If Bewick’s woodcuts visually represented the details of English nature with unprecedented care and focus, then John Clare achieved something very similar in his poetry. As a result, he has for some years been seen as the archetypal ecological poet. Following John Barrell’s groundbreaking work on the importance of the place in his writings, critics have examined his remarkable attentiveness to his local environment. At the same time, our understanding of how he placed himself within literary culture and history has also developed. However, despite the complex writer who has emerged in the last few years, there is still a tendency to see him primarily as poet of the local. This chapter presents a different version of Clare: a figure who was always fascinated by dislocation and absence, and who was at times able to identify with a national community that transcended the merely local even while rooted in it. This is still an ecological approach to Clare in that he is concerned with what it means to be ‘at home’ (the Greek oikos), but finds the idea of ‘dwelling’ in his work to be more complex and troubled than has sometimes been acknowledged. It is not surprising that in theorising ‘dwelling’ ecocritics have made frequent use of the existentialism of Heidegger and the phenomenologists, but what if they were also to turn to the Sartre of Being and Nothingness (1943) and Existentialism and Humanism (1946)? These texts are palpably uninterested in place, instead asserting the individual’s self-generated capacity for continual renewal and self-creation. An ecocriticism that was less obsessed with place and an idealised ‘dwelling’ might be more comfortable with dislocation and absence – what Wordsworth called...
‘blank desertion’ – and more aware of the contingency of all human projects, including environmental ones. It might be less invested in the local and authentic, and less likely to collapse into primitivism. It might be less prone to sentimentalising the non-human. It might resemble in some respects the ‘ecology without nature’ mooted by Timothy Morton, who critiques the role of nature and place in ecological writing by examining how they operate as rhetorical constructs that impede ecological thought. As I discussed in the introduction, Morton finds place to be fluid and evanescent. He focuses especially on the limitations of *ecomimesis*: writing that claims directly to situate the self in the natural world, and thereby offers a fantasy of immediacy, but which is inevitably troubled by the deferral of meaning characteristic of all texts. To the extent that Sartrean existentialism makes a virtue of displacement and contingency, it may have quite a lot to offer contemporary ecocriticism.3

The significance of ‘local attachments’ has been seen as crucial to the development of Romantic poetics, and as a salutary reminder of the dangers of sacrificing a sense of place in the pursuit of modernisation.4 However, the dangers of unreflective localism are nowhere more apparent than in critical work on John Clare. It is temptingly easy to construct a narrative of his life and writing that moves straightforwardly from home to homelessness, from a strong sense of self to a disintegration of identity. The importance of place in his work is not in doubt – his capacity to find meaning in the smallest details of his environment – and nor should the deracination of rural communities by enclosure be downplayed. But when Clare writes about his experiences of childhood and youth in pre-enclosure Helpston, he often writes about alienation. To be a labouring-class poet in rural Northamptonshire, to read and write and to wander the fields without any apparent purpose or errand, was to be marked out as different; it was, in fact, to be out of place. For Clare, literature allowed an escape from a community that could be stifling or conformist: reading and writing as displacement.5 Perhaps writing that seems the most palpably locatable is potentially the most dislocated: after all, to write about a place is to separate it from the self by turning it into an object. Furthermore, as Roland Robertson suggests, a close attachment to the local, or even the very idea of the local, may be produced by an awareness of much larger spheres.6 Clare’s localism is always troubled, always displaced, always on the verge of