

# Nature's "every day disabile": John Clare, shattered vision, and the everyday poetics of noon

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# RON

## Romanticism on the Net

### Nature's "every day disabile": John Clare, shattered vision, and the everyday poetics of noon

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#### Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of noon in John Clare's poetry. Drawing heavily on Deleuze's notion of the middle or the intermezzo, this article makes the case that Clare's noon or midday is an exploration of what Deleuze calls life's "meantimes (*des entre-temps*), between-moments," and one that importantly offers us a view into the experience of the intermezzo. For Clare, noon affords a new mode of perception, one that he repeatedly frames as a shattered vision: at noon "it seems / As if crooked bits of glass / Seem'd repeatedley to pass" (6-8). While also considering the appearance of noon in the work of Clare's contemporaries, such as Shelley and Constable, the uniquely shattered vision that accompanies Clare's experience of this seemingly ubiquitous spacetime is a way to see the world in a different way outside of our routinized or habitualized modes of everyday perception. Furthermore, against a dominant tradition that imagines thought as taking flight at dusk (following Hegel), Clare's turn to noon offers thought a different line of flight. For Clare, midday becomes an important moment of knowledge, a defamiliarized moment of shattered perception, a creative synthetic event of *sympoiesis*, that is, the practice of mixing and making together.

#### Biographical Note

Elizabeth Effinger is an associate professor at the University of New Brunswick. She co-edited *William Blake's Gothic Imagination* (Manchester University Press, 2018) with Christopher Bundock. She has published articles on Blake, Byron, Mary Shelley, and queer and animal studies, some of which appear in *European Romantic Review*, *Pedagogy*, and *Romantic Circles*. She co-directed (with celebrated poet Sue Sinclair) *Erasing Frankenstein*, a SSHRC-funded public humanities outreach activity that transformed Shelley's 1818 novel into a book-length erasure poem in collaboration with incarcerated and non-incarcerated citizens. She is completing a book on how the Romantics were engaged with various disciplines that increasingly put pressure on the human, and is working on a further SSHRC-funded project dealing with how the emergent sciences and technologies of the Romantic period call human exceptionality in question.

“nature...appears best in her every day disabille.”

— John Clare, *Letters*

“It is never the beginning or the end which are interesting; the beginning and end are points. What is interesting is the middle”

— Gilles Deleuze, *Dialogues*

## **I. Introduction**

1. This article explores the disruptive image in John Clare’s early and middle-period poetry of a typically unremarkable sliver of time: noon. With a shockingly frequent appearance in over seventy of his poems, noon captures Clare’s attention in a manner unlike other times of the day. Noon is a concept that operates at the intersection of multiple traditions, including religion, philosophy, landscape aesthetics, and poetry. However, Clare’s treatment of this concept is a reconfiguration, criss-crossing and cutting new lines across these fields. Noon, according to Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1815), the fourteenth edition of which Clare owned, is “The middle hour of the day; twelve; the time when the sun is in the meridian; midday.” It is a hard light, a time when the sun is at its zenith, and, especially in the thick of summer, a time of debilitating heat — mostly levelling human and nonhuman bodies alike. Indeed, as anyone living now within “The Great Derangement” (Ghosh) knows all too well, with unbearable heat waves and new records for the hottest year now regularly broken due to the climate catastrophe, we’re all feeling the heat.

2. Yet the stifling heat of noon and the languishing of certain forms of life because of it is, according to Nicolas Perella, secondary to a larger, archetypal encounter with noon as a moment of crisis — existential, spiritual, and erotic. Perella suggests this crisis image of noon emerges in classical and biblical antiquity and holds a long, complicated place in Christian tradition, often appearing as a punishing blaze, much as it does in Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (29). Curiously, although Clare was deeply influenced by religion, as Sarah Houghton-Walker has shown, he does not frame the figure of noon in purely punishing terms.
  
3. Like the blinding light of divine judgment, noon in a certain philosophical tradition has also appeared as the time of full light, insight, truth, and clarity in understanding and perception. Whereas one image of philosophy takes flight at dusk (a tradition following Hegel), another, through the thought of Walter Benjamin, sees noon as the pivotal moment. Benjamin turns to a summer’s noon as his example for when the aura is perceptible, with noon thus becoming a figure for insight and knowledge, thus offering thought a different line of flight.<sup>1</sup> As Gerhard Richter suggests, “For Benjamin, it is not dusk but midday that is the moment of knowledge. ... Noon is the time of simultaneity, the time of decision and stillness” (138). This is, after all, the time when shadows are their smallest. And yet, for Clare, noon doesn’t carry with it these associations either; across his verse, Clare’s curious treatment of it does not square with the association of noon-light as truth, unobstructed vision, and knowledge.
  
4. Elsewhere, in an aesthetic tradition — particularly the landscape aesthetics in which Clare was deeply steeped — noon is not the “golden hour” of early morning or evening with that soft, sun-drenched yellow warmth found in the paintings of seventeenth-century landscape painter Claude Lorrain, whose depictions of inviting, shimmering light profoundly influenced English and European aesthetics well into Clare’s time. And yet, if noon is traditionally a harsh, abrasive light

far from the golden hour, for Clare, like his contemporary painter John Constable (1776-1837), it proves to be something else. In short, whereas noon, as Perella suggests, traditionally oscillates between being experienced as either glorious or dreadful, a moment of reaching out toward the Absolute or shrinking from the Abyss, a time of blindness or insight, for Clare noon is experienced as neither.

5. Instead, as this article will argue, in Clare's verse the tradition of noon as a moment of crisis gives way to a richer, manifold moment of thick pleasure and poetic thinking — something more in line with John Constable's treatments of noon and the Deleuzian notion of the middle or *intermezzo*. Both Constable and Deleuze are thinkers for whom the visual arts are rich with affect.<sup>2</sup> Clare's noon, I argue, is a curious instance within the everyday for the emergence of a radical spacetime of creative/synthetic thinking, or what I am calling a sympoetic spacetime. In using "sympoesis," a term with tentacles in both German Romanticism (cf. Schlegel and Novalis) and recent eco-critical and posthumanist theories (cf. Dempster and Haraway), I refer to the practice of mixing and making together.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, noon is for Clare a decelerating and thickening of time and perception, a syrupy moment thick with affect, painful pleasure, and poetry. To put it another way, it is a spacetime when the mundane everyday becomes extraordinary, when the world looks and feels different from other times of the day, a time where routine mixes with creativity. Mixing together pain and pleasure, noon is an escape in Clare's early to mid-period poetry from the other times of the day. It is, then, at least for a time, a labourer-poet's noon. These multiple poems from a period when Clare himself was a labourer and emerging poet capture a special effervescent spacetime, one affectively associated with creativity and poetic thinking for Clare. As the later poems reveal, this spacetime disappears, for once Clare becomes an asylum patient, mentions of noon vanish from his writings.<sup>4</sup> As such, attending to Clare's noon also becomes a way of marking the textures and changing durations and intensities in his thought over time.

6. Clare's representation of noon also reveals his investment in life's radical changes, further evidence of his worldview over nature's becoming, or what Simon Kövesi astutely calls Clare's "rural plural...not a single organic entity but a diverse set of lines criss-crossing in and among one another" ("John Clare &...&...&..." 87). Noon is one such strange line to cross Clare's phenomenal experience, at least until his asylum period when it vanishes from his writings. And although he does not directly speak of noon in his letters or journals, Clare's discussions of nature in her "every day disabillie" and the notion of "looking with a poetic feeling" — ideas to which I will return — all collude with the representation of noon explored across much of his poetry. As such, then, this article situates itself within the field's interests in affect, nonhuman and posthumanist readings in Clare and Romanticism more broadly, and introduces a transversal line of thought into the mix, namely how the appearances of noon allow us to see a specific shimmering image of Clare's everyday world in becoming, of a kaleidoscopic, rhizomatic, shattered vision that repeats, albeit with some differences, throughout much of his early and middle poetry, each time marking out noon as a spacetime in which nature is delightfully dishevelled and the speaker's "looking" is synaesthetically performed "with a poetic feeling."

7. This way of looking is Clare's phrase and describes his preferred mode of looking at the environment:

I love to look on nature with a poetic feeling which magnifys the pleasure I love to see the nightingale in its hazel retreat & the cuckoo hiding in its solitudes of oaken foliage & not to examine their carcasses in glass cases yet naturalists & botanists seem to have no taste for this poetical feeling they merely make collections of dryd specimens classing them after Leanius into tribes & familys. (*The Natural History Prose Writings* 38)

To look with a poetic feeling is not to imagine nature as pristine or untouched, but to derive pleasure in animals alive and in their habitats, to put them under the magnifying power of poetry rather than under the magnifying glass of science that transforms them into “carcasses in glass cases.” However, I offer that Clare’s method of “looking with a poetic feeling” extends beyond the animal world and speaks more broadly to his larger interest in new modes of poetic perception, and finding poetic feeling as a way through which to perceive a world of becoming around him.

8. In what follows, I explore this distinct mode of perception by closely reading five under-read poems by Clare — “A Lare at Noon,” “Noon,” “Noon” (1820), *The Shepherd’s Calendar*, and “The Heat of Noon” — a selection of poems that I here dub with the shorthand of Clare’s “noon poems.”<sup>5</sup> These poems expose noon’s symposis in the Clarean imaginary. This article’s aims are twofold: first, to open up a way in which to begin from the middle, as it were, in order to sluice between the two dominant poles of Clare scholarship that promote him as either a poet of the local (cf. John Barrell) or as a poet of enclosure (cf. James McKusick)<sup>6</sup>; and, second, to think more extensively about Clare’s role in the larger project of thinking about Romanticism’s contribution to everyday life studies. To linger in the middle, to turn to the normally ubiquitous midday or noon, then, brings us close to William Galperin’s formulation of the everyday, which he suggests “comes to light during this interval [of romanticism] as a history of missed opportunities” (17). Attending to the Clarean noon (and its cognates of the middle and the intermezzo) is to pay attention to something unremarkable in its perpetual appearance and simultaneous disappearance as it has quietly stood murmuring in the background; it is, as Galperin says of the everyday, to pay attention to “something missed but recoverable” (20). The payoff in looking here in the unrecognized and unappreciated, in the “missed opportunities” as Galperin puts it, is the latency of a new possibility.

9. Although related, this focus on everyday life is not simply another name for the local, for the everyday slips even beneath this level. The everyday turns to what the experimental, Oulippean novelist Georges Perec calls the “endotic” rather than the “exotic,” honing in on those invisible, overlooked elements, taking seriously the minor and all but nearly erased actants in life, the “bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms” (210). Clare, more than any other Romantic poet, restlessly returns to this otherwise unexceptional and seemingly unpoetic time, exposing this middle point in the mundane everyday to have a new rhythm, to paradoxically be an exceptionally generative, creative spacetime.
10. Folded into this discussion of Clare’s noon is the work of painter Constable and Deleuze (and the latter’s collaborative work with Guattari) — as sympathetic co-conspirators in thinking about the fecundity of the middle. For the way that Clare finds a new mode of perception in noon shares a resemblance with the concept of the middle or *intermezzo* (and the related notions of becoming and the rhizome).<sup>7</sup> Common to all is the insistence on the distinct modes of perception that working and thinking from within the middle —or the midday, for Clare — affords. For as Clare reveals most clearly in the poem “Noon” (1820), noon-vision is a shattered vision: “it seems / As if crooked bits of glass / Seem’d repeatedley to pass” (6-8). This image of a shattered vision that repeatedly passes describes a way of seeing the world outside of our traditional or habitualized modes of perception. Similarly, for Deleuze and Guattari, one such site of perceptual change occurs in the middle. While for them the middle is a space in which “things pick up speed” (*Thousand Plateaus* 25), for Clare it is a site of thickening and deceleration.<sup>8</sup> But things also “pick up speed” or move forward by slowing down, and we feel in Clare’s muculent moments the experience of poetry’s powerful torque. Clare’s noon — a kind of temporal middle point in the everyday — is a metonymic exploration of the barely perceptible moments, the becomings, that make up life, and offers another view into the phenomenological and psychic experience of the *intermezzo*.



Clare's noon exposes something of the structure of the everyday and the ways in which the thickening and deceleration of life also create the conditions of possibility for seeing, creating, and thinking otherwise. Or, to put it in Clare's own words, looking through noon's shattered vision is a way of seeing nature in her "every day disabillie," a mode of "looking" at the everyday world "with a poetic feeling." In following this line of thought, however, glimpses appear of some of Clare's contemporaries, other poets (like Shelley) and painters (like Constable), their images refracted by their own related investments in the estranging spacetime of noon.

## II. Noon: Shelley and Constable

11. Shelley, a poet whom Clare considered "a fine writer & one of the sweetest Poems I have ever seen was of his" (*Letters* 546), shares an affinity for this strange spacetime with Clare.<sup>9</sup> In Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" (1817) noon serves as a tipping point or moment of release: "The day," writes Shelley, "becomes more solemn and serene / When noon is past" (73-4).<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere, noon appears as a time of mystical revelation; in Shelley's poem, "Lines Written among the Euganean Hills" (1819) noon is quasi-supernatural as it "descends" and brings with it a "purple mist." It is an hour when, as Donald Reiman notes, "the sun's rays are least diffused and refracted by the earth's atmosphere," and thus serves as Shelley's symbol for "the nearest conjunction between the divine and the mortal, the eternal and the temporal" (411). Noon in this poem is a time when the poet and surrounding world are, in Shelley's words, "interpenetrated...By the glory of the sky: / Be it love, light, harmony, / Odour, or the soul of all" ("Lines Written" 313, 314-16), a time when the poet and the world around him experiences what Reiman calls "cosmic creativity" (411). If Shelley's descending purple noon arrives as a moment of revelation or cosmic synthesis from a divine realm, Clare's experience of cosmic creativity — or what I am calling Clare's *sympoeisis* — (that experience he describes as having a "dazzled eye"

or “looking with a poetic feeling”) arrives from within, embodying the model of immanence rather than transcendence. Like Shelley, noon becomes an important time for Clarean creativity. And yet, nothing supernatural descends in mysterious colours from above; instead, most of the world grows strangely thick and still as vision becomes manifold.

12. Given how visual Clare’s experience and representation of noon is — indeed, we might even call it cinematic in the way he captures not a static snapshot but decelerated life as if shot in slow-motion — it is worth recalling the resonances here between Clare and the visual arts. Consider, for example, landscape painter John Constable, who was similarly invested in this particular spacetime of noon. What Clare does in poetry is closest to what John Constable did in painting; both elevate the mundane to new heights and focus on transforming the familiarity of noon. Together, renovating this spacetime is part of a larger project in elevating everyday life. There is one particular painting by Constable that constellates a number of the ideas that this article explores, including Clare’s treatment of noon: one of Constable’s “six-footers,” originally titled *Landscape: Noon*, now known as *The Hay Wain* (1821). The temptation in thinking about the poetry of John Clare in association with Romantic landscape painting is, as Fiona Stafford cautions, to lump them together under the banner of pastoral escapism or nostalgia for a lost land. Instead we must remember the “radical novelty of landscape art” in the Romantic period, a modern art form that was “popular with the public, but at odds with the artistic establishment” (30). *Landscape: Noon* was radical, in part, for its scale atypical of landscape paintings at this time; large-scale paintings were reserved for historical paintings treating epic subject matter. Constable’s dramatic scaling up of rural landscapes (which was previously considered to be a diminutive form) launches the background into the foreground, the periphery into the centre, and the ordinary into the extraordinary. This move finds a corollary in Clare’s poetic focus on the rural and natural

world which he scales up in terms of the sheer quantity of poems dedicated to subjects from the everyday, including birds, nests, animals, and times of the day.

13. To help us appreciate the charge of this painting as it would have had when it exhibited in the 1820s (first in London at the Royal Academy in 1821, then to greater success at the Paris Salon in 1824), it helps to recall the painting's original title, which has become obscured over time.<sup>11</sup> As Jonathan Clarkson notes, Constable himself never referred to it, even privately, as *The Hay Wain*. The significance of the original title, *Landscape: Noon*, "is to make time, rather than the cart and horses, the centre of attention. ... The word 'noon' in the title directs the viewer's attention to the quality of light throughout the picture" (103). To push this point even further, the title foregrounds a time of day that is otherwise easily overlooked, a fact that is symptomatically reinforced in the gradual erasure of the term from the painting's title. Noon is not special enough, a middle time in between the sublimely inspiring dusks and dawns, mornings and midnights, found across the sister arts. Constable, then, was not just interested in scaling up a minor landscape but an easily overlooked time of day. Indeed, based on his precise record keeping of the time of his paintings, we know that Constable preferred to paint at noon, completing a quarter of his sky studies at this time, which he described as a time of "solemn stillness" (qtd in Thornes 65).<sup>12</sup> Thus both poet and painter share an interest in the affect of noon: stillness, thickness, sultriness, a hesitation or suspension with creative charges.

14. While critics have noted the resonances between Clare and Constable, none have examined their mutual attraction for noon. The poet John Ashbery recognizes in Clare's poetry a "*plein-air* effect [that] is similar to the studies of John Constable, Clare's exact contemporary. In the case of both, the point is that there is no point. Clare is constantly wandering, in his circumscribed domain, but there is not much to see; the land is flat and teeny and devoid of 'prospects'" (qtd in Kövesi, *John*

*Clare: Nature, Criticism and History* 142). If Ashbery finds in Clare and Constable a shared nomadic approach to the landscape and interest in a listless lyric subjectivity, others recognize their shared commitment to the everyday. Hugh Haughton, for instance, suggests that “like Constable in painting, Clare is just the self-consciously ‘bold and innovative genius’...to oppose ‘the prevailing system of rhyme’” (74-75).

15. These restless and resistant characteristics also formally register in their respective techniques. Constable surprises in his varied application of paint, which, as Jonathan Clarkson notes, “may be piled up or scraped down, aggressively jabbed or tightly and precisely touched, spread with a knife, scratched with the end of a brush, splattered and smeared” (211). And, we might think of Clare’s hallmark poetic technique, that curious blend of inventive words and rebellious grammar, as the textual equivalent. Theirs, to put it in Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, is an investment in a striated rather than smooth space.
16. Clare was intensely interested in painting. Critics have explored Clare’s relationship with numerous modern landscape painters: Peter DeWint (cf. Lynn Banfield Pearce, Fiona Stafford), Flemish artist Peter Tillemans, who sketched the unenclosed landscape of Helpston; English landscape painter John Crome (cf. Waites); and, to a lesser extent, as I’ve already suggested, Constable (cf. Ashbery, Haughton). This extends a reading of Clare that registered in some of Clare’s earliest reviewers who saw connections between his poetry and painting. Indeed, as Fiona Stafford notes, “the parallel between contemporary landscape painting and Clare’s poetry therefore underlines the innovative character of each” (30).
17. Clare dedicated poems to DeWint (cf. “Sonnet to DeWint”) who also produced a frontispiece for Clare’s poetry, and engraver Thomas Bewick (Haughton 53), and socialized with them and other

important figures from the Royal Academy during his time in London, including Sir Thomas Lawrence, painter and President of the Royal Academy from 1820, and neglected landscape painters William Etty, Edward Villiers Ripplingille, and William Hilton, the latter of whom was Keeper of the Royal Academy in 1820 and who also painted a portrait of Clare. As Clare writes in his “London Journal,”<sup>13</sup> which records his four visits to London during the 1820s, “I did not know the way to any place for a long while but the royal academy and here I used to go almost every day” (*John Clare By Himself* 148). With daily visits to the “Royal Academy & other Exebitions,” as he puts it in an 1829 letter to DeWint,<sup>14</sup> we get a sense not only of how engaged Clare was with painting and especially landscape aesthetics, but also how critical he was of what he saw.

18. Clare appears to have overtly preferred the outliers and minor painters, and elevated DeWint above all. Clare exchanged many letters with DeWint, and even wrote to him requesting some of his rough sketches that he might “hang up in a frame in my Cottage” (Letter to Peter DeWint, 19 December 1829; *Letters* 488). In this same letter, Clare reveals that his time in London included disappointing visits to the various galleries where nothing

struck me so forcibly as representations or rather fac similies of *English* scenery as those studies of yours—now I think many Painters look upon nature as a Beau on his person & fancies her nothing unless in full dress—now nature to me is very different & appears best in her every day disabille. (*Letters* 488)

Clare’s preference for nature dishevelled and undone — that is, in her “every day disabille” — resonates with Constable’s attraction to nature’s same soft spots. In a passage that invokes the glistening cesspools from Clare’s poem “The Mouse’s Nest,” Constable admits, in his well-known letter to his friend John Fisher, “Old rotton Banks slimy posts. & brickwork. I love such things” (Letter to John Fisher, 23 October 1821, qtd in Thornes 278-282). For both Constable and

Clare, theirs was a world of becoming, slippery creative movements between heterogeneous elements, moments or blocks of movement a world of unlikely alliances rather than filiation in which movement occurs by “transversal communications” between many different bodies (*Thousand Plateaus* 239).<sup>15</sup>

19. In an unfinished and unpublished [and undated?] essay on landscape painting, “Essay on Landscape,” Clare extends his thoughts on English landscape painting articulated in that 1829 letter to DeWint. In the essay, Clare complains about the contemporary fashion in painting in which painters act more like poets, inappropriately taking license to populate a landscape with unrealistic details ranging from uniformity of trees, mythological figures, or improper mixtures of elements:

There are other ridiculous situations oft to be found in modern fancy Landscapes were we often meet a group of cattle indiscriminately intermixed just as they fancied not as they found them thus cows horses & sheep are scened cooling themselves in a pool which is out of nature for sheep were never seen in that situation since Noahs flood unless forced in for they have a great aversion to water. (Clare, *Prose*, 214)

The only painter named and spared in this essay is DeWint. While Clare never mentions Constable by name in his “London Journal” or throughout his letters, it is likely that given his interest in landscape painting and his time spent in London frequenting the various exhibitions during the 1820s that he would have been aware of Constable and may have even seen his exhibited work, including *Landscape: Noon*. To summarize, then: Clare shares a kinship with Constable and other landscape painters in their shared commitment to rethinking the aesthetic of the everyday, of teasing out and amplifying the frequency and appearance of the “every day disabile.” Once such place we find this strategy operating is in the turn toward the middle, to noon or midday, a duration that is simultaneously disorienting, defamiliarizing and delightful for Clare.

### III. Noon and its affinity with the Deleuzian middle

20. Noon, or midday, is conceptually bound up with the middle, the latter of which is a site of rich potentiality for philosophers Deleuze and Guattari. Life, according to Deleuze, is not defined by being but becoming, not by finite or fixed moments “but only meantimes (*des entre-temps*), between-moments” (“Immanence” 5). Indeed, as he elsewhere writes, “One never commences; one never has a *tabula rasa*; one slips in, enters in the middle; one takes up or lays down rhythms” (*Spinoza* 123). To proceed from the middle, from the position of in-between, reimagines life as a process of and in flux; it is, as Deleuze and Guattari write, “another way of traveling and moving: proceeding from the middle, through the middle, coming and going rather than starting and finishing” (*Thousand Plateaus* 25). Against a certain rigid image of thought that deals with beginnings or points of origins or conclusions, one that they associate with the French interest in trees (“the tree of knowledge, points of arborescence, the alpha and omega, the roots and the pinnacle” [*Dialogues*, 39]), Deleuze and Guattari offer instead the figure of the rhizome, which becomes the very embodiment of the middle insofar as it grows from the middle with none of its parts becoming fixed points: “A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*” (*Thousand Plateaus* 25). Yet in sidestepping beginnings and endings, the middle is not to be understood in a negative light, as if it were a synonym for the mundane or mediocre. As Deleuze and Guattari continue:

The middle is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed. *Between* things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one *and* the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle. (*Thousand Plateaus* 25)

The middle is a space of becoming and acceleration for Deleuze and Guattari, a freedom from fixities and enclosure. As Jay Conway puts it, the Deleuzian middle indicates “thought freed from the goal of explanatory closure. ... Deleuze’s ‘middle’ encourages us to cultivate an attitude of critical indifference toward the fashionable, attention-seeking gesture of declaring a beginning or end” (19-20). The middle operates in a similar manner as the humble conjunction “and,” as Deleuze elsewhere describes:

AND is neither one thing nor the other, it’s always in between, between two things; it’s the borderline, there’s always a border, a line of flight or flow, only we don’t see it, because it’s the least perceptible of things. And yet it’s along this line of flight that things come to pass, becomings evolve, revolutions take shape. (*Negotiations* 45)

Simon Kövesi has argued for the relevance of Deleuze and Guattari’s thought to Clare, specifically aligning their notion of the rhizome with Clare’s use of the ampersand and polysyndeton (the frequent repetition of conjunctions). Closely reading one of Clare’s untitled sonnets from his Middle Period (1822-1837), Kövesi rightly describes Clare’s vision as rhizomatic:

The generative idea of this scene — the wandering wonder of it — emerges in its restlessness, its lack of settlement, its nomadic, decentred and fundamentally planar shape. Any attempt to grasp, to pin down, to order and codify, to emplace, is shaken off by the deviant doubleness of a lost looseness. The rural plural here is not a single organic entity but a diverse set of lines criss-crossing in and among one another. (*John Clare*, 116)

And yet, this is an observation that extends beyond merely this poem, and speaks, I argue, to a larger sense of Clare’s worldview. What Kövesi finds in Clare’s use of polysyndeton is indicative of a larger interest in an “eco-aesthetic” of relationality, or the focus on the links and rhizomatic relations themselves. For Kövesi, it is evidence of Clare’s resistance “not just against classifying order, but also against simplifying union” (*John Clare* 117). Reading beyond Kövesi, I find in Clare’s poetry a world in becoming, one that we can sharply see operating through the figure of



noon and with consequences for perception.<sup>16</sup> The figure of noon — that we might think of as yet another variation of polysyndeton and relationality — is another aperture in the body of Clare’s poetry through which we can glimpse his interest in a kaleidoscopic, shattered vision that refracts the flow of the world’s becoming.

21. Along this temporal borderline or conjunction within the everyday, an affectively charged time of day that skims barely beneath the surface of his body of work, noon emerges as a line of flight along which perception is profoundly and even uncomfortably changed. If Clare, as Kövesi puts it, “is a poet of strange, defamiliarizing and discombobulating encounters” (“John Clare &...” 81), the noon poems reveal one such profound encounter to be with this curious spacetime wherein perception is radically transformed, a tear within the fabric of our daily lives when a dazzled eye breaks through, one particular spacetime that serves as the condition of possibility for “looki[ng] with a poetic feeling.”

#### **IV. Clare at noon**

22. In the “noon poems,” Clare’s depiction of noon reveals an unfinished or unsettled thought on this spacetime that is, above all, generative of a new mode of perception. Noon is repeatedly presented in a mixed state, as a sympoetic spacetime strange and estranging for the poems’ speakers and bodies.
23. Clare dedicates many poems to the ubiquitous spacetime of noon, all of which capture it as a thick, decelerated spacetime. His sonnet, “A Lare at Noon,” published in *The Village Minstrel* (1821), Clare’s second publication, offers a vision of a secret woodsy nook in which Clare half-hopes to take a midday rest. In this poem, hawthorn (“awthorn” [1]) and ash trees gently stop the

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sun as the speaker finds a shaded bower, an “easy bed” (2), in which to nap. While noting the ways in which other bodies (the water, cattle, little minnows) similarly attempt to find retreats and nooks, the poem concludes with the speaker strangely admitting that he almost could have pretended to nap and to look peacefully at this scene, that is, if he hadn’t been awakened or inspired by the muse:

I feign had slept but flies woud buzz around

I feign had looked calmly on the scene

But the sweet snug retreat my search had found

Wakend the muse to sing the willows screne (“A Lare at Noon” 11-14)

But it is not simply that inspiration has hijacked his body’s intention to sleep. Clare’s repetition of “feign” (to pretend) here is telling. The speaker admits to only pretending to nap and pretending to look calmly at this scene. This swerve toward the speaker’s admission of giving the illusion of napping and of relaxed, easy vision wrenches our attention away from the lare itself and instead toward the speaker’s perception. Here, then, noon is a curious time when things — lares and Clares— are not what they seem, and where the dynamic interplay of speed and stasis, accelerated creativity and slowed bodies, is felt the strongest.

24. Clare returns to work through the same affect of noon in the poem “Noon,” another sonnet from the same collection. Moreover, with the repetition of the buzzing flies, the water, willow and hawthorn trees — many of the same details as in “A Late at Noon” — it might even be the same spot as before:

The mid day hour of twelve the clock counts oer

A sultry stillness lulls the air asleep

The very buzz of flye is heard no more

Nor one faint wrinkle oer the waters creep

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Like one large sheet of glass the pool does shine  
Reflecting in its face the burnt sun beam  
The very fish their sturting play decline  
Seeking the willow shadows side the stream  
& where the awthorn branches oer the pool  
The little bird forsaking song & nest  
Flutters on dripping twigs his limbs to cool  
& splashes in the stream his burning breast  
O free from thunder for a sudden shower  
To cherish nature in this noon day hour (“Noon” [1821], 1-14)

Nature in this scene is static, marked by a minimal movement; the only body in active motion is the fluttering and splashing little bird. Against the muted backdrop of all other bodies and forces seemingly at rest, the bird’s boisterous performance absorbs the speaker’s attention, as if it were a soliloquy. This is a mode that he, like the bird who bathes without thunder, cherishes, a mode that Clare again associates with noon.

25. Clare’s verse reveals an interest in clandestine spacetimes, an interest that complements Sara Lodge’s observation that “Clare’s sonnets are frequently concerned with intimate or hidden space” (549). Noon, as I have been suggesting, is one such hidden spacetime. Indeed, it is fitting that Clare overwhelmingly chooses the sonnet form in which to explore this strange spacetime of the intermezzo. For the sonnet form, as Lodge notes, “allows us to experience minuteness, seclusion, the possible concentration of life within a spatial and temporal framework small enough to be overlooked” (549). Thus, on the one hand, the sonnet formally captures this phenomenon that is otherwise ubiquitous enough and perhaps unremarkable enough to be overlooked. Formally,

the sonnet sits as an appropriately-sized nest for this minor time of day — minor in both its common sense of inferior or inconsiderable, and in the Deleuzo-Guattarian sense of minor as “a potential, creative and created, becoming” unlike the major which is “a constant and homogeneous system” (*Thousand Plateaus* 106, 105).<sup>17</sup>

26. However, on the other hand, something in the protean quality, the dog’s breath of noon resists such beautiful thinking, such a tidy aesthetic, insofar as noon spills beyond Clare’s sonnets. Take, for instance, the much longer poem “Noon,” published in *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820). Here, Clare more fully explores the perceptual effects of noon. Although the stage is similarly set as in the sonnets — it is again a spacetime of minimal forces, movements, and sounds (“Vocal voices all are mute” [23])— “Noon” more fully outlines the perceptual transformation that the speaker undergoes. In the poem’s first eight lines we encounter the transformative affect of noon on bodies and their parts:

All how silent and how still  
Nothing heard but yonder mill  
While the dazzel'd eye surveys  
All around a liquid blaze  
And amid the scorching gleams  
If we earnest look it seems  
As if crooked bits of glass  
Seem'd repeatedley to pass (1-8)

These lines establish this as a scene of near stasis and silence, and reveal the sole moving agent here to be the eye that surveys. I’ll return to this eye shortly. The poem continues to observe the particular bodies that have become still and silent: after cataloguing the range of nonhuman bodies that have become strange — a breeze that does not blow, and twigs and branches that fail to

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shake, water that does not flow, birds and bees that are mute — the speaker turns to the human ones, who “from the tormenting heat / All are wishing to retreat” (27-28): the shepherds who have forsaken not only work but even song or poetry (“Tuneles[s] lies the pipe and flute” [24]), mowers who “wait for cooler hours” (30), and the “Cow-boy” (31), who like his cattle seeks a shady spot. All bodies, human and otherwise, are marked by heat and exhaustion — with the exception of the quasi-disembodied “dazzel’d eye” that surveys all at the beginning of the poem. Shifting to the first-person voice, Clare enters the poem to grieve for what cannot survive noon’s “hot relentless sun” (50):

---O to see how flowers are took  
How It grieves me when I look  
Ragged robins once so pink  
Now are turnd as black a[s] ink  
And the leaves being scorch'd so much  
Even crumble at the touch  
Drowking lies the Meadow sweet  
Flopping down beneath ones feet  
While to all the flowers that blow  
If in open air they grow  
The injurious deed alike is done  
By the hot relentless sun  
E'en the dew is parched up  
From the teazle's jointed cup (39-52)

The scorching heat of noon kills certain forms of nonhuman life, beginning with the Ragged-Robin (*Lychnis flos-cuculi*) whose pink flowers have turned ink black. Next, the speaker turns his attention to the “poor birds” (53) to wonder where they must now fly given that their water

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source has dried up in the sun's heat, and instructs them to "leave the shadeless goss" (57) or else be "choak'd & clam'd to death" (56). If they do that, they might sing again and thus "cheer" the speaker and inspire him to, like them, "wander to contrive / For my self a place as good" (68-69).

There, amidst the "middle of a wood" in the tall grasses along the mossy bank, he will rest:

Fearless of the things that creep  
There I'll think and there I'll sleep  
Careing not to stir at all  
Till the dew begins to fall (75-78)

There is an uncanniness to the stasis that the speaker desires to find (a future time when he will not stir) and the stasis that already marks this scene of noon. Does the speaker himself yearn to embody the annihilating force of noon? Strangely, what the speaker desires has in some ways already arrived. The poem concludes with the speaker's wish for the return of this feeling, the repeated pleasure of the still and silence, the "liquid blaze" (4) that to the "dazzel'd eye" makes things appear in a shattered vision, as if through moving "crooked bits of glass" (7).

27. The haziness and violent pleasure that accompanies a hot noon (a kind of Burkean "delight" or negative pleasure associated with the sublime) returns again in *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1827), a long poem that follows the lives of farm labourers throughout the year. Clare offers yet another sustained reflection on a hot summer's noon in the section dedicated to July (second version), a passage worth quoting here at length:

...noon burns with its blistering breath  
Around and day dyes still as death  
The busy noise of man and brute  
Is on a sudden lost and mute  
The cuckoo singing as she flies

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No more to mocking boy replys  
Even the brook that leaps along  
Seems weary of its bubbling song  
And so soft its waters creep  
Tired silence sinks in sounder sleep  
The cricket on its banks is dumb  
The very flies forget to hum  
And save the waggon rocking round  
The lanscape sleeps without a sound  
The breeze is stopt the lazy bough  
Hath not a leaf that dances now  
The totter grass upon the hill  
And spiders threads are standing still  
The feathers dropt from more hens wing  
Which to the waters surface sling  
Are stedfast and as heavy seem  
As stones beneath them in the stream  
.....  
.....  
And in the oven heated air  
Not one light thing is floating there  
— Save that to the earnest eye  
The restless heat seems twittering bye  
Noon swoons beneath the heat it made  
And flowers een wither in the shade

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Untill the sun slopes in the west  
Like weary traveler glad to rest  
On pillard clouds of many hues  
Then natures voice its joy renews  
And checkered field and grassy plain  
Hum with their summer songs again  
A requiem to the days decline (101-137)

The personified noon with its “blistering breath” brings the day to a standstill, dying “still as death.” With the exception of the “earnest eye,” that sole “light thing...floating there,” all movement and sounds of life (human and nonhuman activities) cease, framed as a kind of sudden loss and disinterestedness that washes over all. Even those activities that seem essential to certain bodies, such as the humming of flies, chirping of crickets, and babbling of the brook, cease. The stillness observed here verges on the surreal: not even the spider’s faint gossamer threads move. This interruption or suspension is framed as a kind of paralysis or sudden forgetting, an amnesia or stupor that interrupts these activities or movements. The sense of thickness, heaviness, embodied in the image of feathers sitting on the water with the weight of stones, accumulates with the cataloguing of each body that stands silent and still in the “oven heated air” of noon. Curiously, even noon itself “swoons beneath the heat it made,” suggestive of noon having a force that exceeds its own control, a creator whose creation with a life of its own now monstrously overpowers him. There is, then, a darker side of noon.

28. However, there are some ambivalences in noon here. If noon creates this heat that crushes nearly all, is this celebrated by Clare? Despite its “blistering breath” and association with death, noon does pause the “busy noise of man and brute,” a business that is not necessarily celebrated. Moreover, there is also an intoxicating, pleasurable affect to this paralysis. Consider, for instance,



noon's "sultry lusciousness" (1) in Clare's poem "The Heat of Noon," part of the *The Midsummer Cushion*:

There lies a sultry lusciousness around  
The far-stretched pomp of summer which the eye  
Views with a dazzled gaze — and gladly bounds  
Its prospects to some pastoral spots that lie  
Nestling among the hedge, confining grounds  
Where in some nook the haystacks newly made  
Scents the smooth level meadow-land around  
While underneath the woodland's hazily hedge  
The crowding oxen make their sway beds  
And in the dry dyke thronged with rush and sedge  
The restless sheep rush in to hide their heads  
From the unlost and ever haunting flye  
And under every tree's projecting shade  
Places as battered as the road is made

Here, the heat of noon, suggests Nicholas Birns, "is the ultimate natural *nunc stans*: a moment of utter synthesis, of the obliteration of natural specificity in the imperial glare of the sun" (191). For Birns, Clare's language does not lead to a scenic image of summer, but instead "sultry" and "luscious" are rendered into a quality of summer:

The sultry lusciousness of high noon would ordinarily be stifling in its estival generosity, providing us with too much fulfilment, too much satisfaction, preventing the sort of cognitive or experiential nuance that enables us to meaningfully navigate our relation to the external world. Clare makes enigmatic what would otherwise be a stultifying surplus by his making the sultry lusciousness a peripheral epiphenomenon of the pomp of summer

rather than an organic consequence, a move which means the eye is not dwarfed by the static perception of summer but “dazzled” by its magnificence. (192)

Yet the eye, which surveys this scene with a “dazzled gaze,” also “gladly bounds” itself to particular spots, as if it too, like the other bodies in the poem (such as the “crowding oxen” and the “restless sheep”) seeks refuge. Some of the stakes of this perceptual semiotics show through in this poem, as the intensity or even sublimity of noon’s far-stretching heat is almost too much for the gaze. In fact, Clare’s account here of the dazzled gaze stretching and binding recalls the rhetoric around the pleasures of terror, which, as John Aikin and Anna Laetitia Aikin (later Barbauld) note, emerge when “a strange and unexpected event awakens the mind, and keeps it on the stretch” (129). Noon, in Clare’s hands, is precisely one such strange and unexpected event that almost impossibly holds together beauty and terror, radically changing the forces, movements and intensities of human and nonhuman bodies — becoming syrupy, thick, nearly silent and static — and shattering the very experience of habitualized perception itself.

## **V. The dazzled eye at noon**

29. As this essay has been arguing, a distinct mode of perception is at the heart of noon’s seductive attraction for Clare. The importance of the “dazzled” eye — an image for an altered or new perception — speaks to the larger perceptual insight that Clare finds in the spacetime of noon. To recall, there’s the “dazzled gaze” that views this lusciousness in “The Heat of Noon”; the sole floating “earnest eye” in *The Shepherd’s Calendar*; and the “dazzel’d eye” that “surveys / All around a liquid blaze” in “Noon” (1820) (3-4). To dazzle, according to the OED, means to “lose the faculty of distinct and steady vision” (1) the result of gazing at too bright a light, or to “become mentally confused or stupefied; to become dizzy” (2), or to “overpower, confuse, or dim” either the vision (3) or mental faculties (4) — all definitions that were available to Clare. In sum, I

suggest that we think of becoming dazzled as a vertiginous experience where habitualized, steady vision and thought become simultaneously undone.

30. What Clare returns repeatedly to find in the figure of noon is the vision of a different mode of perception. Indeed, what the image of noon grants access to in Clare's working through might be thought of along the lines of what Bergson means by *durée* (duration) as a continuous flow of time, like the ever-moving parts of mental states or music always moving. Duration is dynamic, perceivable through intuition. Duration, as Bergson writes, "means invention, the creation of forms, the continual elaboration of the absolutely new" (*Creative Evolution*, 7) — or, in Deleuze's reading, *durée* is space and time always in the process of becoming. Although the noon poems, insofar as they isolate a specific time, appear on the surface to belong (if only in their titles) to "clock time" — a mode of time that is measured and chops up and distracts from the experience of the flowing time of duration — the experiential differences marked within these poetic accounts of noon work to wrench open such a reading.

31. These poems become access points into the *durée* known through the emergence of the dazzled or shattered vision. For poems, Bergson implies, have such a force:

The poet is he with whom feelings develop into images and the images themselves into words, which translate them while obeying the laws of rhythm. In seeing these images pass before our eyes we in our own turn experience the feeling which was, so to speak, their emotional equivalent... (*Time and Free Will*, 15)

Bergson's rhetoric in describing these images that the poet develops that then "pass before our eyes" recalls that experience that Clare describes in his poem "Noon" (1820): "If we earnest look it seems / As if crooked bits of glass / Seem'd repeatedley to pass" (6-8). Looking through poetry

affords a new vision, as if the shattered glass we find here is the shattered form of that other unpoetical mode of looking at nature that sees it as “carcasses in glass cases.”

32. In the repeated return to this clandestine spacetime of noon, Clare creates a footpath on which we might follow. The syrupy deceleration of movements and shift in temporality paradoxically shows us Clare’s immersion in the flow of life’s duration and its multiplicities, exploring (or “obeying” as Bergson puts it) the rhythms of duration that lie beyond clock time. In the frequent returns to noon, Clare appears interested in capturing life in the middle. The ultimate payoff, I have been suggesting, is that noon appears to be a tear in the quotidian, the condition of possibility for experiencing a radical new mode of perception, a kind of kaleidoscopic or shattered vision in which Clare sees the world askew. It is, as Deleuze and Guattari write, “not easy to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below, or from left to right or right to left: try it, you’ll see that everything changes” (*Thousand Plateaus*, 23). Clare’s poetic returns to noon anticipates this challenge to see things in the middle, and offer a perception radically changed, a generative perception for creativity made possible by a shattered vision, a richly thick, decelerated spacetime that sympoetically holds together privation and plenitude, stasis and ecstasy.

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<sup>1</sup> Noon also serves as Benjamin's example for his concept of the aura. In his short essay "The Little History of Photography," he describes the aura as principally a strange or mesmerizing spacetime that holds distance and proximity together: "What is aura actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer,



until the the moment or the hour become part of their appearance — this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch” (Benjamin 518).

<sup>2</sup> An entirely separate paper could explore the resonances between Constable and Deleuze. For my purposes here, let me briefly note that I see Constable and Deleuze meeting in the idea of painting as a site of affect or captured moments of intensity. For as Constable famously writes in his Letter to John Fisher, October 23, 1821, “painting is with me but another word for feeling” (Leslie, *Memoirs*, 86). For Deleuze, painting is an art of sensation, its job “to render visible forces that are not themselves visible” (*Francis Bacon* 56). For Deleuze, painting works more than any other art form to transform/transmute inner experiences of sensations and feelings into externalized affects and percepts. Deleuze addresses painting most predominantly in *A Thousand Plateaus*, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, and *What is Philosophy?*

<sup>3</sup> My use of this term recalls Schlegel and Novalis and the interest in German Romanticism of various “synactivities,” as Antoine Berman calls them, such as “sympoetry, symphilosophy, syncriticism” (51) and the more recent use of the term by Beth Dempster and Donna Haraway, who use it to describe a process of “making with,” a process of self-making that only happens collectively and collaboratively (contra the “autopoeisis” of Maturana and Varela).

<sup>4</sup> In June 1837, Clare was admitted to Matthew Allen’s asylum at High Beach, and escaped in in July 1841. He was admitted in December 1841 to the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum.

<sup>5</sup> Other poems that mention noon, albeit in a less central capacity, include “May-Noon”, “Sunday at Noon”, “A Seat at Noon”, “[How many times with weary feet]” to name but a few. A keyword search reveals that 75 of Clare’s poems make reference to noon.

<sup>6</sup> These two poles arguably replace what Simon Kövesi and Scott McEathron identify as “the false dichotomy of Clare as either importunate peasant or martyred genius” (*New Essays* 10). On Clare and the local, see John Barrell *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*; Sarah Houghton “The ‘Community’ of John Clare’s Helpston” *SEL* 46.4 (2006): 781-802; David Higgins ‘Hail England old England my country & home’: Englishness and the Local in John Clare’s Writings” *Victoriographies* 2.2 (2012): 128-148. On Clare and enclosure, see James McKusick “ ‘a language that is ever green’: The Ecological Vision of John Clare” *UTQ* 61.2 (1992): 226-249; Eric Miller “Enclosure and Taxonomy in John Clare” *SEL* 40.4 (2000): 635-657; Chris Washington “John Clare and Biopolitics” *ERR* 25.6 (2014): 665-682.

<sup>7</sup> These are important and interconnected concepts. Unlike the way we think of being, as Deleuze and Guattari explain, “a becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself” (TP 238) and moves not through heteronormative models of descent and filiation but through queer sideways growths. This operates much like their figure of the rhizome: “The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance...The tree imposes the verb ‘to be,’ but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, ‘and...and...and...’” (25), and “Becoming is a rhizome, not a classificatory or genealogical tree” (239). See especially sections 1 and 10 in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

<sup>8</sup> Another way to understand the shared affect of the middle despite the dromological difference between middles (Deleuze [fast] and Clare [slow]) is to compare it to Burke’s aesthetic of the sublime. For Burke, we can experience the affect of sublimity when confronted with terrifying objects that incite fear regardless of scale (“Section II. Terror” in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, 57).

<sup>9</sup> Letter to John Taylor. 9 July 1831 (*The Letters of John Clare*, 546).

<sup>10</sup> For more on Shelley’s noon, see *Laon & Cythna* (“In the bright wisdom of youth’s breathless noon”), *The Cenci* (“the broad noon Of public scorn”), and *The Witch of Atlas* (“in the noon of interlunar night” and a “noon-wandering meteor flung to Heaven”).

<sup>11</sup> Constable entered the Royal Academy Schools in London in 1799 and first exhibited his work there in 1802 (Evans 39).

<sup>12</sup> As John Thornes notes, “Noon is an excellent time to paint skies in that the sun is at its highest in the sky to the south, casting the smallest shadows of the day, and moving shadow is less pronounced either side of noon” (65).

<sup>13</sup> I follow James McKusick’s use of the phrase “London Journal” to refer to the autobiographical writings that address Clare’s London experiences contained in his *Autobiographical Writings*. See James McKusick, “John Clare’s London Journal: A Peasant Poet Encounters the Metropolis” *The Wordsworth Circle* 23.3 (1992): 172-175.

<sup>14</sup> Letter to Peter DeWint. 19 December 1829 (*The Letters of John Clare*, 488).

<sup>15</sup> There are resonances here with “dark ecology,” following Timothy Morton’s reading of Clare.

<sup>16</sup> I move beyond Kövesi’s Deleuzian reading in my consideration of perception and spacetime.

<sup>17</sup> Deleuze and Guattari first develop the concept of the minor (and major) in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* and then in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Another way to think about it is in analogous terms to the minor use of language, which works to “make language stammer, or make it ‘wail’ . . . draw from it cries, shouts, pitches, durations, timbres, accents, intensities” (*Thousand Plateaus*, 104). Just as every language has a major and a minor use, according to Deleuze and Guattari, noon has two usages read as both ordinary and extraordinary. Clare makes language stammer, such as in his use of polysyndeton (cf. Kövesi), while the noon poems show him as doing the same with perception.