state of body and mind that, as a *poet*, Clare should possess:

But how comes this illness, just at the time that you ought to be in the best health and spirits? Shake it off, I pray you [...] and let us see you to talk about the book poem by poem, and line by line. It is well

enough for prosing folks like myself to be clogged with gout and shaken with catarrhs, but what have your finer wits to do with such coarse companions?<sup>7</sup>

It is the poet as an image of health, not of sickness and fragility, that Gilchrist champions here, a message in conflict with the connection made between “genius” and illness in other assessments of Clare’s work, but no less symptomatic of a culture invested in the poet’s physical and mental constitution as a marker of their talent or sensibility.<sup>8</sup> Arguing for the “finer wits” of the poet at once suggests that they should possess a superior constitution or corporeal faculties (“wits” being defined as the five bodily “senses” here) at the same time as implying that poetic composition is reserved purely for the finer mental “wits” of intellect and reason.<sup>9</sup> Gilchrist suggests that Clare should occupy himself with more rarefied concerns than bodily illness and its symptoms, which here—if multiple senses of “prosing” are brought into play—appear both frustratingly dull and commonplace, and apparently more allied with the realm of prose than of poetry.<sup>10</sup> He sets up health as the condition under which, for Clare, poetry is to be both produced and received.

Clare’s initially warm reception and popularity in the early 1820s may have been invigorated partly by the sympathetic appeal of disease and hardship, yet the same readership also had a desire to participate in a rural ideal of robust health against the sickness and contamination of the city. In a later review of the volume *Rural Sketches* (1839) by the poet Thomas Miller in *Eclectic Review*, labouring-class life is presented as a rural idyll and reading poems produced in this setting is offered as a kind of health-giving escapism. For those who are “compelled to breathe the hot air of the office, warehouse, or parliament,” the “only alternative” offered by the reviewer is “to seat themselves in a quiet corner [...] with such a volume as Mr Miller’s,” because his poems were “marked by a very striking improvement of style; and what is still more important, by a fresh and healthy spirit” (70). Not only is the text itself conceived as a curative space for the reader, but labouring-class poetics as a whole are described in physicalized terms as an urgent

remedy for the supposed current state of national literature. The health-giving appeal of labouring-class writing is conceived as crossing class boundaries, transgressing the divisions of the “office,” “warehouse,” and “parliament.” Miller is added, significantly, to the list of “Bloomfield, Clare, Burns, Hogg, Allan Ramsay, Allan Cunningham, and Ebenezer Elliott” who are looked to for “the renovation of our literature; for the infusion of new and more healthful blood into the literary system” (72). There is a commodification of the rural at play here and Clare, formerly marketed as the sickly, vulnerable, disease-fleeing peasant, is offered conversely as a panacea to be consumed by metropolitan, along with Bloomfield and others.<sup>11</sup> Caught between differing models of poetic identity — one of physical weakness and sickness, one of “healthy freshness” and robust strength — the labouring-class poet has to negotiate these two identities and their social and cultural values.

What kind of poet, then, could Clare be within these conflicting frames of health and illness in his reception, and what kind of poetry could he write? In *The Country and the City* (1973), Raymond Williams declared that “Clare marks the end of pastoral poetry, in the very shock of its collision with actual country experience” (174). For Williams, Clare and poets that he grouped with him, such as Crabbe, posed a challenge to a specific pastoral ideology or “assumption”: “health is the ‘fair child’ of labour; it ‘languishes’ with wealth. This is more than an observation of the simple dependence of health on exercise; it is a slanted association of health with labour and then of sickness with wealth, that in any real world is naïve” (116). Clare certainly did not shy away from representing the material reality of rural life in his poetry, in works that emphasise the pain, sickness, and exhaustion that could spring from manual labour as well as the harsh conditions of rural subsistence. “The Mole Catcher” (1826) for example, represents its subject as having an almost infantile dependency on his surroundings: “He leans on natures offerings for supply / Like a sick child upon a mothers breast” (lines 64-65 *MP* 2: 24). This is no model of pastoral harmony with a providential

landscape, but a sick need for nature to provide any sort of healthy sustenance. The mole catcher's fate is also overshadowed by one of Clare's scattered references to the workhouse, the threat of which creates a bind where his former sickly routine becomes preferable to the prospect of poor relief: "When labour fails the workhouse fair is near / And thus on misery's edge he potters round the year" (lines 72-73: 24). "The Widow or Cress Gatherer" (1820-21), too, shows Clare's detailed sensitivity to the bodily ailments associated with labour, even on a small scale: "A hard earnd sixpence when her mops are spun / By many a whalk & aching finger won" (lines 109-110 *EP* 2: 657). "Whalk" is derived from an Old English verb, meaning variously "to roll," "to move back and forth," and to "work with the hand," and captures the repetitive physicality of the widow's task as she rolls and moves her mop back and forth with increasingly aching fingers.

The exposure to the elements that rural labour also necessitates is a common theme in Clare's verse. In "The Summer Gone" (1826), we see how "the hedger soaked with the dull weather chops / On at his toils which scarcely keep him warm" (lines 19-20 *MP* 3: 490). Here Clare makes the rain falling on the hedger sound almost like a form of attack, as he describes how "At every stroke he takes—large swarms of drops / Patter about him like an April storm" (lines 21-22). Conversely, in a later sonnet, we meet a shepherd who, unlike the other labourers, travellers, and schoolboys in his community who are continually knocking their hands together or blowing on them to keep them warm, seems impervious to the elements: "While toltoring shepherd though infirm & old / Faces the cutting wind & feels no cold" (lines 13-14 *MP* V: 296). There is a stoicism to this shepherd that does not uphold the robust, rural healthy ideal, but rather speaks of a job done in harsh conditions for so long that his "infirm" body has ceased to respond to his conditions.

Yet for all of Clare's alertness to the naivety of the pastoral ideal, there are still moments in his verse where a vision of health as a state achieved and maintained through

labour and a close relationship with the natural world appears. In “The Woodman” (1819) he declares that “Good luck it is his providential wealth / That hardy labour & the freshing air / Should ‘crease his strength & keep entire his health” (lines 100-103 *EP* 2: 291). Likewise, an early ballad rouses a cry of “Gi’ me the life of a Villager man / His whol’ stock o treasure his health / His life and his labour shall fill up my span” (lines 1-3 *EP* 2: 402). Clare is clearly unsettled in the pastoral mode, unable to sustain a vision of rural vitality when so aware of his own suffering and that of others, but unable to renounce it completely, either. Such ambivalence is significant when read in relation to the kind of pastoral that Clare held in highest esteem. He did not much care for William Shenstone, for example, stating that his “pastorals (as I think) are improperly call’d” because “Putting the Correct Language of the Gentleman into the mouth of a Simple Shepherd or Vulgar Ploughman is far from Natural” (*Letters* 12). He took issue, too, with Pope’s definition of pastoral, rooted as it was in the “golden age” and a deliberate sense of artifice: “if Popes difenition be true that everything in nature is vulgar & every monstrous fancy out of it a past[oral] then mine is grossly wrong” (*Letters* 293).<sup>12</sup> Instead, it was in Robert Bloomfield, a fellow labouring-class poet, that Clare found his most convincing example of the pastoral mode. Referring to Bloomfield as “our English Theocritus,” he declared to Allan Cunningham that “He is in my opinion our best Pastoral Poet,” because, unlike Crabbe (who, for Clare “writes about the Peasantry as much like the Magistrate as the Poet”), Bloomfield “not only lived amongst them, but felt and shared the pastoral pleasures with the peasantry of whom he sung” (*Letters* 302).

If Bloomfield shared in the “pleasures” of the labouring-class, he also had more than his fair share of their pains and this, I argue, is also fundamental to his appeal to and influence on Clare. During the flurry of excitement around the publication of *Poems Descriptive*, Clare received a letter from Bloomfield addressing him as “Brother bard and

fellow labourer” to thank him for sending him a copy of the volume. Much of this letter is structured around the precarity of Bloomfield’s own health and his investment in Clare’s:

Brother bard and fellow labourer,

Some weeks past Mr Drury of Stamford send me your Vollm. and I have only been prevented from answering by ill health, which began in January and seems to threaten a longer continuance. I am however very glad to have lived to see your poems: they have given me and my family an uncommon pleasure, and, they will have the same effect on all kindred minds and that’s enough [...] I had better not turn critic in my first letter, but say the truth, that nothing upon the great theatre of what is called the world (our English world) can give me half the pleasure I feel at seeing a man start up from the humble walks of life and show himself to be what I think you are [...] I must write to Mr. Drury, and Mr. Clayton but not now, I am far from well—have just been walking amidst the most luxuriant crops with my eldest daughter and two sons, but find myself tired.

Let nothing prevent you from writing, for though I cannot further your interest I can feel an interest in it, and I assure you I do.

I am heartily tired (not of my subject) and must beg you to accept my congratulations and my best wishes for your health, which I find after all is one of the most essential blessings of life.

Yours Sir,

Most Cordially,

Robert Bloomfield

P.S. I have written this on ‘My Old Oak Table’ and I think you know what I mean

(Letter of 25 July 1820, *CLRB* 349)

John Goodridge has discussed at length the influence Bloomfield had on Clare’s work as a “brother bard and fellow labourer,” especially as they both negotiated the dynamics of community and isolation in their verse (*John Clare and Community* 83-101). What is significant here, though, is how Bloomfield’s emphasis on the “essential blessing” of health speaks simultaneously to material need and poetic inspiration. Bloomfield’s insistence on

health as an “essential blessing” comes, necessarily, from an acute awareness of his own mental and physical decline, and his letter is charged with a more than cursory wish for the younger poet’s continued well-being as well as his commercial success. Goodridge, discussing Bloomfield and Clare, writes of “the sense of vulnerability that these labouring-class writers felt, and a consequent need to band together and value each other” (90). Bloomfield writes out of a genuine concern for Clare’s well-being here, but significantly as both a “brother bard” and a “fellow labourer,” a complex co-mingling of identities that makes health a pressing material, but also poetic concern.

Bloomfield’s poem “To My Old Oak Table” (1806), which he makes a deliberate coded reference to at the end of his letter to Clare, is a lyric meditation on a life spent trying to write poetry under the threat of repeated illness and deprivation. Simon White suggests that this poem necessarily re-works an understanding of the relationship between illness and creativity because of its labouring-class subject: “For the poor, the link between illness and creativity was somewhat different [...] ‘To My Old Oak Table’ reveals that Bloomfield’s ill-health and that of his family had a negative impact upon his practical capacity to write” (*Romanticism and the Poetry of Community* 77). The table is revered as the object that has kept Bloomfield upright and supported him—literally and metaphorically—in times of physical and mental suffering: “The creeping Dropsy, cold as cold could be, / Unnerv’d my arm, and bow’d my head to thee!” (lines 49-50; *CWRB*).<sup>13</sup> Without health, the table cannot be a site of poetic composition here, but merely a prop for the ailing poet’s enfeebled frame; his head is not “bow’d” in writing, but in illness and exhaustion. As an affectionate ode to a familiar and comforting domestic object, the poem also moves into a pastoral register as it welcomes health as necessary both for the safety of the poet and his family, and for the continuance of Bloomfield’s poetic craft:

Delightful ’twas to leave disease behind,

And feel the renovation of the mind!  
 To lead abroad, upborne on Pleasure's wing,  
 Our children, midst the glories of the Spring;  
 Our fellow-sufferers, our only wealth,  
 To gather daisies in the breeze of health!

(lines 69-72; *CWRB*)

There is a charted return of both health and poetic inspiration (the “renovation” of the poet’s mind) here, marked as a shift into a moment of pastoral praise. What has up until now been a poem situated firmly indoors, in a domestic scene of illness and recuperation, suddenly turns its focus outwards to the natural world and the abundance of health to be found there. By directing Clare to “To My Old Oak Table” at the end of his letter, then, Bloomfield draws his attention not only to the frustrating circumstances of the labouring “bard,” who must fight against personal and family illness more so than other poets to be able to write in the first place, but also to pastoral as a mode that can perhaps only be accessed when one is in a state of health.

If Bloomfield’s access to the pastoral moment in “To My Old Oak Table” feels hard won, it is because he, as much as Clare, was also under no illusions as to the hard realities of rural life. As the poet who, in “Good Tidings; Or, News from the Farm” (1804), worked with Edward Jenner to “spread the gospel,” as Tim Fulford and Debbie Lee put it (Fulford and Lee 150), of smallpox vaccination from the country to the town-based public, Bloomfield knew very well the pressures placed on the labouring-class poet to uphold the pastoral vision of nature as a healthful ideal. Fulford and Lee suggest that “Smallpox threatened Bloomfield’s precarious poetic career because it exposed a fatal gap between the real world of farm laborers of which he had personal experience, and the idealized version of it to which his publication as a “pastoral” poet committed him [...] Vaccination saved Bloomfield’s muse because it made the pastoral ideal seem liveable” (151-152). “Good Tidings” does not shy

away from showing the reader the grisly reality of farm life and exposure to disease, but manages to do this *and* reassert an ideal vision of curative nature by the end of the poem, hailing rural life as a now “uncontaminated spring” (line 384; *CWRB*). Bloomfield plays the game of “sick” labourer and “healthy” poet well.

However, even in poems that seem firmly planted in a pastoral vision of rural healthiness versus the sickness of the city, Bloomfield’s sensitivity to health as essentially precarious comes through. “Shooter’s Hill” is a topographical poem that begins with an overt apostrophe to health, before casting a roving eye over its many hiding places:

HEALTH! I seek thee;- dost thou love  
 The mountain top or quiet vale,  
 Or deign o’er humbler hills to rove  
 On showery June’s dark south-west gale?  
 If so, I’ll meet all blasts that blow,  
 With silent step, but not forlorn;  
 Though, goddess, at thy shrine I bow,  
 And woo thee each returning morn.

I seek thee where, with all his might,  
 The joyous bird his rapture tells,  
 Amidst the half-excluded light,  
 That gilds the fox-glove’s pendant bells;  
 Where, cheerly up this bold hill’s side  
 The deep’ning groves triumphant climb;  
 In groves Delight and Peace abide,  
 And Wisdom marks the lapse of time.

[...]

Sweet Health, I see thee! hither bring  
 Thy balm that softens human ills;  
 Come, on the long drawn clouds that fling  
 Their shadows o'er the Surry-Hills.

(lines 1-60; *CWRB*)

On the surface, this seems like a straightforward topographical poem. Bloomfield adopts a mobile speaker, whose movement through the landscape allows him to record its features and sing its praises. Yet the topographical mode also complicates the goal of Bloomfield's subject. The momentum behind the poem, what keeps the perspective moving, is that health is something the speaker is continually having to "seek." This is not a poem written in confident possession of health, but that takes instead its absence as the point of departure and inspiration. In a footnote to the poem, Bloomfield wrote that "Sickness may be often an incentive to poetical composition; I found it so; and I esteem the following lines only because they remind me of past feelings, which I would not willingly forget" (note [\*], *CWRB*). What are the "past feelings" Bloomfield alludes to here? Are they the health he invokes in the poem, or the "sickness" he suggests was the basis for the composition? The footnote immediately counters the secure pastoral health of the poem by insisting that the reader does not forget the experience of illness that either acted as its catalyst, or might be looming round the corner. Alongside this ambiguity is also the sense that the supposedly restorative nature the speaker seeks out has an equal capacity to be harmful: the "foxglove" in particular feels chosen deliberately for its potentially toxic connotations. As Fiona Stafford argues in her discussion of Keats's choice references to the flower, "Foxglove was one of the plants most exciting to contemporary scientists. Deadly when taken in excess, foxglove administered

carefully and correctly was proving to possess remarkable therapeutic properties” (Stafford 77). By leading the speaker into shady spaces of “half-excluded light” where the foxgloves grow, Bloomfield offers a vision of the natural world that, like his footnote, also nods to the latent threat of illness lurking beneath it.

“Shooter’s Hill” was clearly an influential poem for Clare. His ode “To Health” discussed at the beginning of this essay nods not only to Bloomfield’s repeated invocations, but to much of the imagery in the poem, too. Clare’s hesitant address to health in his ode could also be indebted, then, to the poet who struck him as the best pastoral poet of his age, and who offered him a model of poetry that, whilst it could rehearse the paeans to pastoral healthiness, could also acknowledge their limitations and bring a personal experience of illness to bear on a traditional register and motif. A sonnet that Clare composed in the early 1830s also echoes “Shooter’s Hill” in its opening and questioning mode of address, yet takes Bloomfield’s ambiguous treatment of his topic to a more anxious extreme:

Mild health I seek thee wither art thou found  
 Mid daisies sleeping in the morning dew  
 Along the meadow paths where all around  
 May smells so lovely thither would I go  
 Where art thou envious blessing now the cold  
 Is gone away & hedge & wood is seen  
 All lovely & the gay marsh marigold  
 Edges the meadow lakes so freshly green  
 My straining eye so anxious to behold  
 Thee up & journeying on the swallows wing  
 To see thee up & shining everywhere

Among the sweet companions of the spring

(lines 1-14 *MP* 2: 250)

These lines are definitely more recognisably Clarean than “To Health,” and show Clare to have re-worked his treatment of that poem’s themes into the haphazard aesthetic of many of his middle-period sonnets. With this re-working comes a more overt distrust of, or disappointment in, pastoral motifs. There is no organized or confident location of health here. Positioned variously as “mid,” “along,” “up & journeying,” it never stays still. Health eludes the containment that the sonnet might try to place on it and, in a development of Clare’s confident invocation of its seasonal return in “To Health,” is also figured more assertively as an “envious blessing” that might never come. The “cold” of winter has “gone away,” but health is nowhere to be seen. The subject’s anxious “straining” to behold health in the natural world in this sonnet can also be read as Clare straining after the pastoral, and a vision of the rural that is permeated by health, which he now finds wanting even as he cannot move beyond the expectations it creates. Eric Robinson, David Powell, and P.M.S Dawson pinpoint the date of this sonnet’s composition in the early 1830s, a time when Clare was also busy compiling manuscript material for a volume he hoped would become *The Midsummer Cushion*. This was also a time when Clare’s mental and physical health had taken a turn for the worse; his move to Northborough in 1832 is often considered a major catalyst in the decline that eventually led to his admission to High Beach asylum in 1837. A version of *The Midsummer Cushion* appeared eventually, and much-edited, as *The Rural Muse* in 1835, the last volume Clare published in his lifetime. In the preface to this volume, Clare felt he did not have much to say to his reading public, dejected as he was by the tumultuous editing process he had gone through to get the book into print and with the dwindling public enthusiasm for his verse: “If I write a short Preface, it is from no vanity of being thought

concise, but on the contrary, from a feeling of inability to say anything more to the purpose” (*RM* vi). He did, however, make a point of telling his public that “ill health has almost rendered me incapable of doing anything” (v-vi). The above sonnet did not make it into *The Rural Muse*, but it is a poem infused with Clare’s disappointment both in the appeal of his rural verse and in his own fragile health. He cannot be the poet of “healthy freshness” and, in this poetic moment, finds communion with a “brother bard” who also found a voice in a more precarious form of pastoral.

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Clare’s poetry are from *The Early Poems of John Clare 1804-1822* (2 vols, 1989) and *Poems of the Middle Period 1822-1837* (5 vols, 1996-2003). These titles are abbreviated in parentheses to *EP* and *MP* and cited with relevant line, volume, and page numbers.

<sup>2</sup> Clare famously recalls buying a copy of Thomson’s *The Seasons* in his “Sketches in the Life of John Clare,” claiming that it sparked his first forays into poetry as he sat reading it in Burghley Park: “what with reading the book and beholding the beautys of artful nature in the park I got into a strain of descriptive rhyming on my journey home this was ‘the morning walk’ the first thing I committed to paper” (*By Himself* 11).

<sup>3</sup> See Powell (28).

<sup>4</sup> Job 2:7 King James Bible.

<sup>5</sup> *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820), abbreviated to *PD* in all parenthetical citations.

<sup>6</sup> References to periodical reviews of Clare’s works are, unless stated otherwise, taken from *John Clare: The Critical Heritage*, abbreviated to *CH* in parenthetical citations.

<sup>7</sup> British Library MS Eg. 2245, f. 29.

<sup>8</sup> For sustained discussions of the interest in the figure of the poet and the health, or disorder, of their mental and physical faculties in this period, see Allard, Crawford, Whitehead, De Almeida, Jackson, Richardson, and Wallen.

<sup>9</sup> *OED*, ‘wit’, *n.* senses 1 and 3.

<sup>10</sup> *OED*, ‘prosing’, *v.* senses 1a, 1b, and 2a.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Cronin is also highly alert to how Clare’s regular contributions to the *London Magazine* played to a nostalgia for rural authenticity and an alternative to metropolitan life: “Clare’s poems offered a passage out of the urban landscape in which the magazine was read to a rural England of which the magazine’s readership had only a limited experience” (Cronin 222).

<sup>12</sup> In “Discourse on Pastoral Poetry” (1704), Pope stated that “If we would copy nature, it may be useful to take this idea along with us, that Pastoral is an image of what they call the golden age: so that we are not to describe our shepherds as shepherds at this day really are, but as they may be conceived to have been, when the best of men followed the employment” (Pope 298).

<sup>13</sup> All references to Bloomfield’s poetry are from *The Collected Writings of Robert Bloomfield* (2019). This title is abbreviated in parentheses to *CWRB* and cited with relevant line numbers.

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