

ROMANTIC SCARCITY

In December 1799, Dorothy Wordsworth (1771–1855) and William Wordsworth (1770–1850) moved into a modest house in the village of Grasmere at the heart of the English Lake District. Their move coincided with the first great age of tourism in the region. Well-to-do British travelers came in flocks to enjoy the dramatic scenery of the mountains and lakes. The Wordsworths shared this aesthetic impulse, but turned it toward lofty new goals. Dorothy and William had been born in the nearby market town of Cockermouth. They were the children of John Wordsworth, solicitor to the grandee James Lowther, first Earl of Lonsdale. Not quite locals but also certainly not tourists, the Wordsworths embraced the rural life in Grasmere as a source of inner renewal and spiritual transformation. By immersing themselves in the social life and natural world of this small place, they hoped to achieve a profound connection with the earth itself.

Their time in the village was lovingly recorded in Dorothy's journals. Weaving together high and low, she wrote of friendship and toothaches, gardening and insomnia, the work of the villagers and the cycles of the seasons. For Dorothy, journal keeping, no less than romantic poetry, made possible a new way of being in the world. Out of the daily routine of

household chores, nature walks, and conversations with neighbors and friends, she fashioned a life devoted to material simplicity and poetic experience. Consider, for example, the entry for June 20, 1802. After spending their late Sunday morning in the orchard, the siblings followed a favorite path out of the village while discussing household finances. Soon economic concerns were set aside. “We lay down upon the sloping turf. Earth & sky were so lovely that they melted our very hearts. The sky to the north was of a chastened yet rich yellow fading into pale blue & streaked & scattered over with steady islands of purple melting away into shades of pink.”¹ For Dorothy, such encounters with the natural world had a restorative effect on the spirit, charging everyday life with poetic beauty and intense joy. Nature had the power to reorient the desires, away from the consumption of material goods and the striving for social distinction. Nature was not merely a source of resources to extract but a home, shared with many other species of animals and plants, to respect and cherish. By training the senses and the mind on the physical world, the observer could transcend the ordinary self, treading a path first opened by ancient mystics and philosophers. Dorothy wrote of the moment on the hillside: “It made my heart feel almost like a vision.”²

On full display in Dorothy’s journal and William’s poetry is a romantic understanding of the relation between nature and economy. Not by accident, Dorothy wrote again and again in her journal of the comfort of circumscribed spaces. The vale of Grasmere was a sheltered microcosm, protected from the outside world. William, too, expressed this sentiment in his poetry: “Embrace me then, ye Hills, and close me in.”³ Mountains had become objects of beauty to the educated public during the Enlightenment. Crucially, the Wordsworth siblings went beyond mere aesthetic appreciation to celebrate the people and economy of the uplands. The mountains and marginal soils of the Lake District bred a special kind of virtue. For William, the landscape molded the psychology and morals of the inhabitants. While David Hume saw moral sentiment emerging in the commercial hustle and bustle of the city, the Wordsworths found virtue in humanity’s engagement with nature. In the poem “Michael,” William Wordsworth depicted the self-reliance and perseverance of a local shepherd as traits implanted by the difficult environment: “The common air, the hills . . . impress’d so many incidents upon his mind, of hardship, skill, or courage, joy or fear.”⁴ Lakelanders grew accustomed to a life of

material simplicity and independence, far away from urban society and aristocratic fashion. Dorothy admired the self-sufficiency and small scale of village life. Even the pages of her journal were recycled, with the price of paper so dear.⁵

The Charms of the Countryside

This embrace of village life was part of a broader revolution in sensibility that swept Europe's middling sorts in the late eighteenth century. Instead of understanding scarcity as an incentive to improvement and commerce, a new generation of poets and philosophers believed that scarcity demanded material simplicity. Instead of validating desires and consumption as pathways to human happiness, they prioritized living within the limits of nature as the necessary foundation of virtue and true community. Although this Romantic notion of scarcity celebrated traditional notions of



James Baker Pyne, *Grasmere from Loughrigg*, 1859. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Wordsworth's romantic experiment in simple living had become an object of middle-class tourism. *Credit:* Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, The University of Chicago.

restraint and limits, it departed from the Neo-Aristotelian and Utopian ideals by jettisoning conventional Christian morality in favor of a novel spirituality of nature. Inspiration for this alternative conception of scarcity came in great part from the philosophical writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778).

Of all the eminent thinkers of the Enlightenment, Rousseau was possibly the most contrarian figure. A Genevan citizen by birth, from a modest background, Rousseau dazzled Europe with his learning even though he never received a formal education. He made contributions to political economy, political theory, and pedagogy while also penning two autobiographies. Like Adam Smith, he was enamored with natural history and promoted the botanical method of Carl Linnaeus. Though Rousseau lived in the public eye and became friendly with luminaries including Denis Diderot and David Hume, he remained deeply troubled by his own celebrity and longed all his life for solitude and an escape from commercial society.

In the 1750s, Rousseau shocked his Enlightenment contemporaries by mounting a frontal assault on the conventional understanding of civilization and progress. Life in the natural state, he argued in *The Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (1755), was the best possible condition for all people. The key to the good life was self-sufficiency: “So long as they applied themselves only to tasks a single individual could perform, and to arts that did not require the collaboration of several hands, they lived free, healthy, good and happy as far as they could by their Nature be.”⁶ In the absence of a division of labor and the institution of private property, contentment was within easy reach. Desires did not “exceed . . . Physical needs.” For Rousseau, the faculty of human understanding was inextricably bound up with the state of the passions and the imagination. Since natural man had no knowledge of the world or the future, he had no reason to yearn for new things: “His imagination depicts nothing to him.” The condition of humans in the natural state was insular and self-sufficient.⁷

Yet such harmony could not last. The drive for self-preservation among humans led them gradually toward a new state of being. Natural forces of different kinds—from small obstacles to wholesale disasters—provoked creativity and consciousness. By responding to external pressures of various kinds, natural men learned how to master nature, little

by little. This new sense of control in turn “aroused the first movement of pride.”⁸ Early people formed families, learned how to use tools and build huts, introducing the earliest “sort of property.”⁹ According to Rousseau, natural men acquired “several sorts of conveniences unknown to their Fathers.”¹⁰ Soon, these desires became habitual and “degenerated into true needs.”¹¹ From the proliferation of artificial needs followed discord and vanity. “Everyone began to look at everyone else and to wish to be looked at himself.”¹² In this way, the march of progress led further and further away from the original equality. Rousseau argued: “iron and wheat . . . civilized men, and ruined Mankind.”¹³ Not only did improvement increase inequality, it also obscured the true origin of freedom. Civilized men, like domesticated horses, had come to love the shackles of their captivity: “They call the most miserable servitude peace,” much like the barbarians who had given up their freedom in exchange for Roman baths and granaries.¹⁴

Rousseau staunchly opposed the notion, embraced by Hobbes, Barbon, and others, that the human mind was, first and foremost, governed by self-love. He argued that his fellow philosophers had made a cardinal mistake by failing to recognize that the selfishness of modern man was a product of particular social arrangements. When philosophers limited their inquiries to the social world wrought by private property, money, and commerce, they ended up with a blinkered view of human potential. To discover the actual tendencies of human nature, one had to strip it of all the trappings of modern life. This was the purpose of Rousseau’s conjectural history of the “savage” stage.¹⁵

Natural man, Rousseau insisted, was indeed defined by self-love, but of a kind very different from that assumed by earlier philosophers. The object of what he called *amour de soi* was “our preservation and our well-being.”¹⁶ *Amour de soi* was “contented when our true needs are satisfied.” Such needs were always limited in numbers and scope; they remained concrete and specific.¹⁷ Self-love as Rousseau defined it was accompanied by another natural sentiment; pity operated in every individual by moderating self-love and, as such, provided the foundation for all the social virtues. “Indeed,” Rousseau asked rhetorically, “what are generosity, Clemency, Humanity, if not Pity?” Even “benevolence and friendship” were grounded in pity.¹⁸ Together, *amour de soi* and pity produced harmonious relations between people and between humanity and nature. Once

humanity embarked on its ceaseless quest for ever more property, and it became important to people to display their riches, the “gentle voice” of *amour de soi* was drowned out by a different, louder, and more aggressive self-love which Rousseau termed *amour propre*.¹⁹ Not unlike Nicholas Barbon’s infinite “wants of the mind,” this was a pleasure that came from feeling superior to others. In Rousseau’s words, “the ardent desire to raise one’s relative fortune less out of genuine need than in order to place one-self above others, instills in all men a dark inclination to harm one another, a secret jealousy.” The result was “always the hidden desire to profit at another’s expense.”²⁰ The ability to feel pity and sympathize with other people had now been transformed into *identification*, the act of seeing one-self through the eyes of others.²¹

Modern man’s psychological disposition sparked a new condition of scarcity. Whereas for natural man “desires do not exceed his Physical needs,” people living in commercial societies were oppressed by a “multitude of new needs.”²² Their constant striving for more material riches made them lose touch with their inner self and corrupted their relationship to both nature and humanity. Rousseau summed up the alternatives: “What makes man essentially good is to have few needs and to compare himself little to others; what makes him essentially wicked is to have many needs and to depend very much on opinion.”²³ Once people fell under the spell of *amour propre*, they lost the capacity to see beyond or to check their “greedy, ambitious, and wicked” self-interest.²⁴ Instead, they internalized a desire for ever more consumption and embraced the fact that their lives would be defined by endless toil. They became like a trained horse, who “patiently suffers whip and spur,” while their former selves would have been more like the untamed steed, who “bristles its mane, stamps the ground with its hoof, and struggles impetuously at the very sight of the bit.”²⁵ This version of scarcity was not class-based, as it had been for Gerrard Winstanley, leader of the seventeenth-century Digger movement. In Rousseau’s world, all people were trapped in a vice that kept on tightening as human wants expanded.

Rousseau’s critique of civilization took the history of stages and progress so central to the Scottish Enlightenment and turned it upside-down: the greater the complexity and sophistication of social and economic development, the more humans sank into corruption and depravity. Still, even after the rise of the institution of property and the end of what

Rousseau called the savage state, he saw ways of avoiding moral failure. When Rousseau considered positive prescriptions for political reform, he tended to favor societies with a simple division of labor. If mankind was “made up exclusively of husbandmen, soldiers, hunters and shepherds,” it would be “infinitely more beautiful than” a society “made up of Cooks, Poets, Printers, Silversmiths, Painters, and Musicians.”²⁶ Nature had endowed people with the instincts “to feed, to perpetuate, and to defend” themselves.²⁷ Men could turn these simple instincts into virtues by guiding them with reason and managing them wisely. “The ancient Republics of Greece” had prohibited all occupations of a “quiet and sedentary” sort that corrupted the body and enervated the “vigor of the soul.”²⁸ In Greece, the state “where virtue was purest and lasted the longest” was Sparta, the nation without philosophers.²⁹

In modern times, remnants of such virtues still persisted in republican states and rural societies on the periphery of commercial civilization. Rousseau often praised the simple communities of the Swiss Alps, where he had spent his youth. The mountainous country near Neuchâtel was dotted by small farms, “each one of which constitutes the center of the lands which belong to it,” and their inhabitants enjoyed “both the tranquility of a retreat and the sweetness of Society.”³⁰ Every farmstead functioned as a self-contained unit: “each is everything for himself, no one is anything for another.” The peasants were free, lived in comfort, and, unlike their French counterparts, were not subject to excessive taxes or forced labor. Swiss people exhibited “an amazing combination of delicacy and simplicity” that Rousseau had “never since observed elsewhere.”³¹

For Rousseau, the self-sufficient habits and values of the Swiss served as an inspiration to imagine an alternative path of human flourishing—the condition we call Romantic Scarcity. In his sketches for the constitutions of Corsica (1764–1765) and Poland (1771–1772) he set out to explain how a nation might avoid the pitfalls of commercial society. In the Polish case, perhaps the greatest challenge to achieving this ideal was the sheer size of the country. For true patriotism and democracy to flourish, citizens must feel they are constantly in the public eye. “Almost all small States, republics and monarchies alike,” Rousseau noted, “prosper by the sole fact that they are small, since all the citizens in them know each other and watch each other, since the leaders can see by themselves the evil that is done, the good they have to do; and since their orders are executed under

their eyes.”³² A second critical factor was to limit the influence of money. By converting the army into a national militia along Swiss lines, the Polish government could avoid a huge financial expense. In this way, Rousseau hoped to resist not just the logic of capital accumulation but also the growth model embodied by military states funded by public debt and heavy taxes.

In the case of Corsica, Rousseau argued that geographic insularity and social simplicity would allow the country to follow the Swiss path. Mountains, islands, and a largely rural population helped insulate society from moral corruption. In the plan for a Corsican constitution, Rousseau resisted the use of money and long-distance trade. Taxes should be paid in kind and the size of administration kept to a minimum. Agricultural labor was the best occupation for the people, encouraging physical vigor and peace of mind. Whereas commercial polities like France and Britain inflamed the passions of their populations with objects of consumption that stirred up envy and competition, Rousseau’s constitution would channel the desires of Corsica’s citizens toward simple needs and relative equality in the austere spirit of Sparta or republican Rome. Farmers who cultivated the land were by nature more attached to the nation than cosmopolitan city-dwellers were. Since the demanding and diverse character of agricultural labor required “constant attention,” it prevented rural people from developing the vices associated with leisure. Farming work made them “patient” and “robust” in spirit.³³

Proper pedagogy provided another key to moral probity. Rousseau hoped to instill in Corsica’s children the right norms and habits. Here he followed closely the precept laid out in his treatise *Émile* (1762): “observe nature and follow the path it maps out for you.”³⁴ Rural people should be guided by the moral authority inscribed in the natural order. Agricultural work was the most “decent, the most useful, and consequently the most noble,” though the artisanal trades, such as ironworking and woodworking, were also respectable and salubrious.³⁵ Manual labor generally brought the workers “closest to the state of nature.”³⁶ Rousseau welcomed refinements in the arts or improvements in technology, not as a means to control the natural world in the sense of Bacon or Hartlib, but rather as a way to fulfill truly essential needs. Yet the defense of this constitution contained a fatal weakness: the internal harmony of Corsica required an agrarian economy too small and simple to protect the nation from any ex-

ternal aggression by richer neighbors. Rousseau never explained how his austere virtues could safeguard the independence of his new republic in an age of commercial warfare and imperial rivalries.³⁷

While Rousseau's political visions failed to bear fruit, his ideal of Romantic Scarcity was easier to embrace in private life. Rousseau himself made clear in his autobiography that the peace and tranquility of the simple life was not reserved for local farmers but could also be experienced by educated people. In 1765, Rousseau spent two months on the island of St. Pierre in Lake Bienné, near Bern. He described the pleasure of solitude in ecstatic terms. On the island, he felt entirely "self-sufficient, like God."³⁸ Such autonomy was accompanied by a profound change in his perception of time. During his stay on the island, Rousseau felt no need to "recall the past or encroach upon the future." Instead, his sense of the present ran on without a sense of duration, indefinitely.³⁹ This experience closely resembled Rousseau's idea of early human life. For prehistoric people, the experience of time was closely tied with sharply bounded desires: "His modest needs are so ready to hand . . . that he can have neither foresight nor curiosity. . . . His soul, which nothing stirs, yields itself to the sole sentiment of its present existence, with no idea of the future, however near it may be, and his projects, as limited as his views, hardly extend to the close of day."⁴⁰

The Simple Life

In the late Enlightenment, the dream of the simple life found a popular audience through works of fiction and poetry. Rousseau himself paved the way here with his novel *Julie, or the New Heloise* (1761). This was the story of the doomed romance between a young noblewoman and her middle-class tutor, told through a tempestuous exchange of letters. Although Julie acquiesced to an arranged marriage, the novel ended happily with husband, wife, and lover reunited in domestic harmony on Julie's estate in the Alps. Here they could follow the precepts of nature in a sheltered microcosm far from city life. Rousseau's book became wildly popular with eighteenth-century readers. Rustic manners and mountain scenery also added to the broad appeal of the narrative. Indeed, Rousseau defended the merits of his novel as a rare and singular work of literature that would induce virtue, as long as it was read at a great distance from Parisian high society. A generation later, Rousseau's student and friend Jacques-Henri

Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (1737–1814) reworked many of these themes in his bestselling 1788 novel, *Paul et Virginie*.⁴¹ The protagonists of the title were two shipwrecked children growing up in Arcadian innocence on the island of Mauritius. Where their predecessor Robinson Crusoe had used his island solitude to remake himself into an agent of bourgeois industry, Paul and Virginie embraced a self-sufficient household economy that kept them safe from the artificial and vicious desires of urban society. They knew nothing of the past or the future beyond the bounds of their mountain: “Solitude, so far from making them savages, had made them more thoroughly civilized. If the scandal of society gave them nothing to talk about, nature was at hand to fill them with delight.”⁴² *Paul et Virginie* enjoyed popular success into the nineteenth century, though curiously its readership shifted from adults to children over time. Dorothy and William Wordsworth were both avid readers of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. We can understand their move to Grasmere in December 1799 in part as an attempt to emulate the virtues and sentiments of *Paul et Virginie*. Here was a northern counterpart to the secluded island home in the novel. Dorothy and William were self-consciously embracing a simple, self-sufficient existence, purged of artificial desires, what Dorothy called “plain living but high thinking.”⁴³

The house at Grasmere had until recently served as a coaching inn, called The Dove and Olive Bough, on the main road between Ambleside and Keswick. There were four small rooms to each floor. Downstairs was a living room with dark wall panels, stone floors, and a cooking range. In the back was a buttery cooled by an underground streamlet. Upstairs, Dorothy papered the walls of the bedroom with newspapers to keep out the cold. The rooms were furnished comfortably but without ostentation. As a working household, it was also a simple operation. Dorothy had the help of a neighbor who did the cooking and washing. From the beginning, she and William saw their new home as a “cottage.” This word had acquired a new, special ring in the eighteenth century. Improvers encouraged the building of functional cottages to house tenants on estates. Architects were also beginning to design genteel cottages for the wealthy as fashionable spaces of retreat from the city.⁴⁴ Dorothy made the idea her own by associating it with sibling love and the charms of a modest home. After the death of their parents, she had lived apart from William among relatives in different places. In a letter to a friend written in 1793, she imagined

cottage life as a kind of earthly paradise: "I am alone; why are not you seated with me? And my dear William why is not he here also? . . . I have chosen a bank where I have room to spare for a resting place for each of you. I hear you point out a spot where, if we could erect a little cottage and call it *our own* we should be the happiest of human beings."⁴⁵ When Dorothy and William signed the lease for the house and renamed it "Dove Cottage," they were fulfilling Dorothy's dream of a safe haven and also beginning a self-conscious experiment in simple living, inspired by Rousseau and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre.

Life in Grasmere had a strongly communal dimension. Unlike Paul and Virginie, the Wordsworths had plenty of neighbors. Dorothy and William were both fascinated with the rugged character of local shepherds and farmers. William believed that the difficult terrain of the region expanded and elevated the mind by instilling virtues of endurance and self-sufficiency. Sheep farms were not idylls of pastoral repose but places of relentless and solitary labor. In the poem "Michael," Wordsworth told the story of an aging shepherd who sent his son away to pay off a debt to secure the patrimony of the farm. But he lost both farm and heir when the son fell in with bad company in the city. For Wordsworth, Michael's only error was that he loved the farm "even more than his own Blood."⁴⁶ This was not simply a matter of poetic sentiment to Wordsworth but a political observation of great significance. Wordsworth believed that the small farmers of the Lake District, known locally as "statesmen," presented a bulwark for British liberties against radicalism. Writing in a time of economic dearth and revolutionary turmoil, Wordsworth suggested that the independence and modest needs of his shepherd-farmers offered a moral example for poor people everywhere. This was the best remedy against servile dependence on "workhouses . . . and Soupshops."⁴⁷

Amour propre in Rousseau's sense held little sway in Wordsworth's social order. In the poem "Michael," the shepherd and his wife live a simple life of few wants. Their diet consists of "pottage and skimm'd milk . . . with oaten cakes and . . . plain homemade cheese."⁴⁸ Despite this meager existence, Michael and Isabel are entirely content. "We have enough," the shepherd tells his wife.⁴⁹ Among their few possessions is an old lamp—"an aged utensil"—which shines in the window of their cottage every night, a sign of simple constancy.⁵⁰ There was no place in Wordsworth's poem for Nicholas Barbon's restless version of human psychology—perpetual

longing spurred by the desire for absent objects. Michael's only regret is the loss of his son. The bonds of family and community form the true sources of satisfaction.⁵¹

A shadow of doubt has long lingered over Wordsworth's pronouncements about the Lakeland peasantry. Although his poetry has been immensely influential, its social vision remains contested. Skeptical observers see Wordsworth's notion of the statesman-farmer as the brainchild of a certain kind of conservative idealism. Such skepticism finds support in the social circumstances surrounding his work as a poet. For all of Wordsworth's sympathies with shepherds and farmers, he lived apart from them, a Cambridge-educated, middle-class man who found national fame and eventually became poet laureate of Great Britain. Though he was a passionate advocate of hill farming, he never fully grasped its meaning or nature. When the clergyman Hardwicke Rawnsley collected testimony about Wordsworth's life and reputation a generation after his death, he found that local people had few kind words for the poet. They remembered him as an aloof outsider and even disparaged his talents as a poet. To gain a better sense of the experience of rural life in the period, we might turn instead to Wordsworth's near contemporary, the Northamptonshire poet John Clare (1793–1864).⁵²

Neglected by critics and readers until the twentieth century, Clare is now recognized as a leading figure in romantic literature. In his lifetime, Clare struggled to find recognition. In contrast with Wordsworth's origins, his were unequivocally plebeian. His father, Parker Clare, was a farm laborer and the illegitimate son of a schoolteacher. Lacking connections and patronage, John Clare received a brief and uneven education in the local school. At the age of thirteen he came by a copy of James Thomson's poem "The Seasons" that inspired him to try his own hand at poetry. In 1819 a local bookseller put him in touch with a London publisher, opening the door to his brief literary success as a "peasant poet." But his later writings met with public indifference. In his forties, Clare succumbed to mental illness. The contrast between Clare and Wordsworth is sharp. After the lean years in Dove Cottage, Wordsworth was able to move to the far larger establishment of Rydal Mount. Profiting from his fame and connections, he secured a lucrative post as Distributor of Stamps for Westmoreland in 1812. By the time Wordsworth became poet laureate in the 1840s, Clare was locked up in Northampton General Lunatic Asylum, where he spent the final twenty-three years of his life.

Clare's poetry was shaped above all by the social experience of enclosure. An Act of Parliament enclosed his native parish of Helpstone in 1807, setting off the kind of hardship and dislocation that Winstanley had captured almost two hundred years earlier. The old landscape of open fields and commons was destroyed. Villagers could no longer claim customary use rights to gather firewood and graze livestock on common land. Clare's poetry describes in vivid detail the social and environmental devastation wrought by the new regime of property rights. In poems like "Helpstone," "The Mores," and "Remembrances," he bore testimony to the lost world of his childhood when the land was still held in common. This, Clare insisted, had been an age of "Peace and Plenty . . . known to all."⁵³ The landscape before enclosure was a patchwork of woodlands, heaths, greens, and other forms of "waste"—rich with resources accessible to the entire local community. In his poetry, Clare resurrected this landscape, reminding the reader of its complex geography and social meaning. If you could name all these things and places, you could also make a claim to possess the landscape. In "Remembrances," Clare hinted at the myriad ways in which the child learned about the uses of common land through play and work. "When jumping time away on old cross berry way / And eating awes like sugar plumbs ere they had lost the may." Like More and Winstanley before him, Clare was an eyewitness to the ravages of agrarian capitalism and the cruel logic of Enclosure Scarcity. But Clare's poetic sensibility also set him apart. He distilled from the experience of enclosure a romantic vision of community and the natural world quite different from that of More and Winstanley.⁵⁴

The disaster of enclosure had leveled Clare's childhood world and turned it into a "desert by the never weary plough."⁵⁵ A multifaceted landscape rich in material uses and social meaning had been denuded and simplified to make way for widespread improvement.

The bawks and Eddings are no more
 The pastures too are gone
 The greens the Meadows and the moors
 Are all cut up and done
 There's scarce a greensward spot remains
 And scarce a single tree
 All naked are thy plains
 And yet they're dear to thee.⁵⁶

In the poem “Helpstone,” Clare contrasted true and false abundance. The “Peace and Plenty” of the commons benefited the whole community whereas the “accursed Wealth” of enclosure was the property only of a “few.”⁵⁷ This judgment rested not just on the value of equality but also on an economy of sufficiency. For Clare, a cottage home represented stability, shelter and the comforts of the hearth. One of the few modest triumphs of his difficult life was the offer from Lord Milton in 1832 of a “most comfortable cottage” with “an acre of orchard and garden, inclusive of a common for two cows, with a meadow sufficient to produce fodder for the winter.”⁵⁸ Yet in Clare’s poetry, the economy of the household could not be separated from the commons. This was a plebeian version of Romantic Scarcity, defending the needs and livelihood of the common people. Over and over again in his writings, freedom and value emerged from the love of simple pleasures associated with communal life and the natural world. The social historian Jeanette Neeson confirms that common land conferred invisible earnings outside the market system. But she also observes that the abundance of the commons presupposed a particular conception of desire: “Commoners had little but they also wanted less.”⁵⁹

The act of enclosure produced physical hardship for peasant occupiers by destroying woodlands and pasture. Clare turned to the animal world to convey his sense of horror. Farmers and gamekeepers would string up moles and other vermin on their fences as a warning to all pests and other trespassers. Such policy brought to mind the systematic terror and destruction wrought by Napoleon’s reign on its conquered subjects.

Inclosure like a Buonaparte let not a thing remain
 It leveled every bush and tree and leveled every hill
 And hung the moles for traitors—though the brook is running
 still
 It runs a naked brook cold and chill.⁶⁰

We see here how deeply the social and the natural world grew intertwined in Clare’s mind. The defense of village communities went hand in hand with a keen appreciation of the rural landscape before enclosure. In this way, social criticism became a bridge toward an extended sense of community beyond the human realm. Moles were people, too.

Once Clare started to think this way about wild things, his poetry took an unexpected direction. In a series of astonishing poems about the birds of the local landscape, Clare began to imagine what the human community looked like from the *outside*. Snipes, sand martins, fern owls, thrushes, and nightingales all made their homes in the woods around Clare's native village. They, too, formed communities in distinct landscapes (the concept of the habitat came into use around this time). Their nests were miniature dwellings, built to offer comfort and security. But their lives were shaded by constant fear of outside threats—above all, human trespassers. Clare knew intimately the destruction wrought by hunters and collectors. He had grown up climbing trees and plundering nests for pleasure.

Such a bird's-eye view, looking down at people from the treetops, collapsed all distinctions of property and class, showing humans only as an undifferentiated and predatory mass. The same shift in perspective also revealed the intrinsic value of the natural world beyond economic use. In the woodlands, Clare found a sense of peace and refuge from the strains of village life and literary ambitions. Birds were free from "meddling toil" and "artificial toys" and "mercenary spirit."⁶¹ This joyful encounter with the wild went hand in hand with an ethos of restraint. Clare no longer plundered nests but was content to observe and record. His eyes opened to the value of natural obstacles to exploitation. Wetlands offered safety from nearby human population. "Boys thread the woods / To their remotest shades / But in these marshy flats these stagnant floods / Security pervades."⁶² Here was an ecological reason to resist enclosure, distinct from the defense of common use rights. A landscape that had not yet been drained and cultivated could serve as a sanctuary for wild things. More than a generation before the first move toward systematic conservation in Britain—the 1869 Act for the Preservation of Sea-Birds—Clare's defense of the traditional landscape nudged him toward a deep and radical sympathy with the diversity of nonhuman life forms.

The Stationary State

Clare was not alone in turning to the natural world for solace and pleasure. John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), for example, is someone now remembered principally as a philosopher and political economist, but he was also a

lifelong plant hunter and amateur botanist. The young Mill, driven to nervous breakdown by his father's harsh pedagogical regime, looked to the natural world for escape and distraction. One of his proudest achievements was the survey he made of the flora in his native Surrey—incidentally, also home to St George's Hill, where Winstanley and his Diggers protested the enclosures. Mill's private passion for plants also influenced his social and political vision. In later life, he became a defender of common access to landscapes of outstanding natural beauty. He founded the Common Preservations Society and the Land Tenure Reform Association. Like Clare, Mill came to see human activities as a threat to the natural world. When the Royal Horticultural Society introduced a prize contest for the best herbaria in Britain, Mill sounded the alarm in a letter to *The Gardener's Chronicle and Agricultural Gazette* that such a competition might trigger a scramble of amateur collectors, with devastating ecological consequences. "Already our rare plants are becoming scarcer every year," he warned. "You are, no doubt, aware how rapidly, for example, the rare Kentish Orchids are disappearing." The herbarium contest might encourage ignorant "dabblers" to uproot and destroy native flora across the country so that "the present year 1864 will be marked in our botanical annals as the date of the extinction of nearly all the rare species in our already so scanty flora."⁶³ Like Clare, Mill worried that human activities, even in the form of well-intentioned scientific efforts of inventory, was diminishing the diversity of wildlife. He compared the present threat to the native flora to the outright extermination campaigns carried out against predators in the past, which had brought the wolf, bear, and beaver to extinction in the nation. Together with Charles Darwin, Mill helped organize a petition to the Royal Horticultural Society to alter the rules of the contest. They emphasized that botanical extirpation was a direct consequence of agricultural improvement. Because of high land values and intensifying productivity, "many wild plants" had reached the point of being confined to a few or even to single localities, often of small extent."⁶⁴

Viewing Mill's work through a botanical lens, we gain a new perspective on one of the most puzzling and famous aspects of his work: his discussion of the stationary state in *The Principles of Political Economy* (1848). In this short chapter toward the end of the book, which was heavily influenced by his long-term partner, Harriet Taylor, Mill warned that the "richest and most prosperous countries would very soon attain the stationary state"

unless “improvements were made in the productive arts” and capital was poured into “the uncultivated or ill-cultivated regions of the earth.” Like the political economist Thomas Robert Malthus (to be discussed in Chapter 5), Mill feared that the speed and scale of modern growth was carrying the advanced economies toward a permanent ceiling beyond which they could not pass: “all progress in wealth is but a postponement of this . . . each step in advance is an approach to it.” The prospect of stagnation was no longer distant but “near enough to be fully in view . . . we are always on the verge of it.”⁶⁵ For Mill, this crisis also threatened the diversity and wilderness of the natural world, with “every rood of land brought into cultivation . . . all quadrupeds or birds which are not domesticated for man’s use exterminated as his rivals for food . . . and scarcely a place left where a wild shrub or flower could grow without being eradicated as a weed.” A crowded, domesticated world without wild spaces would harm the human mind irreparably, since “solitude, in the sense of being often alone, is essential to any depth of meditation or of character.” Embracing a position that anticipated the conservationists of the late nineteenth century, such as John Muir, Mill observed that “solitude in the presence of natural beauty and grandeur, is the cradle of thoughts and aspirations, which are not only good for the individual, but which society could ill do without.”⁶⁶

Yet, the moral lesson of this forecast also made possible an alternative ending to the history of capitalism. In Mill’s version of Romantic Scarcity, humanity could embrace the possibility of the stationary state “long before” the physical limits on growth became pressing and severe.⁶⁷ Such a choice would permit people to transcend the brutality and ugliness of industrial society. “I am not charmed,” Mill noted wryly, “with the ideal of life held out by those who think that the normal state of human beings is that of struggling to get on; that the trampling, crushing, elbowing, and treading on each other’s heels, which form the existing type of social life, are the most desirable lot of human kind.”⁶⁸ In reality, the industrial age was merely a passing phase—a necessary stage in civilization, to be sure, but not the crowning glory of human society. This stationary society would be free to redirect its fundamental creative urges in new directions: “There would be as much scope as ever for all kinds of mental culture, and moral and social progress; as much room for improving the Art of Living, and much more likelihood of its being improved, when minds ceased to be

engrossed by the art of getting on.”⁶⁹ Throughout the chapter, Mill characterized the problem as a universal choice of the “species” rather than the path of a single class or a nation. He also framed the value of the stationary state in terms of stewardship and the preservation of wildlife: “It is not good for man to be kept perforce at all times in the presence of his species.”⁷⁰

Even though Mill’s book *Principles of Political Economy* represents a great synthesis of nineteenth-century economic thought, it is actually a curiously uneven reflection of British industrial society. There is little detailed commentary in it on the factory system and the industrial slums. When Mill launched the term “industrial revolution,” he used it to describe the intensification of industriousness in early commercial societies rather than the coming of the factory age.⁷¹ A large portion of the first part of the book was occupied with a comparative history of land tenure. Though Mill did not support radical land reform, he saw moral value in ownership of small farms. A claim to land instilled virtues of “prudence, temperance and self-control” in the peasant class.⁷² Here, he echoed Harriet Martineau’s ideas of self-improvement and foresight (we will discuss Martineau’s views in Chapter 5). But just as important was Mill’s devotion to William Wordsworth’s poetry and his pilgrimage to the Lake District in 1831. He praised the Lakeland hill farmers as a vestige of the “yeomanry” of the Middle Ages.⁷³ In this and other ways, Mill tempered his analysis of political economy with an idea of Romantic Scarcity that illuminated the potential for moral virtue among the rural poor.

For some Victorians, Mill’s “Art of Living” was not a distant prospect but a matter of urgent action. In 1872, the political economist and artist John Ruskin (1819–1900) moved from London to the shores of Coniston Water in the English Lake District. He came to the north in search of refuge. The countryside offered a sanctuary from the consumerism and pollution of the Victorian city. At his house, Brantwood, overlooking Coniston Water and the Old Man—the great hill to the west of the village—Ruskin launched a utopian movement against mass consumption on behalf of the “workmen and laborers of Great Britain.” At the heart of the project was the revival of handicraft industry in the Lake District between 1880–1920.⁷⁴

For Ruskin and his allies, the aim of their movement was to anticipate a post-industrial future. In the twenty-ninth letter of his *Fors Clavigera* serial (1873), Ruskin urged his followers to look forward to a “sweet

spring-time” for “our children’s children . . . when their coals are burnt out, and they begin to understand that coals are not the source of all power Divine and human.”⁷⁵ Ruskin’s prediction echoed the forecast made by William Stanley Jevons in *The Coal Question* of 1865. Jevons had calculated then that British coal consumption would soon face increasing costs of extraction. Not too far into the future, Britain would lose its status as a great manufacturing nation and become a post-carbon society. Ruskin’s arts-and-crafts community in the Lake District sought to establish an alternative economy—no longer dependent on coal and steam—but founded on skilled work and communal bonds. This vision of artistic artisans engaged in joyous creative work looked to a highly idealized version of medieval history to imagine the end of industrial capitalism.⁷⁶

During the 1870s, Ruskin became increasingly concerned with the environmental degradation caused by industrial capitalism. From his windows at Brantwood, Ruskin charted unsettling and unprecedented phenomena in the skies above the Lakeland hills. The prevailing winds from the southwest brought smoke from the nearby manufactures on the coast. On his annual trips to the Alps, he bore witness to a warming trend in the mountains. As early as 1863, Ruskin had noticed that the glaciers near Mont Blanc appeared to be in retreat. Ten years later, he concluded that a third of the ice sheet in the Alpine glaciers had vanished in less than a generation. From these uncanny observations, Ruskin concluded that the climate was undergoing a sinister change, what he later called “The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century.” Already in the fifth *Fors Clavigera* letter in 1871, he warned about the planetary reach of atmospheric pollution: “You can vitiate the air by your manner of life, and of death, to any extent. You might easily vitiate it so as to bring such a pestilence on the globe as would end all of you.”⁷⁷ The ever expanding appetite of consumers threatened to make the entire world into a coal mine or factory. At mid-century, John Stuart Mill had seen the fundamental environmental problem as one of preserving rural haunts and wildlife from the encroachments of agriculture and suburban sprawl. But for Ruskin in 1871, the destructive power of industrial capitalism had coalesced into a new kind of threat. It was now a planetary force capable of polluting the atmosphere, even to the point of changing the earth’s climate. Little did he know what the future held in store.

Strangely, the remedy for the Storm Cloud lay in the realm of the mind. Men and women must be taught not to want useless things. Wise

consumption demanded an education of desire. “Three fourths of the demands existing in the world are romantic; founded on visions, idealisms, hopes and affections,” Ruskin suggested, “and the regulation of the purse is, in its essence, regulation of the imagination of the heart.”⁷⁸ The aim of the arts-and-crafts movement was to encourage consumers to reorient their desires away from conventional middle class goods toward art, history, and natural beauty. By refining the faculty of aesthetic judgment and the acquiring natural knowledge of the world, one would find new and better objects of desire. Ruskin also encouraged a deeper understanding of production processes. Wise consumption required a critical grasp of the labor conditions and the nature of supply chains: “In all buying, consider, first, what condition of existence you cause in the producers of what you buy; secondly, whether the sum you have paid is just to the producer, and in due portion, lodged in his hands.”⁷⁹ In the place of industrial capitalism, Ruskin promoted an artisanal ethic of work that went against the grain of conventional political economy. Workers should confine production only to those articles that were genuinely useful to the consumer. Instead of flooding the world with cheap and disposable commodities, the workman should concentrate on objects of durable design and artistic merit that truly served human need and welfare. The “intrinsic value” of an object lay in “the absolute power” it possessed to “support life.” Ruskin meant by this a mixture of biological necessity and aesthetic beauty: “A sheaf of wheat of given quality and weight has in it a measurable power of sustaining the substance of the body; a cubic foot of pure air, a fixed power of sustaining its warmth; and a cluster of flowers of given beauty, a fixed power of enlivening or animating the senses and heart.”⁸⁰ By this standard, most middle class objects of consumption fell short of genuine value.

Ruskin’s movement was at the same time a philosophical and practical experiment. Choices about what to consume at the level of the household also shaped the nation and the natural world. Through the education of desire, the Ruskinians sought to redefine the relationship between economy and nature. In practice, they tried to demonstrate that the good life depended on skilled work and artful simplicity rather than conventional status and wealth. This impulse animated a revival of handicraft as well as new currents in architecture, education, and landscape design. Central to the movement was a form of social preservationism, dedicated simultaneously to protecting the environment and the customs of the Lake

District. In this way, Ruskin and his followers hoped to foster a self-conscious culture of sufficiency, steering a middle course between abundance and deprivation.

Conclusion

Perhaps above all, what united the line of romantic thinkers from Ruskin back to Rousseau was a sense of the spiritual importance of nature to human welfare. Their main contribution was to imagine ways of dwelling in the world that limited human use and made room for the flourishing of other species. Rejecting the engineering ambition of seventeenth-century Cornucopian ideology as well as the industrialism of the nineteenth century, romantic thinkers refused to see the world merely as a resource, a standing reserve available for human exploitation. Clare's bird poems took stock of humanity from an external point of view. Mill wanted to make room for the nonhuman in the world by limiting economic growth. Ruskin presciently understood the planetary threat posed by industrialization, anticipating twentieth-century concerns about the overloading of the atmosphere with pollution. At the same time, romantic thinkers spurned the restless play of consumer desire. To be at home on earth was to limit human wants and economic growth, choosing a simple and slow life open to the natural world. Romantic Scarcity thus weaves together a philosophy and an aesthetic of the organic interplay between human and nonhuman lifeforms.

In political terms, romanticism has left an ambiguous legacy. One current of the movement tended toward illiberal nationalism. The fascination with peasant life and self-sufficiency produced disturbing xenophobic and racist echoes in twentieth-century fascist ideology. To take one example (discussed further in Chapter 8), Martin Heidegger's existentialist philosophy of dwelling was tainted by his dalliance with National Socialism. It would be a serious mistake, however, to equate romanticism exclusively with antidemocratic forms of ideology. As we have seen, one of the roots of romantic thought began with Rousseau's republican projects. A similar radical and democratic current surfaced in Clare's defense of common use rights and Mill's post-materialist stationary state. New versions of subaltern and radical romanticism have flourished in different corners of modern environmentalism, including the movement for climate justice and degrowth within Planetary Boundaries.