In a letter to one of his publishers, James Hessey, in April 1820, John Clare says, ‘I write to you & Taylor as I shoud do to a Country friend I tell you my most simple opinion of things that strike me in my own rude way as I shoud have done 3 or 4 years back’; a little later in the same letter, he continues: ‘some folks tell me my letters will creep into print & that it is a serious benefit for me to try to polish I only tell them I must then make an apollagy to creep after them as a preface & all will go right – what a polishd letter this woud be if it was printed !!!’ ¹ The three exclamation marks suggest something of the lightness of touch of the whole letter, and of Clare’s attitude to the whole business of creeping into print and becoming polished. Eight years later, in a brief note to another writer and editor, Allan Cunningham, he describes himself as a ‘plain unpolished fellow’.² There is a direct relation between his view of himself and his writings; the very idea of his being dressed up for public consumption is one that amuses him.

Clare is less amused when he sees the extent of the polishing to which William Hilton goes in his famous portrait:

tell him bluntly he has forcd poor J.C. from his flail & spade to strut on canvass in the town of lunon & I will take him from his ‘water nymphs’ to lye on the hobs of our dirty cottages to be read by every greazy thumbd wench & chubby clown in spite of his ‘RAs’ &c &c so tell the gentleman his doom.³

It is partly a matter of the simple truth: for Clare, as Thomas Pringle the Scots poet was glad to discover, a spade should always be a spade. But it is also a matter of how the ‘plain unpolished fellow’ should be presented to the public.
Much has been said and written about the implications, both for Clare and his audience, of marketing him as the ‘Northamptonshire Peasant Poet’: ‘creeping into print’ presents more problems for Clare than for perhaps any other poet, certainly in this period, and this in turn presents problems for us, his readers. Just as, in his letters, he is engaged in a private dialogue with a friend, so in his poems he is often writing for himself, without any particular audience in mind. This is especially true of his early poems and of his asylum poems.

Given the circumstances of his life, it should be no surprise that Clare continually faces the question of his status in the literary world. When he looks back on his life from the perspective of the Northampton asylum where he spends the last 23 years of his life, he calls one of his slight and simple poems, ‘The Peasant Poet.’

He loved the brook’s soft sound
The swallows swimming by
He loved the daisy covered ground
The cloud bedappled sky
To him the dismal storm appeared
The very voice of God
And when the Evening rock was reared
Stood Moses with his rod
And everything his eyes surveyed
The insects I’ the brake
Where Creatures God almighty made
He loved them for his sake
A silent man in lifes affairs
A thinker from a Boy
A Peasant in his daily cares –
The Poet in his joy.

Whilst much of his life is in fact a struggle against that label and its implications, Clare can be proud to be the ‘peasant’, if this can mean a genuine acknowledgement of where he belongs, of his roots not only in a particular place with its particular way of life, but also in a tradition that exists apart from the literary one against which, as he knows only too well, he will be judged. It is the difficulties of this complex relationship, of an existence that is so evidently self-contradictory, that concern this chapter; irrespective of any claim we want to make for him, his life as a writer, far from being tangential to that of the major figures of his day, can be seen as a reflection of theirs. This could