

# Home, emotion and deep subjectivity

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## Place

In 1837 at the age of 44, John Clare, the celebrated rustic poet, was detained in an asylum in Epping. His physician, Dr Skrimshire, who had attended him for 14 years, wrote in later committal papers that the cause was probably hereditary. In answer to the committal papers question, "Was the insanity preceded by severe or long-continued mental emotion or exertion?" Dr Skrimshire wrote: "After years addicted to poetical prosing" (Bate, 2003). John Clare died in 1864 after 27 years of detention. By the standards of the day, even perhaps by our own, his detention was humane. Retrospective analysis of his insanity suggests that, if he were alive today, he would be likely to be diagnosed with bi-polar disorder. But the circumstances of John Clare's life were so different from our own that such a diagnosis, although likely based on what is known about him, must remain very contentious.

John Clare was born to a family of poor rural labourers who lived in the village of Helpston on the edge of the Cambridgeshire Fens. He was raised to the necessity of labour and, even in the prime of his life as a popular published poet, he could only make ends meet by hiring himself out to work the fields, to cut and clear ditches, and to lay hedges. He was remarkably sensitive and observant of the intimate detail of life in the countryside, of every aspect of its landscape, its people, animals and birds. Too poor to afford paper he found quiet places where he could compose undisturbed and wrote verse on the rim of his hat, which he later copied into books stitched together from handbills and similar scraps of paper. The epithet, 'peasant poet', belies Clare's power and genius as a poet: Seamus Heaney has spoken highly of Clare's, "...exacting and intuitive discipline, the painterly thickness of the world captured in his poems, of his combination of dreamwork and photography, of how at their best his poems take hold on the sprockets of our creatureliness, and how the channels of expression are opened exhilaratingly by the removal of every screen between the identity of the person and the identity of the place" (Bate, 2003). Take for instance, *Emmonsails Heath in Winter* here described, at times, in his local dialect:

*I love to see the old heath's withered brake  
Mingle its crimped leaves with furze and ling  
While the old heron from the lonely lake  
Starts slow and flaps his melancholy wing  
And oddling crow in idle motion swing  
On the half-rotten ash-tree's topmost twig  
Besides whose trunk the gipsy makes his bed  
Up flies the bouncing woodcock from the brig  
Where a black quagmire quakes beneath the tread  
The fieldfare chatter in the whistling thorn  
And for the awe round fields and closen rove  
And coy bumbarrels twenty in a drove  
Flit down the hedgerows in the frozen plain  
And hang on little twigs and start again  
Clare 1990, p. 74*



In his teens, the countryside in the vicinity of Helpston was enclosed by act of parliament, along lines that gave land to a few for the sake of better husbandry and agricultural improvement, but which dispossessed many poor families like his own. He lost the right to wander the heaths and common lands which he had known as a boy, and the countryside was hedged and divided into the landscape with which we are familiar today. Furthermore, the movement of sun and shadows, people and animals across the landscape of the common land, which plotted the time and seasons, was changed forever. In effect, Clare had become an outsider in his own landscape that he knew so well. He, who had ranged across the commons at will as a boy, wrote after the enclosure:

*I dreaded walking where there was no path  
And prest with cautious tread the meadows swath  
And always turned to look with wary eye  
And always feared the owner coming bye*  
(Clare, 1990 p. 405)

In prefatory remarks to his account of John Clare, the storyteller Hugh Lupton described the incredible identification Clare felt with the landscape, and then lost when it was enclosed, in similar terms to the loss the native Americans experienced when they were confined to the reservations. Lupton said, "It was as if when they were put off their land, they were put out of their minds" (Lupton & Wood, 2009). This, almost unfathomably deep and intimate resonance between landscape and mind, is also described by Bruce Chatwin, in his description of how Aboriginal Australians sing the geography of their landscape in songlines, which tracked the territories of their ancestors, and their paths across the wilderness (Chatwin, 1987).

### Emotion

What each of these examples illustrates is that indigenous contact with landscape is not merely a visual appreciation; it has visceral qualities that shape the very physical substance of mind. The aching loss for his home Clare experienced when he was removed to the asylum, was not merely mental anguish: his poetry reveals that he felt it in the very substance of his mind and body; the loss had palpable existential qualities. For Clare, the essence of his poetic sensibility was the ability to reveal the coterminous experience of his exterior and interior landscapes. Furthermore, it was his ability to coalesce this sensibility into verse that both drove his genius, and it was his acute sensitivity to life lived in a particular landscape, from which he was alienated, which contributed to his madness. Clare knew the feel underfoot of the walk from Helpston to Glington; the feel of the prevailing easterly wind during different seasons; the sensation of the dappling dancing shapes of the sun as it came through the canopy of Oxey Wood at different times of day. He wrote about actual events in the rural landscape, how the time of day was marked by the different activities of men and women at work in the landscape: cows being brought home from pasture; the shepherd struggling home through the cold and clinging winter mud; children at play on the heath; the man at the door apprehensively eyeing the gathering storm.

To be separated from one's landscape, and to be homesick is a grief, similar in its effects for some as a bereavement. A woman with whom I had been working who had lost her child remarked, "I was surprised by the very physical nature of the grief, it was as if I had been cut in the belly, right here". She indicated her abdomen and, as if holding a knife in her grasp, cut in a circular motion. This direct physical relationship between the loss of a child and pain in the belly is compellingly understandable. Similarly, the grief of people who are homesick is also often as palpable. A man spoke of the pain in his heart, "It is like this", he said, holding his hand up against his chest and making a powerful gripping motion as if he were squeezing his heart.

To feel the sickness of loss of home so keenly, and to be able to express it so eloquently, is perhaps a gift. For many others the loss of home is felt more subtly, but is perhaps no less disturbing for all that. It is composed of all the physical and mental accommodations we make to our home, which usually disappear beneath the threshold of consciousness because of their habitual nature. For to

be continually aware of such habits, would be an enormous effort, so we take them for granted so that our attention can be occupied elsewhere, and because of this economy of mental effort we barely notice the sounds across the landscape of the day that chart the passing of time; the sound of the neighbours cars in the road; the feel of the steps beneath our feet in the dark; the way we turn and lift the key in the lock, just so, so it opens; the distinctive smell of our home; the sounds of our family. These are the uppermost sensations of deep subjectivity, those we can bring to mind, the loss of which may feel subtle, and which may propel us into grief when we are separated from home. Other sensations of deep subjectivity are located deeper still within our consciousness and their loss can be experienced as even more uncanny, and difficult to fathom or put into words, perhaps because they are pre-verbal in their origins.

### Intersubjectivity

Heidegger, struggled throughout his life to write a philosophy that was grounded in actual experience and the dilemmas he faced in describing subjectivity, in the uncompromising language of philosophy, are not dissimilar from ours in attempting to capture the complexity of relational interactions. There is a lot that can be learned from his discipline of the subject, and from others like him, such as Buber, who grounded his particular thinking in the relationship of 'I and Thou'. Buber's preoccupation was that genuine relating requires a quality of interaction in which the other manifests as 'thou' rather than as an 'it' (Buber, 1937). The distinction he made was that, in the thou, the full aspects of the others subjectivity comes forth in relationship to one's own subjectivity. This he contrasted with the 'it' when we relate to a person as if they are an object. These ideas, as if in the zeitgeist, came to ground in the psychotherapeutic tradition through the working experience and writing of Heinz Kohut and Merton Gill and others (Kahn, 2001). Working in the psychoanalytic tradition, what they noticed was that the transference relationship is deeply influenced by the actuality of the therapist: a real relationship transpires between client and therapist and what is important in the healing process is that the client brings to the relationship aspects of themselves that require working through, and that the therapist responds, actually, rather like a parent, with their own particular qualities of openness, empathy, insight and wisdom. In other words, lived experience honed through one's training, personal psychotherapy and therapeutic experience. These ways of working have developed into a stream of psychotherapy now known as intersubjectivity. Contemporary writers in this tradition include Lewis Aron, George Atwood, Jessica Benjamin, Robert Stolorow, and Daniel Stern. In family therapy these ideas have gathered force under the development of Carmel Flaskas and David Pocock, among others (Flaskas & Pocock, 2009).

### Deep subjectivity

However, to return to Heidegger, as well as enquiring into our subjectivity and laying the contemporary philosophical ground for an appreciation of our ever unfolding subjectivity, in some of his work Heidegger pointed toward the utter relevance of our dwelling, and of our pre-verbal interior space: a state of mind and body that I believe is captured in the term, deep subjectivity. Furthermore, I believe understanding deep subjectivity can enable us to enter into the intersubjective with greater depth and compassion. Utterly aware of the absence of the essential as

a graspable utilitarian concept, Heidegger conceptualised our dwelling as the human essence. To quote from Julian Young, “To dwell is to be at home...To dwell is for one’s place to show up as dwelling-place”. Young describes Heidegger’s grasp of the idea of dwelling within the ‘fourfold’: “To dwell is to belong within the fourfold of earth and sky, mortals and divinities” (Young, 2006). In writing this, Heidegger does not want to sacralise dwelling in any particular sense. In fact, he is wishing to point to the unfathomable mystery of existence, which comes forth in the mundane details of our lives. “To dwell is to be on the earth – spreading out in rock and water, rising up in plant and animal – and under the sky – the year’s seasons and their changes, the light and dusk of day, the gloom and glow of night, the clemency and inclemency of weather” (Young, 2006, p. 389). Heidegger’s grounding of dwelling in the particularity of life lived in a setting puts me in mind of John Clare’s particularity, the fact that his pastoral poems emerge out of lived observation and that his depression was likely to have been propelled to some great degree by his alienation from the landscape that nurtured his talent. Furthermore, that any grief has its particularity and that when we are homesick, it is then that we feel the particularity of our dwelling and its absence. This being so, to what extent do we attend to these dimensions of deep subjectivity in therapy? Can awareness of deep subjectivity be helpful to the therapeutic process? Is deep subjectivity merely the province of the rural, of pastoral landscape that we may idealise, but which is a far cry from the experience of many of the individuals and families we see?

Heidegger has been criticised for, “his anti-urban, radical pastoralism”, (Young, 2006, p. 389 ; see also Sheehan, 2006) but deep subjectivity actually has no limitations. It emerges as soon after conception when the growing child has the neural capacity for felt experience. It is the beat of the mother’s heart in the womb, the sound of rushing blood in the mother’s body. It is the sound that rain makes only in our backyard. It is the hum, and roar and hubbub of traffic on the roads about us. It is the sound of the streets in our neighbourhood. It is in layer upon layer of experience that identifies us within home it has both unconscious and conscious elements. The facility of John Clare and of other poets, writers, film makers and artists is to take the texture of our experience and to represent it back to us in a tangible form.

So, if they are to be any more than whimsy, how are we to make use of these insights into deep subjectivity? First, whatever institutional setting in which we work we can orient ourselves to encounters with clients through just sitting in our consulting room; quietly on our own, tuning into the sounds within ourselves and the sounds around us, settling into the deep subjectivity of our setting, and thereby having the potential to respond to the inrush of emotions which families bring into the room, when we are at work. Secondly, we can contemplate the songlines that have crossed the landscapes of our lives on our journey to this place where we work today, so as to be better poised to connect to the family’s journey to us, and with us. Thirdly, in work with couples we can wonder what are their different and shared deep subjectivities; what connects them and repels them; can they tune in to the deep subjectivities within themselves and each other? Fourthly, in work with re-constituted families, foster families and adoptive families, we can wonder about the differing deep subjectivities each part of the family carries; do they each have permission to be heard and to emerge; can we validate



their resonances, and mourn their losses and changes? Fourthly, by attuning ourselves to our own and our client family’s deep subjectivities we are in a better position to offer a place of security in our therapeutic work: a secure base is not merely relational and intersubjective, it also composed of layers of deep subjectivity.

Deep subjectivity is the ground of our emotions, almost beneath the conscious threshold, it is the echo of the feelings conjured up in us from our earliest journeyings into life. When we are still, we become aware of its presence and its power to help us find our place in the world. To carry on in life in any sort of way requires that we move away from the immediately familiar, hence the need to mourn. Fruitful mourning requires that we can bear to hold in ourselves the sounds, and feelings and fleeting images of what has passed before: tuning into the deeply subjective is part of that process.

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