

## John Clare and Botanical Aesthetics of Affect

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Hongyi, Tian & Ryoo, Gi Taek. “John Clare and Botanical Aesthetics of Affect.” *Studies in English Language & Literature* 45.4 (2019): 75-91. This paper examines John Clare’s nature poems to explore how Clare, being immersed in nature, develops affectionate bonds with nature and how he makes physical and mental modifications to botanical affect—the vital force transmitting from the bodies of plants into the body and mind of the interactive agent. Clare’s botanical aesthetics enables him to project feeling and thinking onto the vegetal bodies and to transform himself into a non-human being during the process of vegetal empathy. This particular emotional state or “affect” demolishes barriers between men and nature, allowing the human to enter into the world of the non-human. Affect is intensified vital force that modifies both mind and body, and that allows Clare’s readers to become immersed in the natural world as a co-equal part of nature. This paper draws upon the perspectives of affect theory to illuminate Clare’s botanical aesthetics in terms of affect as intensive force, affect-induced vegetal empathy, and botanical atmosphere emanating from the affective qualities of the environment. Understanding Clare’s botanical poetry from the perspectives of embodied theories of affect testifies that people’s affections for botanical world are intersubjective, rather than being mysterious private personal feelings. (Liaocheng University, China · Chungbuk National University)

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### 1. Introduction

David Orr in *Love it or Lose it: The Coming Biophilia Revolution* testifies to the

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extreme importance of emotional bond with the natural world. Orr calls for intense subjective attachment to the natural world: “For those presuming to wear the robes of objectivity, the disguise, . . . is often a defense against being flooded by emotions of humility, reverence, mystery, wonder, and awe. Life ought to excite our passion” (420). “The robe of objectivity,” Orr suggests, presupposes a fundamental barrier between the human observer and the nonhuman observed and thus prevents us from any meaningful and emotional interaction with nature. The poetry of John Clare (1793-1864) enables us to shed “the robe of objectivity” to recognize the intrinsic value of other species living in their specific habitats and to develop strong affective bonds with them.

The relationship between human beings and nature in Clare’s nature poems has been explored by a number of scholars since the 1990s. Coletta identifies the ecological aesthetic value of Clare’s poems, analyzing the ecological relationship between individual species and between the human and the nonhuman in a particular habitat (29). Bresnihan has explored “the excess of possibilities inherent in the manifold commons,” focusing on the ongoing, negotiated, and interactive relations between people and natural things (71). Mckusick also offers a detailed analysis on the meaningful interactions between humans and the natural world in Clare’s poems, finding that Clare’s approaches to the natural world is to “create a linguistic analogue to the natural world” (82).

However, these previous researches have failed to touch how the human subject is aesthetically interacted with non-human beings. Clare’s botanic poems suggest that people can only realize their ecological selves when both their body and mind are affected by the vital power during their embodied aesthetic experiences with nature. Clare’s vision for botanic aesthetics involves both body and mind being modified by the vital force as a result of dynamic interaction between people’s imaginative impulse and the objective reality. As such, it is a product of a deep understanding of both natural history and sensory-emotive responses to concrete experiences.

In this sense, Clare’s botanical aesthetics can be better illuminated by the

theoretical perspectives of affect, which have provided detailed accounts of the reciprocal relationship between body and mind, and man and nature. The theory of affect was originally proposed by Baruch Spinoza, who defines “affect” to denote what changes the human body and mind in different ways, through which, a particular human being’s body and mind are affected during his or her encounter with external things. According to Spinoza, affects are traces of our encounter with other things, the marks of such encounter “upon both our bodies and our minds, which continue to unsettle and disturb, long after the encounter has taken place” (qtd. in James 95).<sup>1</sup>

Drawing on Spinoza’s theory of affect, Gilles Deleuze has developed the idea of affect into “pre-personal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another, implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act” (qtd. in Massumi xvi). Brian Massumi, a translator of Deleuze’s works into English, equates affect with “intensity embodied in purely autonomic reactions manifested in the skin, . . . at its interface with” (24-25). He insists that affect is the body’s response to stimuli at a precognitive and pre-linguistic level that involves the brain, but not consciousness to which subjective, signifying and functional-meaning emotions belong (441).

In psychology and neuroscience, on the other hand, affect is regarded as an elemental state of the primary motivational system—i.e., an “innate biological mechanism, more urgent than drive deprivation and pleasure, more urgent than physical pain, . . . lending power to memory, to perception, to thought, and to action no less than to drives” (Tomkins 355-56). In line with the concept of affect as an elemental state, the literary critic Charles Altieri identifies four modes of affect: feelings, moods, emotions, and passion. For Altieri, feelings are elemental

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<sup>1</sup> Affect must be distinguished from the notion of affection. Spinoza uses the term “affections” to describe both things as well as the states or modalities of these things: “Affections are the modifications of the mode, the effects of other modes on it” (Deleuze, *Spinoza* 48). Therefore, for Spinoza, affect involves the notion of affect being the “productive force” and the notion of affection being “manifest emotion” (Lundberg 401).

affective states characterized by an imagination engaging in the immediate experience of sensations. According to him, emotions are modes of affect in which the ego has positioned itself in relation to the conscious that move it, with the human-self caring about how the emotions will engage certain states of affairs over time (46).

All these theories of affect mentioned above may provide a new vista for understanding Clare's botanical aesthetics and his particular approach to nature writing. The present study of Clare's nature poems draws upon the perspectives of affect theory to explore the aesthetic affect emanating from the dynamic interaction between the human agent and the phenomenon of the natural world. The study of aesthetic affect in Clare's nature poetry will enable us to approach the natural world with a strong sense of embodiment, instead of aesthetics of objectivity based on rational mind.

## 2. Poetic Expression of Affect as Intensive Force

Clare's poems can be characterized by the mutual response between mind and body, and man and nature; as a result, they both affect and are affected by each other. In *What is Philosophy*, Deleuze and Guattari refer affect as matter in us responding and resonating with the matter around us: "it is something passing from one to the other," leading to a person's non-human becoming. They consider that affect, as vital force, is a point where beasts, things, and a person can no longer distinguish himself from others (173). These notions appear in Clare's poetry as well. For example, in Clare's poem "The Wind Blows on Everything," multiple shades of green against diverse background colors of the natural world are expressions of Clare's affected response to the vital force of nature.

I love the luscious green before the bloom

The leaves & grass & even beds of moss  
 When leaves gin bud & spring prepares to come  
 The Ivy's evergreen the brown green gorse  
 Plots of green weeds that barest roads engross  
 In fact I love the youth of each green thing  
 The grass the trees the bushes & the moss  
 That pleases little birds & makes them sing  
 I love the green before the blooms of spring (*LM* 205)

The speaker's psychological response to colors is basically his embodied interaction with the vital force of nature. Here we can see the affective qualities flowing out of various shades of green grass growing in diverse backgrounds of natural environment. The absence of punctuation adds to the sense of uninterrupted and intense love for the plants. The green image is never boring in the reader's mind because the various shades of green color are embedded in a wild landscape of diverse plant species: the 'evergreen' ivies that climb tree trunks, houses, rocks, etc.; the brown green gorses in barren heaths; the green weeds decorating the hard trodden roads; the bush in the background of grass; and the green tree tops against the background of blue sky dotted with clouds.

In this nine-line stanza, the word "green" appears six times. The poet's love for green grows in intensity, reaching the climax by combining visual, acoustic and imaginative images such as singing bird, the upcoming blooms of spring. Through the recurrence of the simple word 'green', Clare expresses his strong attachment to nature, showing the affected power of the poet's impulse to magnify what can be seen.

Clare's feeling of love is generated by the vital force flowing out of the green world. In Goethe's terms, when eyes of a person experience a distinctly grateful impression from the color green, the mind reposes, having neither the wish nor the power to imagine a state beyond it (316). In the poem above, the poet's expression of satisfaction with "each green thing" in nature implies that the green of each thing

is different from the other and is indispensable for the harmony of color combinations. This is phenomenologically supported by the principle of completeness and harmony in Goethe's theory of color: the eye can only assimilate or identify itself and become excited with a single color for an instant, then it is the nature of the eye to seek for a colorless space next every hue in order to produce the complementary hue upon it (316-317). The poet's experiences of the various shades of different green things in the poem reveal that we do not respond to just one color, but to colors in combination, and the eye will be in some degree pathologically affected by being long confined to a single color.

In his *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Deleuze points out that affect as vital force can also come like a powerful wave of alteration, causing the perceptive subject to experience a sensation (31). The essence of sensation is the compound of non-human forces of the cosmos, leading to man's non-human becoming. The creation of sensation depends on the relationship between the human body and the body of object: the body of the object acts upon the brain, while the dynamic human body activates the sensation (36). The subject's strength and ability to produce sensations are correlated with the overcoming of mere sensory information received by the brain—i.e., a deformation of the naturalistic profile, a distortion of the visible during the process of non-human becoming (38).

“The Meadow Grass” is a good example of the poet's experiencing the sensations of non-human becoming. The reader can feel from the poem that the vital force freely flows from the meadows to the poet who has no power to distinguish whether he sees or feels the joys.

Delicious is a leisure hour  
 Among the sweet green fields to be  
 So sweet indeed I have no power  
 To tell the joys I feel and see  
 See here the meadows how they lie  
 So sunny level so green

The grass is waving mid leg high  
A sweet rest was never seen  
I look around and drop me down  
And feel delight to be alone  
Cares hardly dare to show a frown  
While May's sweet leisure is my own  
Joy half a stranger comes to me  
And gives me thoughts to profit by (*MW* 200-201)

The joys that the poet sees and feels are the affect flowing out of green meadows lying in the sunny levels, bringing about the poet's sensations of deliciousness and sweetness that drive out his former cares: "Cares hardly dare to show a frown . . . / Joy half a stranger comes to me." Joy is the affect transmitted from the green things into the human poet.

In the poem, the speaker becomes the green things of the meadows in the sunshine. Being affected by the vital force flowing from the green things of the natural world when the speaker is bathing in the sunshine, his immersion into the life of grass as an intrinsic part of nature blocks the former cares. In the speaker's consciousness, he forgets himself and becomes an intrinsic part of nature, experiencing the perceptions and sensations of the meadow landscape. He becomes a part of the meadows in sunny level taking in air, water, and sunlight to produce its own food for survival. Here affect has passed from the landscape into the human subject, causing a compound of sensations through the speaker's conscious distortion of the visible data.

### 3. Affect-Induced Vegetal Empathy

During the process of human beings' interaction with the environment, particular affect is transmitted from body to body through the bio-neurological means of

embodied simulation—the automatic function of the cerebral mirror mechanism (neurons), which mimic whatever interacts with a person whether consciously (in the form of mental imagery) or subconsciously, and activate the motor systems of the brain at the same time (di Pellegrino et al. 176-80). Embodied simulation opens a unique door to empathic imagination that is essentially what Spinoza defines as the process of “recognizing the ideas of body modification in the attribute of thought” (68). Through empathic imagination, sensory knowledge is gained, and leads to bodily modification, which is simultaneously formed as ideas in the attribute of thought.

The theory of empathy is originated from the German philosopher Theodor Lipps’s concept of *Einfühlung* (empathy). According to Lipps, empathy is a “process of humanizing objects, of reading or feeling ourselves into works of arts and into nature” (417). In other words, empathy is an inner tendency to give rise to similar kinesthetic sensations in the observer what he feels from the observed target. Following Lipps, the eco-aesthetician Berleant sees empathy as harmonious human appreciation of the perceived nonhuman through physical attunement, bodily correspondence, and co-constructed consciousness. He further explains that “when empathy with a physical movement takes place, there is a consciousness that is wholly identical with the movement” (16). In a similar sense, Spiegelberg considers that empathy is “imaginative self-transposal,” and represents one means by which we are able to enter the world of the other, as one of several distinct types of imaginative experiences (48). In short, empathy is an experience of imagination.

However, the danger of empathy lies in human-centeredness that risks overlooking the difference of organism in nature and human beings: “when humans empathize with plants, they, thus, ultimately empathize themselves, turning the object of empathy into a blank screen, onto which essentially human emotions are projected” (Marder 263). This can be avoided by close and scientific observation of the natural facts. Empathic imagination, according to Haves and Palmer, is dependent upon keen observation of the other from a perspective of “outside looking in,” as well as an



appreciation of “what the other sees” or from the perspective of “inside looking out” (285).

Empathic imagination based on close scientific observation enables Clare to experience the enchantment of nature, identifying himself with the body of the plant, and projecting feelings onto the vegetal entities, as exemplified in the poem “To a Favorite Tree.”

Old favorite Tree! Art thou too fled the scene?  
 Could not Old favorite Tree!  
 Could not thy 'clining age the axe delay,  
 And let thee stretch thy shadow's o'er the green,  
 And let thee die in picturesque decay?  
 . . . . .  
 But gain's rude rage it was that cut thee down,  
 And dragged a captive from thy native wood.  
 So gay in summer as thy boughs were dress'd  
 So soft, so cool, as then thy leaves did wave;  
 I knew thee then, and knowing am distressed;  
 And like as Friendship leaning o'er the grave,  
 Loving ye all, ye trees, ye bushes, dear  
 I wander where you stood, and shed my bosom-tear. (*DP* 200)

The phrase “stretch thy shadow” vividly describes the natural phenomenon of the shadow change in accordance with the different positions of the Sun in a day, expressing the poet’s empathic imagination of the tree’s animated interaction with the sun and the grassland growing under the tree’s crown. The shadow of the tree in the morning depicts the tree waking up and stretching its body; and the swaying shadow of the tree cast on the ground indicates the tree’s dancing on the green meadow. While the changes of the shadow during the day show its animated spirit, the boughs that put on leaves in summer create a joyous atmosphere for its surrounding natural environment.

In contrast to the lively and joyous feelings, the elm tree's being "dragged a captive" from its native woods makes us feel the painful death caused by the "gain-driven" people with "a tyrant's frown." The old elm tree being dragged as a captive evokes the empathetic feeling of our own life being threatened; thus the tree's life becomes our own, and to protect the tree against the capitalist's evil purpose is to save ourselves.

Another example of vegetal empathy can be found in the ballad "A Weedling Wild," which tells a story of a person who intends to pick the flower of a small wild weed amidst heavy rainfall. When the speaker is urged by his instinct to pick the flower, he changes his perspectives and empathically imagines himself to be the wild weed, experiencing what the wild flower would feel:

"And wilt thou bid my bloom decay,  
 And crop my flower, and me betray?  
 And cast my injur'd sweets away,"—  
 Its silence seemly sigh'd—  
 "A moment's idol of thy mind?  
 And is a stranger so unkind,  
 To leave a shameful root behind,  
 Bereft of all its pride?"

And so it seemly did complain;  
 And beating fell the heavy rain;  
 And low it droop'd upon the plain,  
 To fate resign'd to fall:  
 My heart did melt as its decline,  
 And "come," said I, "thou gem divine,  
 My fate shall stand the storm with thine."  
 So took the root and all. (*VM* 97-98)

Empathically imagining himself to be the very wildflower, the speaker projects his own feelings onto the vegetal body and comes to realize the weed's intrinsic right

to experience what nature provides: both sunshine and storm. The storm provides an opportunity for the weed to strive against setbacks, with the flower being its 'pride' of experiencing the storms. It is the weed's right to droop upon the plain under the effect of the "beating heavy rain," receiving the vital force of the storm to strengthen the root.

During the process of empathic imagination, the speaker's mind is dramatically affected by the weed's fighting against the storm, recognizing the shared destiny between his own life and that of the wild weed. Such setbacks enable both humans and plants to grow in strength and to develop the capacity of adaptability to the environment:

My heart did melt as its decline,  
And "come," said I, "thou gem divine,  
My fate shall stand the storm with thine;"  
So took the root and all. (*VM* 96)

Being affected at first by the wild weed's fighting against heavy rainfall, the speaker is instinctively urged to pick its flower in case of being bruised. Then the affect-induced empathic imagination allows the speaker to feel and think as if he himself were the weed. The empathic imagination modifies the speaker's former physical and mental reaction from the urge to pick the flower to welcome the storm together with the wild weed side by side. Therefore, empathic imagination removes the communication barrier between the plant and man, creating a non-dualistic one in nature.

#### **4. Affective Botanical Atmosphere**

Another important element of affect is the botanical atmosphere emanating from the affective qualities of the environment. Philosophers and psychologists have

extensively studied the term atmosphere as aesthetic phenomenon. Ben Anderson argues that atmospheres are affective forces that are generated by the affective qualities emanating from the assembly of human bodies, non-human bodies, and all the other discursive bodies that make up the everyday situations (77-81). Tonino Griffiero considers atmospheres as feelings that people project into the environment when they observe the characteristics of the objects' expressive qualities in emotionally charged circumstances (108-109).

In addition, Gernot Böhme defines atmospheres as the radiation of the plant's potential qualities of ecological affordance (qtd. in Brown 10). What these critics agree is that atmospheres are affective vital forces emanating from the interaction of human bodies, botanical bodies, and all other non-human bodies that are related to each other ecologically in a particular situation.<sup>2</sup>

Observing expressive qualities displayed in the life of plants when they grow and interact with other part of nature, Clare experiences the atmospheres emanating from wildflowers, weeds and trees.<sup>3</sup> In the poem "the Fear of Flower," Clare's vividly presents to us the various ways of wildflowers to protect and perpetuate their lives, creating an atmosphere of humor:

The nodding oxeye bends before the wind,  
 The woodbine quakes lest boys their flower should find,  
 And prickly dogrose spite of its array  
 Can't dare the bloom-seeking hand away.  
 While thistles wear their beauty knobs of bloom  
 Proud as a warhorse wears its haughty plume,

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<sup>2</sup> While atmospheres are qualities emanating from an interaction between man and nature, moods set the conditions of our mental states under which we perform cognitive tasks and experience certain emotions. According to Altieri, moods are modes of feelings where the sense of subjectivity becomes diffuse and sensation merges into something close to atmosphere, pervading an entire scene or situation (46).

<sup>3</sup> The expressive qualities displayed in natural environment is discussed by Emily Brady in her "Aesthetic Appreciation of Expressive Qualities in Animal," in which she considers that the expressive qualities in nature resemble our aesthetic experience in hearing music: certain expressive qualities of music rhythms and movement resemble human emotional behavior (4).

And by the roadside danger's self defy;  
 On commons where pined sheep and oxen lie  
 In ruddy pomp and ever thronging mood  
 It stands and spreads like danger in a wood.  
 And in the village street where meanest weeds  
 Can't stand untouched to fill their husks with seeds,  
 The haughty thistle o'er all dangerous towers,  
 In every place the very wasp of flowers. (CM 177)

As a perennial herb, the stem of the oxeye daisy is unbranched and sprouts laterally from a creeping rhizomatous rootstock. With such peculiarly long and thin stem, the weakest part of the oxeye is its long fragile stems which however survive in the natural environment by bending to the wind. The woodbine, as a vining herb, also has tender stems. But, instead of bending like that of oxeye, the woodbine's stem grows by entwining around other plants or trees, with their flowers hanging on the tree trunks, or other supports like the wall. The mixed white and golden flowers that hang high in the sunshine make it hard for animals and people to distinguish the flowers from the sunshine, thus protecting themselves in an atmosphere of complacent triumph.

Both the prickly dogrose and the thistle have adapted themselves to the natural environment by growing thorns on their vegetal bodies. Yet the thorns on the prickly stem of dogrose is different from that of the thistle which grows thorns on every part of its stems, leave margins, and even its flower receptacles: "And prickly dogrose, spite of its array, / Can't dare the blossom-seeking hand away" (CM 177). The thistle, as a threat itself to animals, not only defies harm from the herbivore animals, but also guard other grasses and weeds living around it:

On commons where pined sheep and oxen lie  
 In ruddy pomp and ever thronging mood.  
 It stands and spreads like danger in a wood. (CM 177)

In contrast to the thistle, common weed such as dandelion, which grows everywhere, has adapted to every kind of environment by filling their husks with seeds within a very short time period of growth. The phenomenon of wild plants' adapting themselves to protect and perpetuate their species resembles people's mental state of fear, but plants' ways of adopting various ways of adaptation have created atmospheres of humor. This botanic atmosphere of humor in face of being threatened disposes us to better understand our inner self, and enlighten us to adapt ourselves to the environment in a positive way.

Since mood is the affect coming into the body and mind of a person from the atmospheres of the environment, reading the atmosphere emanating from the wildflowers can help human subject express the mood he experiences in life, as is illustrated in the poem "To The Violet."

Sweet tiny flower of darkly hue,  
 Lone dweller in the pathless shade;  
 How much I love thy pensive blue  
 Of innocence so well display'd! (*VM* 52)

The "pensive blue of innocence" displayed in the violet flower not only corresponds to the poet's feeling of stress in his troubled life, but makes him feel peaceful amid the "sweet tiny flower of darkly hue."

What time the watery skies are full  
 Of streaming dappled clouds so pale,  
 And sideling rocks, more white than wool,  
 Portending snowy sleet, or hail;

I'gin to seek thy charming flower  
 Along each hedge-row's mossy seat,  
 Where, dithering many a cold bleak hour,  
 I've hugged myself in thy retreat. (*VM* 52)

The poet's reaction of trying to protect the violet flower from the impending "snow sleet, or hail" shows that the violet and the poet are non-dualistic one, together facing the "snowy sleet or hail" of life. Moreover, the spirits of the flower instill inspiration and 'raptures' into the heart of the poet, when he recognizes the violet's unique features of loving to grow in dreary waste and dreary hours, only focusing on the light that sustains its beautiful life: "Is, that thou lov'st the dreary waste / Which is so well below'd by me" (*VM* 52).

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has examined Clare's botanical poetry using three perspectives of affect: intensive force, affect-induced empathy, and affective botanical atmosphere. Affect as intensive force flows freely from the various natural backgrounds, scenes, and landscapes depicted in poetry, modifies the poet's body and mind in ways that mirror the surroundings. Affected by this vital force, the mind of the poet experiences empathic imaginations, during which the poet is immersed in the botanical world and experiences kinesthetic sensations and feelings from the perspective of the vegetation being observed. Finally, observing botanical atmospheres produced by the affective qualities of wildflowers, the poet experiences a positive uplifting mood. Conversely, the poet's negative mood is expressed as a function of corresponding botanical atmospheres. It dissipates as the poet experiences himself as an intrinsic part of nature. Clare's botanical aesthetics of affect disprove the myth that love for nature is a private feeling that cannot be shared by the others. This revelation paves the way for readers to interact with nature with greater reverence, awe, affection, and love.

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