Sexuality, Agency and Intertextuality in the Later Poetry of John Clare

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Contents

Abstract

This thesis close-reads the later poetry of John Clare to explore issues of sexuality, intertextuality and artistic agency. Emergent from this exploration are consistent themes which centre upon the male speaker's interaction with and representation of the feminine. It considers poems in a formalistic manner, tracing rhyme, metre and structure from which emerge detailed considerations of Clare's reaction to and engagement with some of his contemporaries. The intertextual aspect of Clare's work is explored with the same formalist foregrounding of sound and image. A consistent belief, established in the Introduction, is that regardless of the site of writing, Clare maintains his artistic agency. Indeed, in the final chapter, I discuss *Don Juan A Poem* which explicitly discusses Clare's role as a masculine artist. This poem is discussed as a conclusion to the thesis because, although in many ways atypical of Clare, it is in this poem that the major themes of the thesis clearly surface and explicitly interact. The conclusion is really an endnote, but it draws the threads of representations of the feminine in Clare's later poetry together, and finally establishes the consistency and potency of his artistic agency.

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Abbreviations

By Himself	*John Clare: By Himself,* eds. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Ashington and Manchester: Mid NAG and Carcanet, 1996).
EP I, *EP* II	*The Early Poems of John Clare,* 1804-1822, Volume I and Volume II, eds. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).
JCSJ	*The John Clare Society Journal,* Numbers 1-17, 1982-1998 (Helpston: John Clare Society).
John Clare in Context	*John Clare in Context,* eds. Hugh Haughton, Adam Phillips and Geoffrey Summerfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
Letters	*The Letters of John Clare,* ed. Mark Storey, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).
LP I, *LP* II	*The Later Poems of John Clare,* 1837-1864, Volume I and Volume II, eds. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).
MC	*The Midsummer Cushion,* by John Clare, eds. R. K. R. Thornton and Anne Tibble (Ashington and Manchester: MidNAG and Carcanet, 1990).
MP I, *MP* II	*John Clare: Poems of the Middle Period,* 1822-1837, Volume I and Volume II, eds. Eric Robinson, David Powell and P. M. S. Dawson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).
MP III, *MP* IV	*John Clare: Poems of the Middle Period,* 1822-1837, Volume III and Volume IV, eds. Eric Robinson, David Powell and P. M. S. Dawson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
Natural History	*The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare,* ed. Margaret Grainger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).
Nor [then MS ref.]	Manuscript in The John Clare Collection in the Northampton Public Library.

Abbreviations Continued

Northborough Sonnets	*John Clare: Northborough Sonnets,* eds. Eric Robinson, David Powell and P. M. S. Dawson (Ashington and Manchester: MidNAG and Carcanet, 1995).
Northampton Catalogue	*Catalogue of the John Clare Collection in the Northampton Public Library,* David Powell (Northampton: County Borough of Northampton Public Libraries, Museums and Art Gallery Committee, 1964).
PD	*Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery,* (Bury St Edmonds, Lark, 1986. Reprint of the Fourth Edition, London: Taylor and Hessey, 1820).
Pet [then MS ref.]	Manuscript in the John Clare Collection in The Peterborough Museum and Art Gallery.
RM	*The Rural Muse,* ed. R. K. R. Thornton (Ashington and Manchester: MidNAG and Carcanet, 1982). Second edition of Clare's volume of 1835.

Introduction

This thesis concerns itself primarily with John Clare's later poetry, produced from 1837 until his death in 1864. June of 1837 saw Clare voluntarily committed - under the advice of John Taylor - to High Beech in Essex, a small institution run by Matthew Allen.[1] Although this thesis seeks to establish thematic links between the poetry of earlier periods and this later period, it seems logical to take 1837 as the starting date for the main group of poems to be studied. The main primary text is therefore *The Later Poems of John Clare.*[2]

There are problems associated with the later period which do not exist for any other period of Clare's poetic output. The poet's supposed madness (which resulted firstly in his moving to High Beech and then, in 1841, to Northampton General Lunatic Asylum) may undermine the idea of Clare's having artistic agency. However, recent studies have questioned the assumptions many psychoanalysing critics have made about Clare's mental health; indeed it seems likely that Clare was never actually insane.[3] The biographical information regarding this period of the poet's life is very scant indeed,[4] and this absence of information has led to a mythologising and speculative critical reconstruction of Clare's mind, which attempts to fill in the gaps.[5] His life is indeed fascinating, but 'biographism' - defined as follows by Graham Allen - has to some extent begun to limit the variety of approaches to Clare's later poetry.[6]

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[1] See *John Clare: His Life and Poetry,* J.W. and Anne Tibble (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1956), p. 162.
[2] *The Later Poems of John Clare,* 1837-1864, eds. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2 Vols., 1984).
[3] Cf. Roy Porter's assessment of Clare's doctors in "'All madness for writing': John Clare and the asylum" in *John Clare in Context,* p. 259 ff.. Other critics have grouped Clare into the sub-tradition of the 'mad poet' with varying results; see for example chapter 6 of George MacLennan's *Lucid Interval; Subjective Writing and Madness in History* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), p. 120 ff.; and Hester Parr and Chris Philo, "Mapping 'Mad' Identities" in S. Pile and N. Thrift (eds.), *Mapping the Subject: Geographies of Cultural Transformation* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 199-223; Evan Blackmore, 'John Clare's Psychiatric Disorder and its Influence on his Poetry', *Victorian Poetry,* 24:3 (1986), pp. 209-28.
[4] A good example of this is the lack of documentation in the archives at Northampton Asylum (now called St Andrews Hospital); there are very few medical notes referring to Clare, barely enough to cover one side of A4 paper in fact, which is incredible considering his stay was to last for twenty-three years.
[5] For example, the biographer June Wilson admits to the lack of documentation, and then immediately paints the portrait of Clare at Northampton which is now widely accepted:

> Biographism I understand as a belief in an ultimately transparent relation between life and text; an approach which depends upon a form of translation which converts figurative language into historical or psychological referents. From the figurative to the literal, biographism explains texts (and so authorizes interpretations) by stabilizing meaning through a translation process that is supposed to offer us literal, untranslatable, origins for the author's particular motives for metaphor.[7]

The reading of Clare's later poetry presented here is therefore one which regards the reconstruction of Clare's personality, psyche or intentions as highly problematic acts of biographism. As Jeanette Winterson's Sappho writes:

> I put the words into a flask and flung them out to sea. Flung them far out from me, made through myself, but not myself. Only a fool tries to reconstruct a bunch of grapes from a bottle of wine... There's no such thing as autobiography there's only art and lies.[8]

In focusing on text rather than author, and on the figurative rather than the literal (to borrow Allen's terms), or on the wine rather than the grapes (to borrow Winterson's), this study is liberated from the inherent problems in constructing a unified portrait of a poet through his or her poems, as if they were clear windows, offering differing representational perspectives upon his personality. Instead, the study attempts to resist the biographical tendency towards what Allen calls 'stabilizing meaning'. Of course there are consistent themes in Clare's poetry; but there are equally consistent and frequent contradictions. His poems are constructed works of art; they express differing and contrasting moods in various modes, forms and genres. In this study Clare's verse of the later period is granted the artistic agency which - as I will show - it is sometimes denied. Through close and formalistic readings the study tries to demonstrate

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> It is difficult to reconstruct in any detail the fluctuations in Clare's state of mind during the years at Northampton, but certain broad outlines emerge clearly. That there *were* fluctuations, as indeed there always had been, is evident; that there were days when he talked quite rationally, and others when he spoke rambling incoherent sentences, and at times he broke his usual habit of frequent writing and could not be induced to take any interest in poetry. June Wilson, *Green Shadows: The Life of John Clare* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1951), p. 250.

Some clarity about the sources of this impression of Clare will be available after the publication of the forthcoming *Reminiscences of Clare, The Northamptonshire Peasant Poet, By a Fellow Patient (William Jerom), and Other Asylum Memoirs,* eds. Bob Heyes and Greg Crossan (Peterborough: The John Clare Society, forthcoming).

[6] Lynne Pearce sums up:

> Considering his unique and tragic life, it is hardly surprising that the earliest interest in Clare was biographical. However, the extent to which these biographical factors (his peasant origins, his lack of literary success, his 'madness') have been used to interpret his work ever since has been severely limiting.

John Clare and Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogic Principle; Readings from John Clare's Manuscripts 1832-1845 (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1987), p. 4.

[7] Graham Allen, 'Beyond Biographism: Mary Shelley's *Matilda,* Intertextuality, and the Wandering Subject', *Romanticism,* 3.2, 1997, p. 170.

[8] *Art & Lies; A Piece for Three Voices and a Bawd,* (London: Vintage, 1995) pp. 56 & 69.

the ways in which the older Clare established a masterful and deliberate control of the structures of sound, rhythm and rhyme. Intertextual evidence also suggests that Clare maintained his habit of reading, or at least retained vivid memories of what he had read.[9] All four chapters of this thesis resist biographism in an overall attempt to consider how the masculinity of the speakers constructs and represents the feminine. It does not attempt to reconstruct Clare's relationships with real women. Rather, it attempts to reveal patterns and intertextual parallels between his own poems, and poems by others. Clare's poetic intertextuality, and his presentation of sexuality, support my claim for Clare's artistic agency in the later period, which is perhaps the major aim of this work.

The question arises whether it is a sufficient basis of a critical methodology merely to avoid reconstructing an idea of a literal Clare in concentrating on the figurative and the textual. Daniel P. Watkins asks questions of Keats's criticism and critics, which could equally be addressed to Clare's:

> Also troubling for historical investigation is the meaning of the word *Keats.* When we speak of Keats, do we mean a lower-middle-class Englishman, roughly five feet tall, who was a friend of Charles Cowden Clarke, trained at Guy's Hospital as an apothecary, wrote a small body of beautiful poems, and died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-five? Or do we mean, more abstractly, a cultural idea whose authority automatically assigns certain meanings and values to poetic texts when the name Keats is set in relation to those texts? Moreover, are the historical meanings of Keats's poetry determined absolutely by the name Keats? To what extent does Keats—as person or cultural idea—control the critical investigation of poems traditionally associated with his name, and to what extent ought (can) that investigation resist the constraints that the name of Keats might impose? [10]

When one considers the even greater idiosyncrasy of Clare's life, and of what he has become as a cultural and critical entity today, the critical problems become legion. It affects our critical interpretation of texts if for example we are continually reminded - as we are in *The Later Poems of John Clare* - that the poet was in an asylum when he wrote the verse. At the top of every recto page of the transcriptions of the Northampton manuscripts in that edition is the heading 'NORTHAMPTON ASYLUM, 1842-1864'. The 'cultural idea' of Clare is headed not

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[9] Among the many writers and works Clare alludes to or quotes from after 1837 are Robert Bloomfield, Robert Burns, Robert Burton, George Gordon Byron, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Cowper, Dante, Robert Herrick, John Keats, John Milton, William Shakespeare, Percy Bysshe Shelley and the artist Titian.

[10] Daniel P. Watkins, *Sexual Power in British Romantic Poetry* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996) p. 105.

by our reading of Clare, but by where he was, what he was and how he was - all of these things being implicit in the word 'asylum'. How does the authority of that capitalised and heavily pregnant word determine our reaction to the verse beneath it? In an effort to resist that word, and all of its associations, I would challenge the idea of Clare as a personality unifying the poems. This thesis is in effect a reaction to that heading, and seeks a way out of the determining fact of his institutionalisation; the lack of critical certainty about Clare's actual mental state to some degree supports such an approach. It may well be that in resisting notions of the poet's authority I am neglecting to acknowledge the autobiographical aspect of many of Clare's confessional poems, and that may be a flaw in my approach. But to counter that problem I highlight the potency of Clare's authorial *agency.* Authorial authority determines that our interpretation of the poetry has to be gleaned through the framing knowledge of details of the author's life. Authorial *agency,* on the other hand, complicates the idea of a unifying author, and grants the author the potency of creation, of mimicry, of deception, of deliberate contradiction and variation. For this thesis then, the poetry is regarded as intentional, deliberate and carefully-constructed art, not, as some of Clare's critics have implied, as 'unintentional'[11] or accidental.

Perhaps the most interesting recent exclusion of Clare from critical consideration as a Romantic poet as a result of his 'lack of agency' appears in a long footnote by William Galperin in his study of the visible in Romanticism; it is worth quoting at length.

> It is because of his lack of agency (for want of a better formulation) that I have excluded a 'visual' poet such as John Clare from this study. For although Clare is certainly unique among his romantic contemporaries in his almost exclusive preoccupation with visible particularity, the fact that this particularity is, as John Barrell has shown, firmly rooted in a

[11] Even the most enthusiastic advocates of Clare seem to use language which undermines the possibility of Clare's artistic agency: for example Jim McKusick's comment that Clare's 'first attempts at poetry... embody a not altogether intentional *heteroglossia,* mingling high and low diction and grotesquely mangling the conventions of standard poetic discourse...' Elsewhere, McKusick calls Clare's process of heteroglossia 'almost completely irresponsible.' ('Beyond the Visionary Company,' in *John Clare in Context,* pp. 228, 229, 230.) Surely there is something pejorative about these unfortunate phrases, which seem to emerge from McKusick's fore-grounding of Clare's education and class (p. 225 ff.). It is an unfortunate side-effect of being aware of these significant factors in Clare's life that they sometimes become dominant in critical readings of Clare's work, even in work which seeks to re-empower the potentialities of his verse and life. The impossible tensions between the words 'Peasant' and 'Poet' - carved deep on Clare's gravestone - remain a source of awkwardness and sometimes form a millstone for modern criticism (See Raymond and Merryn Williams' Introduction to *John Clare, Selected Poetry and Prose,* [London: Methuen, 1986] and John Goodridge's Introduction to *The Independent Spirit: John Clare and the Self-Taught Tradition,* ed. John Goodridge [Helpston: The John Clare Society and The Margaret Grainger Memorial Trust, 1994]).

> 'sense of place' puts substantial limits on its contestational function... Far from a visible returned, in other words, Clare's visible is something that really never leaves him – so much so, in fact, that by 'failing to pass beyond' the particular to some metaphysical 'knowledge,' Clare *succeeds* at what is arguably a counterromanticism, replete with its own authority and intentionality... Clare's writing is completely consumed by a sense of identity, which, untouched or uncontaminated by any other subject-position, is more hegemonic in orientation than it is anything else.[12]

There are a number of critical assumptions and contradictions here which voice many assumptions about Clare in Romantic criticism in general. The opening gambit that Clare exhibits 'a lack of agency' is substantiated by the supporting idea that his 'writing is completely consumed by a sense of identity'; one might perhaps conclude that Galperin means that Clare can *only* write of himself and his place - geographical, social, temporal - and with such 'obsessive preoccupation with visible particularity' that his poetry contains no 'metaphysical "knowledge"'. That particularity is perhaps the result of what Lynne Pearce has called Clare's 'obsessional eye' and Hugh Haughton Clare's 'following eye'.[13] But neither of these critics have gone on to suggest that the intense particularity of his artistic eye results in his work being philosophically flat; in fact their work has resulted in quite opposite conclusions. Galperin positively asserts that Clare's aesthetic is 'replete with its own authority and intentionality'. That 'intentionality' surely *has* to contradict 'a lack of agency'; if actuated then artistic intention logically leads to deliberate artistic action, or agency. The idea that Clare cannot write anything but *himself,* surely suggests that he cannot achieve fiction or pretence. The creative purity or honesty that Galperin seems to be implying as a major characteristic of Clare's work is as much a simplifying fiction as the idea that Clare's work is 'untouched or uncontaminated by any other subject-position.' As Lynne Pearce has extensively and authoritatively shown,[14] Clare is quite capable of creating many identities and subject-

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[12] William H. Galperin, *The Return of the Visible in British Romanticism* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), footnote 12 to p. 25, p. 287.

[13] Lynne Pearce, 'John Clare's *Child Harold:* The Road Not Taken', *Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice,* ed. Susan Sellers (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) p. 147. Hugh Haughton quotes from Clare's 'The Mores' in 'Progress and Rhyme: "The Nightingale's Nest" and Romantic Poetry' in *John Clare in Context,* p. 66.

[14] See especially Pearce's *John Clare and Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogic Principle; Readings from John Clare's Manuscripts 1832-1845,* (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1987). The multi-identitied polyphony Pearce examines in the *Child Harold* manuscripts is neatly summed up by the following passage, in which Pearce is discussing Nor MS 8:

> The overall impression is chaotic; the reader is exposed to the full carnivalesque force of a manuscript whose contents clash generically, thematically, stylistically and even (on an iconographic level) in the hand in which

positions speaking within a text. Chapter four of this thesis will reaffirm just how complicated Clare's written and consciously-constructed identities can be. Many of the later poems are not situated, located or referent to a particular locale - the limits (if that is what they ever are) of a 'sense of place' are just not evident. Nor do the later poems support the idea of a poet 'consumed by a sense of identity.' In fact - as I shall show - many poems explicitly consider the problematic of identity and the identifiable.[15] To exclude Clare from Romanticism seems to me to be too convenient for Romantic scholars. If his 'unique' position is so idiosyncratic, to read his work intertextually might threaten the ideological domain of the central Romantics and their critics. Certainly Clare is different; but so too is Byron different from Wordsworth, even to the point of explicit mutual condemnation. If Clare establishes a 'counterromanticism' it might well be worth serious critical attention, but Galperin denies him this attention. The present thesis does not attempt to establish Clare's work as evidence of a counter-movement, but in closely considering intertextual relationships between his work and, for example, Byron's and Shelley's, I hope that my reading will begin a consideration of just how 'Romantic' Clare might be. Simultaneously the thesis highlights aspects of his later work which can serve to contradict any facile ideas about Clare's 'position' as a Romantic. As 'Romanticism' was neither a club nor a movement, nor even a centrally-identifiable group of writers (even if it is now) Clare could neither exist within nor without it. Galperin's positivist suggestion that Clare was a 'counterromantic' serves merely to plaster over the injurious critical judgement inherent in denying Clare agency. To conclude this discussion of Galperin's dismissal, Hugh Haughton offers a positive counter:

> If he has not inspired a sophisticated criticism this is because he has not been perceived as a sophisticated poet – and this is largely true for those who admire his poetry as for those who marginalise it or patronise it... My argument is that this is a fateful misperception, and that Clare is an intimately sophisticated and self-conscious writer, not only aware of his place in the world... but of his place in poetry – the poetry of his time.[16]

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they are written... relationships are formed only to be usurped by other relationships; it is a dialogue in which the participants are for ever changing partners, ever forming new connections, ever creating new tensions and differences (pp. 135 and 136).

[15] Obvious examples I consider in this thesis are 'I Am', 'An Invite to Eternity' and 'Don Juan A Poem'.

[16] 'Progress and Rhyme: "The Nightingale's Nest" and Romantic Poetry' by Hugh Haughton in *John Clare in Context,* p. 52.

After a flurry of psychoanalytical interest in the mind of Clare in the 1960's, the important reclamation of Clare's work - instigated perhaps by John Barrell's seminal work of 1972[17] - has concentrated for the most part on verse written prior to 1837. There are clear reasons for this. Clare's later verse is not overtly contextual. Earlier work refers frequently to issues such as enclosure, to the details of Clare's geographical location in Helpston, to identifiable people, to historical events, and to the political and social movements of the early nineteenth century. His later verse seems, in the first instance, to be dislocated; he writes of Scotland, of Ireland, of a Byronic Greece and of Biblical scenes. His poetic speakers may accordingly have a Byronic, a Burnsian or an Irish accent. For the reader who seeks to find a cohesive unifying voice - an authorial god[18] who exists somewhere within the verse - the later poetry can be frustrating.[19] But if the later poetry is regarded as the product of Clare liberating himself from the confines of Helpston and Northborough - indeed, in a literary sense, liberating himself from the asylums - the work of this period is as complicated and as worthy of detailed study as that of any other.

In some respects Clare's poetry resists theoretical conclusions, perhaps because his poetry revels in the unfinished, and in the continual. Significantly, Tom Paulin writes that:

> ... extraordinary sensitivity to sound is one expression of Clare's fundamental aesthetic because his poetics is essentially a poetics of process. What he delights in are not finished

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[17] John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840: an approach to the poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge University Press, 1972). For a clear indication of the pattern of the development of Clare criticism see the bibliographies of H. O. Dendurent, *John Clare, a Reference Guide* (London and Boston: George Prior Publishers and G. K. Hall, 1985) and Barabara H. Estermann, *John Clare: an Annotated Primary and Secondary Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1985). All publications from 1970-1998 are listed in John Goodridge's web-based *Critical Bibliography* at http://human.ntu.ac.uk/clare/clare.html.

[18] The term I use here originates most notably in Roland Barthes' work:

> We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture... To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.
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> 'The Death of the Author', *Image, Music, Text,* trans. and ed. S. Heath, quoted in *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader,* ed. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (London: Edward Arnold, Second Edition, 1992), p. 116-117.

[19] In their introduction to *The Later Poems of John Clare,* Eric Robinson and David Powell almost apologise for presenting all of the poems available to them: 'Some may argue that it would have been better for a proportion of Clare's poetry to have been left in decent obscurity, but if Homer can be allowed to nod Clare can surely be allowed to cat-nap' (*LP* I, p. xiv). Carolyn Kizer introduces her edition of Clare's verse with the comment 'Clare's late poems in Scots dialect are largely worthless' (*The Essential Clare* [New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1992], p. 20.).

> and complete patterns or shapes, but those patterns as they shape themselves, as they exist in process, in the music of their happening or becoming... [20]

Paulin has touched on something here which is vital not just to poetry of the natural world, but which is also central to the unresolved and conflicting relationships Clare's male speakers have with women. Even in a love poem which seems to consider a past love, the speaker's memories of a woman can be painful and in the present of the poem: the relationship may well be said to be over, doomed, or dead, but the pain the speaker expresses is often reprocessed, nurtured, studied and cyclically returned to. Sometimes the poems themselves reflect in their structures - of rhyme or of meaning - this cyclical pattern. In poems as diverse as 'First Love' and 'Don Juan A Poem', similar circular or chiasmic patterns - such as the last stanza referring in some way to the first - can be traced.

This is not to say that Clare as a poet doesn't like conclusions. Some poems are clearly end-stopped and closed with a final clarifying idea. But, as I hope this study reveals, his conclusions regarding the feminine often form awkward admissions of unresolved problems; a conclusion is not necessarily a solution, nor does it signify the end of a process of contemplation. The form of his poems often counteracts finality. Perhaps the clearest example of his non-adherence to the limitations of form can be found in the procession of sonnets written between 1832 and 1837.[21] Seamus Heaney coined the term 'supplets'[22] to describe the form of many of the 14-line pentameter poems which rhyme in couplets. But in addition to the couplet-rhymed sonnet in the *Northborough Sonnets* edition there are a vast number of varying rhyme-schemes which suggest, if nothing else, that Clare's fascination with the craft and traditions of poetry continued in all its wild variety up to 1837. The sonnets spill over into each other, as vignettes which work individually and as sequential stanzas. They consider so many different aspects of rural life - both human, plant, insect and animal - and conclude only to start again with another 14-line or 12-line, pentameter or tetrameter continuation, that it is hard to believe that, as the editors suggest 'Clare was working towards a whole' (p. vii).

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[20] Tom Paulin, 'A Bicentenary Celebration', in *John Clare: A Bicentenary Celebration,* ed. Richard Foulkes (Leicester: University of Leicester, Department of Adult Education, 1994), p. 75.
[21] See *Northborough Sonnets,* ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell and P. M. S. Dawson (Ashington and Manchester: MidNAG/Carcanet, 1995).
[22] Seamus Heaney, 'John Clare —a bi-centenary lecture' in *John Clare in Context,* p. 137.

Perhaps Clare was trying to find - in Keats' words - 'Sandals more interwoven and complete / To fit the naked foot of Poesy'.[23] The following four chapters will I hope support my hypothesis that Clare's fascination with form, with literary history and with things - as Paulin writes - 'as they exist in process', continued long after moving away from Northborough and his family.

The larger question Galperin raises is whether Clare is a Romantic poet or not. Perhaps this question is redundant when so much recent critical work has undermined the assumptions determining what a Romantic writer is. Equally still under great scrutiny are the ideological assumptions determining what a Romantic critic is. If Clare is not a Romantic poet, he is at least the product of what has become known as the Romantic period. Jonathan Bate recently asserted that Clare 'is properly regarded as one of the major English Romantics',[24] suggesting perhaps that Clare is already a canonical Romantic poet. As a writer whose reading of past and contemporary English verse was comparably as wide as, if not wider than,[25] most of his contemporaries, it is clear that reading his poetry with the literary products of the Romantic period as meaningful contexts is a valid methodology.

There is however a recalcitrance and reluctance in some noted Clare scholars and - as Galperin exemplifies - among some Romantic scholars, to associate Clare with poets known as 'Romantics'. Other contexts vie for Clare scholarship, and it seems that historicising contexts such as the folk tradition, the 'self-taught' tradition, a working-class tradition, a pastoral tradition and an eighteenth-century tradition are resistant to sharing space with the leading figures of the literary period in which Clare was actually writing. Greg Crossan offers

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[23] Lines 5-6 of Keats' sonnet 'If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd', in which Keats suggests that the existing traditions (in 1819) of rhyme and metrical structures available to the English poet were too 'constrain'd' (line 4, *Complete Poems,* ed. Jack Stillinger (Massachusetts: Belknap Harvard, 1982, p. 278). Perhaps Clare felt the same. In 1822, some ten years before he began the sonnets of the Northborough period, Clare wrote a frustrated and rather bitter letter to his (and Keats') publisher John Taylor, in which he says 'I have written no sonnets latly I am sick of the short winded pe[e]vishness that hovers round this 14 line article in poetry' (To John Taylor, Thursday, 21 February 1822, *Letters,* p. 231).

[24] In his Keynote Address 'Prologue to a New Life' at the Nottingham Trent University's July 1998 conference on Clare 'New Approaches and New Voices'.

[25] At the same conference, in a paper entitled 'The Hind and the Man of Taste: Clare's *The Midsummer Cushion',* Richard Cronin suggested that 'Byron and Shelley had access to classical literature and to the literature of a number of modern European languages, but I do not think that either had the wide and deep familiarity with English poetry from the sixteenth century to his own time that Clare could claim'. For Cronin, Clare is 'an unusually well-read man'.

an example of such reluctance after quoting Anne Tibble associating Clare with Blake and Keats:

> Such comparisons don't seem to me to be very helpful; in fact they do Clare a disservice by making him compete with poets with whom he has little in common. His reputation is doing well enough without that kind of fanfare, I think... I notice Eric Robinson avowing in the *New Statesman* recently: 'I would not have devoted 30 years of my life to Clare if I didn't think he was a major writer, in the same rank as Keats or Byron.' As I see it, this business of ranking writers is very much a matter of personal taste and probably isn't very useful, but I think it's safe to say that Clare has stood the proverbial test of time.[26]

It is interesting that Eric Robinson, in seeking to establish Clare as a major writer, should ally the poet with figures of a Romantic period Robinson himself has prescriptively denied the significance of: '[n]o one sensitive to Clare's style could see him as a Wordsworthian. No one can claim that he wrote his poems to suit the fashionable taste of his period.'[27] Perhaps as a result of their laudable devotion to Clare, both Robinson and Crossan miss a crucial point: literary contexts do not necessarily undermine artistic agency. Clare can still be regarded, if need be (to quote Robinson again) as 'one who is his own man in literature and life' (ibid.), even if there is strong evidence of his allusion to the ideas of other writers. Lynne Pearce writes:

> ...it was the folly of much early Clare criticism to suppose that because he lived outside recognised cultural circles his inspiration was somehow 'non-literary': almost the exact opposite is the case. Clare's work, from beginning to end, carries more visible traces of his literary forebears and contemporaries than many other writers... The belief in a quintessential 'John Clare', the authentic voice of rural labour, is somewhat misplaced.[28]

Bob Heyes seems to reaffirm Pearce's suggestion that Clare is a highly 'literary' poet, while problematising 'authorial intention':

> ...with Clare... we find that if we examine in detail the actual circumstances of composition and publication, the situation is much more complicated... any simple ideas of authorial intention fall down when confronted by the actual complexity of the process of writing... All texts have a social history attached to them, and are an expression, not simply of an

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[26] 'John Clare: Our Contemporary', p. 58, *John Clare: a Bicentenary Celebration* , ed. Richard Foulkes (Leicester: University of Leicester, Department of Adult Education, 1994). For my assessment of this essay see the review of the collection in the *John Clare Society Journal,* No. 15, July 1996, pp. 86-88.
[27] *MP* I, p. xxii.
[28] 'John Clare's Child Harold: The Road Not Taken' , p. 146 of *Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice,* ed. Susan Sellers (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).

> individual consciousness, but owe something to the wider milieu in which the writer moved, and are an expression of communal rather than purely personal values.[29]

While this might indeed be applicable to earlier well-documented parts of Clare's life, there are perhaps more problems with the historicising approach Heyes extols when applied to the later poetry. Indeed there is such a dearth of evidence regarding 'the actual circumstances of composition and publication' as Heyes puts it, especially in Northampton, that detailed historicising readings of the later poetry would be almost impossible.

For the literary critic, seeking to assert not only Clare's authorial and artistic agency, but also the intertextual or 'communal' aspects of his poetical product, the later poems effect a liberation in the sense that we are placed as readers at a distance from the author. For the most part the manuscripts are not even available in Clare's hand. The transcriptions are more often than not the only extant versions of most of the poems written in Northampton. If the critic worries overmuch about whether Clare 'meant' the manuscripts that are available, the act of reading Clare's poetry becomes impossibly complicated. Such complications bedevil editorial work as much as they do critical work. The editors of *The Later Poems* seem to develop a methodology in which they draw on earlier autograph verse and prose to provide clues as to what the poems would have been like had Clare written them down himself. They write:

> Like other editors Knight sometimes misreads a word and where our own familiarity with Clare's practice has enabled us to suggest alternative readings, we have placed these in the main text if we think they make better sense than Knight's.[30]

So, to read *The Later Poems* is to not only distance oneself from Clare's autographed authority, but it is also to be distanced even from Knight's transcriptions. Northampton Asylum House Steward William F. Knight,[31] who knew Clare well and on a daily basis, is

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[29] Bob Heyes' as yet unpublished paper 'Writing Clare's Poems' was delivered at the Nottingham Trent University's July 1998 conference on Clare, 'New Approaches and New Voices'.

[30] *LP* I, p. xii. Of Knight's punctuation the editors write:

> The punctuation used by W. F. Knight and later amanuenses of Clare's poetry is erratic, sometimes being heavy and obtrusive, sometimes non-existent, but it is impossible to go behind it with certainty. We have, therefore, not regarded it as sacrosanct though we have followed it closely in the main. (Ibid., p. xii.)

[31] The clearest assessment of William F. Knight appears in an essay by Kerith Trick, 'Clare's Asylum Experience' (in Foulkes, pp. 27-40). Trick writes that a '...major influence in Clare's experience of the Asylum was of course William F Knight of whom relatively little is known. He was Acting Steward in 1845 and was made up to the substantive post in April of that year. Knight was himself an amateur poet and from the first took a keen interest in Clare. He transcribed some eight hundred poems from pencil originals and without his efforts much of Clare's later works would have been lost to us. In 1850 he moved to a post at Birmingham Asylum (now All Saints' Hospital). For a time he and Clare continued to correspond, and Knight arranged for his friend Joseph

dismissed as an editor because of the way Clare himself, and critics and editors after him, politicised his reaction to standardised spelling, grammar and punctuation.[32] To assume Clare's early vehemence regarding the standardisation of the language as an editorial policy is methodologically precarious. To charge my own reading of the later poetry with preconceived and speculative notions of Clare's *intentions,* would be to reduce the possibilities of a literary and intertextual reading of his verse. It would also be to conflate the early well-documented Clare of the 1820's, with the older writer of the 1840's and 1850's, about whom there exists little evidence; in others words, it would effect a reduction of the chronological artistic development of the poet to some sort of unified cultural and historical entity. Also, to use earlier work and its political ramifications to reconstruct or reappraise the later work is to establish a hierarchy in which the later poems are lessened in stature because they lack - for the most part - autograph manuscripts; and of course, because they were written in an asylum. In short, I have to believe that there is individual authorial deliberation in Clare's later poetry - even where it might contradict ideas emergent from his earlier work.

As becomes evident especially in 'Don Juan A Poem', Clare's use of, and reaction to, other writers' work does not undermine his authorial agency because that very utilisation of others' ideas is an original and idiosyncratic process. Originality may be constituted by influence, allusion, imitation and quotation. But the process of creation, which openly uses all it has to draw on - be it of folk, literary, botanical, experiential, or cultural origin - is still the source of the author's art. This is true even when that art is filtered through the mediations of Clare's publisher John Taylor, or later, through Knight's transcriptions . If, like Heyes, we are to question the possibility of direct authorial intention as a result of such 'communal' effects upon the writing process, we can equally suggest that a poet's borrowings from, reactions to, and understandings of other poets is always assertively individual. That individuality is

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Stenson to visit Clare and bring him paper and tobacco. After Knight's departure Clare wrote very little, or perhaps what he then wrote was not preserved' (pp. 36-38).

[32] Clare famously wrote: 'grammer in learning is like Tyranny in government–confound the bitch Ill never be her slave' (To John Taylor, Thursday, 21 February 1822, *Letters,* p. 231). Still the clearest consideration of Clare's use of language is to be found in Barbara M. H. Strang, 'John Clare's Language', Appendix I of *The Rural Muse,* ed. R. K. R. Thornton (Ashington, Manchester: MidNAG/Carcanet, 1982):

> Though at times he agreed to allow editors to punctuate his texts, he objected to punctuation in practice as being of unsettled principles (and therefore non-functional), and aesthetically as forming a nasty rash on the page... The only punctuation-marks he used himself are of semantic and rhetorical, not syntactic, value... (p. 160).

constantly asserted even if editorial, societal, cultural or circumstantial 'others' have input into the creative process. The poet asserts his place within a literary community by negotiating with, and from within, a 'culture' of ideas which are represented and established then challenged and undermined in other texts - literary or otherwise. Even if the poetry is repeatedly allusive and only exists in someone else's hand, it is *still* an artistic creation, and as such deserves close, intertextual and literary attention. What is most important as an objective for this thesis is not the idea of the recreation of an intentional author, but instead a clarification of ideas which emerge from the poetry; or to put it simply, to better understand the poetry. In order that the poems are given serious consideration by this study, the critical approach has to have an initial premise that the texts themselves were written with intentionality. It is not the purpose of this study to leap from the textually-emergent ideas to summations about the personality and experience of the poet however; that remains the difficult job of a biographer.

Chapter 1
First Love: Clare's Love Poetry and Romanticism

For the purposes of this chapter, I have chosen the genre of love poetry for an intertextual consideration of Clare alongside some of his contemporaries. By the term 'love poetry' I mean verse whose main objective is the presentation of the theme of a profoundly emotional amatory experience. This definition is necessary to make clear the difference between the 'love poetry' of Clare's later work, and 'lusty love-ballad' poems which I consider in the 'Representations of Women' chapter. Many of the poems considered in this chapter allude very much to the physical and lusty aspects of human love, but where most of them differ from the ballad-like poems which physically compartmentalise women, is in their *partly* conforming to a 'Romantic' model of egotistical sublimation. I emphasise 'partly', because it is in the differences between Clare's construction of love and that of his contemporaries, that his 'authorial intention' is most clearly drawn. Timothy Brownlow's consideration of Clare's 'atavistic alertness'[33] combined with Jonathan Bate's extensive use of Clare in his investigation of ecological issues[34] have established connections and dialogues with the Romantics in the area of nature, landscape and the environment. But I will argue that it is in the genre of the love poem, and in a paradoxical language of silence, that Clare firmly establishes his agendas regarding the Romantic poets.

Before considering Clare intertextually in relation to his contemporaries, it is necessary both to sketch an outline of Clare's reading, and to consider the way in which this evidence is to be utilised. To begin with a detailed example, I will consider the evidence supporting a reading of Clare's love poetry alongside that of Percy Shelley. Whereas the names of Wordsworth, Byron, and Keats appear in studies of Clare's verse with increasing frequency, Shelley's does not. However, the scant available evidence suggests both that Clare was aware of Shelley's work, and that he read it avidly and for a considerable period of his life. There is

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[33] See pp. 88 and 126 of Brownlow's *John Clare and Picturesque Landscape* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983). Brownlow offers the most thorough reading of Clare's relationship with Keats: he asks

> 'Was there ever a poet who embodied Keats's doctrine of Negative Capability more completely than Clare?... Keats, Coleridge, Clare, and Wordsworth are among those Romantic figures who believe that nature is fundamentally a totality and that psychic balance is lost when man becomes, in Wordsworth's phrase, 'An intellectual All-in-all!' (p. 126).

[34] Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and The Environmental Tradition,* (London: Routledge, 1991).

no Shelley volume in the collection of Clare's books at Northampton Public Library, but there are other links, established in criticism contemporary with Clare and Shelley, anthologies, Clare's letters, and an account of Clare at Northampton. The poet Elizabeth Kent[35] included excerpts from both poets in *Flora Domestica* [36] (which Clare owned) which alphabetically explores the literary as well as the botanical dimensions of common flora. In the Preface she writes of Shelley:

> Of a strong and powerful intellect, his manners were gentle as a summer's evening: his tastes were pure and simple: it was his delight to ramble out into the fields and woods, where he would take his book, or sometimes his pen, and having employed some hours in study, and in speculations on his favourite theme—the advancement of human happiness, would return home with his hat wreathed with briony, or wild convolvulus; his hand filled with bunches of wild-flowers plucked from the hedges as he passed, and his eyes, indeed every feature, beaming with the benevolence of his heart. (p. xix)

A couple of pages later she quotes and discusses Clare. Not only is Kent one of the earliest literary critics to discuss and effectively anthologise Clare, she is also still one of the only critics to have no problem discussing him in the same breath as Wordsworth, although her 'simple-minded' presentation of Clare is problematic:

> And flowers do speak a language, a clear and intelligible language: ask Mr. Wordsworth, for to him they have spoken, until they excited "thoughts that lie too deep for tears;" ask Chaucer, for he held companionship with them in the meadows; ask any of the poets, ancient or modern. Observe them, reader, love them, linger over them; and ask your own heart if they do not speak affection, benevolence, and piety. None have better understood the language of flowers than the simple-minded peasant-poet, Clare, whose volumes are like a beautiful country, diversified with woods, meadows, heaths, and flower-gardens... (p. xxi-xxii)

Kent quotes from Clare's two volumes which Taylor and Hessey had published in 1820 and 1821. While it may be the case that Kent was promoting Clare for her publisher, it is worth noting that she quotes more Clare in her Preface than any other poet. A letter from Clare to James Hessey in praise of Kent's book was published in *The London Magazine* in August

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[35] In August 1823 Clare wrote to Kent in praise of her book, which he said was 'the book of nature open at every season & every day turns over a new page to amuse & instruct the looker on as he passes' (*Letters,* p. 283). An entry in his journal substantiates this praise:

> ...with a few improvements and additions woud be one of the most entertaining books ever written – if I live I will write one on the same plan and call it a garden of wild Flowers as it shall contain nothing else with quotations from poets and others... (Journal entry for Sunday, 24th October, *By Himself,* p. 188).

[36] London: Taylor and Hessey, 1823. Item 271 in *Northampton Catalogue.*

1823 in which Clare admitted that he was 'pleased with the mention the author has made of me, and not only pleased, but proud of it...'[37]

Clare would also have known Shelley's work from F. Campbell's *Beauties of the British Poets,*[38] which includes 'Death and Sleep', 'The Magic Car', 'A Serene Winter's Night' and 'The Fame of the Mighty'. In the same edition Campbell includes four of John Clare's poems ('Poesy', 'Twilight', 'The Meeting' and 'What is Life?'). Perhaps the clearest reason for reading Clare and Shelley together is to be garnered from the following which Clare wrote of Shelley's poetry in 1831:

> & there is Shelly a fine writer & one of the sweetest poems I ever saw was of his but I forget it now yet it was somewhere in Benbows Edit of his works & it is a long time since I saw them which was at Mrs Emmersons.[39]

The only Shelley edition Clare could be referring to is William Benbow's 1826 edition of *Miscellaneous Poems by Percy Bysshe Shelley* .[40] It contains seventy-two poems, many of which are ballad-like love lyrics. Indeed, Bob Heyes has discovered a letter from Eliza Emmerson to Clare of August 1826 which features the following postscript note:

> Have you read any of Shelleys Poems? – I am taking them in periodical no^{s} – a piratical edition by "Benbow" – I am delighted with "The Spirit of Solitude" – tell me if you [hav]e read it? – Adieu.[41]

This note reveals how significant Clare's relationship with Emmerson was; she influenced his reading to an important, and perhaps unacknowledged, extent. Also, her suggestion that Benbow's edition was 'piratical' (which indeed it was) links Clare to the politically-motivated illicit publishing circles that radicals like William Benbow, William Hone and indeed Shelley himself, belonged.[42] Clare was still reading Shelley in his first year at Northampton. In the

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[37] To James Augustus Hessey, July 1823, *Letters,* p. 279. Published in *The London Magazine* in August 1823.
[38] London: Richard Edwards, 1824. Item 145 in *Northampton Catalogue.*
[39] 'To John Taylor,' Saturday, 9 July 1831, *Letters,* p. 545.
[40] London: William Benbow, 1826.
[41] I am grateful to Bob Heyes for this discovery and transcription from Egerton MS 2247, fol. 207^{V}, British Library. Strangely enough, 'Alastor, or The Spirit of Solitude' does not appear in William Benbow's 1826 edition, so it is possible another 'periodical' series of Shelley's verse was being produced by Benbow in 1826 which I have been unable to locate.
[42] William Benbow was an advocate of the use of 'physical force' in radical circles of the 1810's, and was a senior member of the National Union of Working Classes and Others which met in 1831 and 1832. Benbow proposed 'a "Grand National Holiday" or month's general strike, in the course of which the productive classes would assume control of the nation's government and resources'. See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class,* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 704, 713-14, 892.
Richard Holmes notes the significant impact of Benbow's edition upon another poet:

head-note before the poem 'Sweet Jessy', the editors of *The Later Poems* quote from *Northampton Mercury,* 30 April 1842:

> The poem which follows will remind the reader of Shelley's exquisite "Dirge" in the poem entitled "Ginevra"... In point of fact Clare had been reading Shelley previously to the composition of these verses, and his mind was evidently under the influence of the lines we have quoted.[43]

Clare's reading of Shelley thus spans many years. His work was critically linked to Shelley's in the early years of his career, and he was evidently 'writing under the influence' even in the asylum at Northampton. Such evidence is historically interesting, and it substantiates the possibility that Clare's work might bear similarities to Shelley's which go beyond the explicitly identifiable. In other words, the textual interaction between the two might elucidate Clare's wider interaction with Romanticism. Shelley's example could be repeated with most of the major poets of the Romantic period, and indeed many of the more marginal ones; Clare was a wide, avid and alert reader of past and contemporary English verse.

As I have suggested, Clare's allusions to other major male poets of the period have been studied extensively by others, especially his references to Wordsworth, Keats and Byron.[44] Some important work has also been done on female poets of the period represented in Clare's extant library; again it seems Clare's reading of his contemporaries was very wide indeed.[45] This wide reading offers substantive reasons to read his poetry intertextually not just with poems and poets he is known to have read, but also with poets who reflect the culture of ideas prevalent in the early nineteenth century. Although it is valuable to know the possibilities of Clare's reading of Shelley, the evidence only reveals *potential.* It is also important to compare Clare's poetry with the work of a poet he almost certainly did *not* read - with William Blake's for example - the similarities, where found, being just as interesting, in that they may have

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> ...Benbow's pirate edition of 1826, which was a book that Robert Browning later picked up on a London bookstall, thus changing his whole life, and precipitating *Pauline* (1833). This was entitled *Miscellaneous Poems,* and did *not* contain *Queen Mab,* which in the circumstances was a pity for Browning...

(*Shelley: The Pursuit,* London: Penguin Books, 1987, p. 209 [note]).

[43] *LP,* I, p. 319.

[44] Cf.: L. J. Swingle, 'Stalking the Essential John Clare: Clare in Relation to His Romantic Contemporaries' in *Studies in Romanticism,* (Vol. 14, 1975) pp. 273-284; Greg Crossan, 'Clare's Debt to the Poets in His Library', *John Clare Society Journal,* No. 10, 1991, p. 27-41; and Jim McKusick, 'Beyond the Visionary Company,' in *John Clare in Context.*

[45] See Clare MacDonald Shaw's 'Some Contemporary Women Poets in Clare's Library', *The Independent Spirit,* ed. John Goodridge (Helpston: The John Clare Society and The Margaret Grainger Memorial Trust, 1994), p. 87.

come to both poets from a common cultural source. So, for the purposes of this study, intertextual comparisons are adopted as an approach to Clare's poetry when emergent themes seem to offer valuable parallels with another writer, not merely where evidence of Clare's reading supports such comparisons.

In the later poem 'First Love' the speaker offers the essential guide to the most important aspects of Clare's love poetry. The poem begins with the first-person pronoun, suggesting a Romantic or confessional mode:

I ne'er was struck before that hour
  With love so sudden and so sweet
Her face it bloomed like a sweet flower
  And stole my heart away complete
My face turned pale a deadly pale
  My legs refused to walk away
And when she looked what could I ail
  My life and all seemed turned to clay[46]

This first octave of iambic tetrameter (Clare's favoured metre for love poetry) provides us with a speaker who is physically and mentally in shock. He has been lambasted by his 'sweet' feelings for a 'sweet' woman. The repetition of 'sweet' and, in the fifth line, of 'pale' already begins to suggest an aural intensity to the sounds of the poem. The speaker is disjointed from his own body - he can't control his own legs. Life is associated suddenly with death in that last word of the stanza, 'clay'; it is as if at the moment of realising his first love for someone, he is also made shockingly aware of his own mortality. The pallor he experiences, after his heart is 'stole[n] away complete', is 'pale a deadly pale': this is a life-threatening experience, his footing, his surety being threatened and undermined. Not only is the mutability of the life of the speaker brought into question, but also his 'life *and all* seemed turned to clay' (my emphasis): everything he knows is altered, made spooky. This theme continues in the second stanza, as attention is turned to his surroundings still more:

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[46] *LP* II, p. 677. April - June 1849.

And then my blood rushed to my face
  And took my eyesight quite away
The trees and bushes round the place
  Seemed midnight at noon day
I could not see a single thing
  Words from my eyes did start
They spoke as chords do from the string
  And blood burnt round my heart

After the nauseous pallor of the first stanza, the life returns to the speaker's face, and in doing so, blinds him. His vision, one might say, is destroyed by the fierce coursing of his blood, for the first time. Perhaps he is fainting - certainly his consciousness is in doubt here. The natural world is turned upon its head - time itself is upended - and the speaker just doesn't know where he is. The loss or impairment of his sight has terrified him; he mentions it twice here. Again the word 'seemed' appears, as it does in the first and last stanzas, so as to further reinforce the lack of certainty of the narrator. And this fourth line of this second stanza marks a metrical change: in the first stanza every line was of 8 or 9 syllables (depending on how one pronounces 'hour' and 'flower', with one or two syllables); this fourth line of the second stanza, which marks the centre-point of the whole poem, is the first to be shortened to six syllables (iambic trimeter). The metre forces us to acknowledge that it is at this centre-point that the speaker is changed: the effects love has wrought on his vision, are wrought in his poetry too. The shorter lines force us along more quickly, as the panicky tempo of the speaker takes effect upon the relating of the narrative. From now on the metre of the poem becomes, roughly, common or ballad metre (alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines, with a stop at the end of each pair). The relationship between the vision of the speaker, and his ability to express himself in words, is made more explicit in the lines 'I could not see a single thing / Words from my eyes did start'. It is as if, because *real* sight has been taken away by love, the multiplying sight of the visionary has taken its place; multiplying because he says he 'could not see a *single* thing' (my emphasis); visionary, because words are emerging from his eyes. For the first time he is seeing poetry intermixed with a darkened vision of nature. This marks the birth of a visionary poet. The experience of love *creates* the poet, and those words emerging from the eyes voicing themselves 'as chords do from the string' - imperceptibly and

musically - suggest a palpable link with Romanticism.[47] The rushing blood which began this stanza is now burning in its final line; the language is revelatory and perhaps apocalyptic. The visionary moment burns fiercely and is shockingly sudden. As quickly as it came, the vision of love begins to retreat.[48]

3
Are flowers the winters choice
  Is love's bed always snow
She seemed to hear my silent voice
  Not loves appeals to know
I never saw so sweet a face
  As that I stood before
My heart has left its dwelling place
  And can return no more —

The two interrogatives which open this stanza are strangely detached; it is as if the profuse vision of the poet throws up confusing cold images to cool the burning of his blood. The temperature drops as the visionary moment calms into self-doubt.[49] The impossibility of growing a winter-flower of love in a (seed-) bed of snow suggests that the love is doomed by the turn of the seasons. The 'bed' is also the nuptial bed - the place which might offer consummation of the burning love; if it is 'snow' then it is inhospitable to the warmth of the speaker's passion. The seasons have turned before the love is fulfilled. Time then, is an important factor in this momentary, but calamitous experience: the first rhyme-word of the poem is 'hour' which immediately circumscribes the blooming of its paired rhyme-word, 'flower', which is in turn likened to the woman's face - the direct and primary source of inspiration, both emotional and poetical. And the experience passes so quickly: from the

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[47] Such relationships between sound, language and creation appear time and again in both Shelley and Byron's poetry. Cf. these lines from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound:*

> And with the force of self-destroying swiftness,
> Intensely, slowly, solemnly roll on,
> Kindling with mingled sounds, and many tones,
> Intelligible words and music wild.
> With mighty whirl the multitudinous orb
> Grinds the bright brook into an azure mist
> Of elemental subtlety, like light... (IV, lines 249 to 255, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, [Oxford University Press, 1909] p. 256.)

[48] A mention must be made of Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan', in which a lengthy dreamed vision is said to have been mostly lost (in the prose introduction). The description (and reader's entering) of the dome in the vision alters the metrical length of the line - the lines move from a tetrameter line to pentameter and, as the vision is lost at the mention of 'war', back to tetrameter. This three-part structure, which is referred to in 'Kubla Khan' itself (line 51), is very similar to that of 'First Love': the initial vision, the expansion, and the loss.

[49] Cf. 'I saw her crop a rose', line 20: 'Then my eye was like to fire - but my heart was like to stone' (*LP* I, p. 559).

opening stanza to the last we have moved from the flowering of a new (spring) love to a space of distance, winter coldness and death.

The third appearance of 'seemed' in the third line of the last stanza suggests that the speaker's own self-doubt is distracting him, and is becoming central to his concerns. His voice is silent: his words then, are like those understood by Shelley in *Epipsychidion:*

> And we will talk, until thought's melody
> Become too sweet for utterance, and it die
> In words, to live again in looks, which dart
> With thrilling tone into the voiceless heart,
> Harmonizing silence without a sound.
> Our breath shall intermix, our bosoms bound,
> And our veins beat together; and our lips
> With other eloquence than words, eclipse
> The soul that burns between them...[50]

The comprehensive union - annihilation even - of soul and body in Shelley's poem, highlights the uneasy sense that in Clare's poem the speaker is not quite sure of the degree of unification. He seems to doubt whether there is any tangible unification at all. He does not suggest that they touched; perhaps it is the quintessential voice of the poet, oddly silent and expressed not orally but through the visionary faculties, that is communicating with the woman. The fourth line troubles that sense further: if the woman does not 'know' or understand 'loves appeals' then what is happening between the speaker and his love? Is it such a secret and unheard communication that it denies the possibility of expression?

Of the line 'Not loves appeals to know' (line 20) the editors of *The Later Poems* ask 'Is "Not" Knight's misreading of "And"?'[51]. I think Knight has transcribed correctly. On a purely phonetic basis, the 'o' sound of 'Not' aids the assonantal coherence of the line more than the longish 'a' of an 'And' might do, although the 'o's are all different sounds. But the meanings of the stanza are complicated by that 'Not'. I think 'loves appeals' are the rituals of normal courtship; that would mean that this woman is innocent of the knowledge of courting, and therefore is able to comprehend a truer language of love, which is an instinctual and

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[50] *Epipsychidion,* lines 560 to 568, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, [Oxford University Press, 1909] p. 418.
[51] Footnote to line 20, *LP* II, p. 677.

inexpressible mode of communication. As in Shelley's poem and in Byron's *Don Juan*, this language of love transcends expression in words:

> They fear'd no eyes nor ears on that lone beach,
> They felt no terrors from the night; they were
> All in all to each other; though their speech
> Was broken words, they *thought* a language there,—
> And all the burning tongues the passions teach
> Found in one sigh the best interpreter
> Of nature's oracle—first love,—that all
> Which Eve has left her daughters since her fall.[52]

The appearance of 'first love' as 'nature's oracle' in Byron's poem is significant. If the experience of first love in Clare's poem turns the man into a poet - whose visions of 'trees and bushes' is so violently altered - we could say that the experience turns Clare's speaker into 'nature's oracle': he becomes a prophet of nature. As nature, love and the poet are conflated elsewhere in Clare's poetry so vividly, it seems that if any revelation occurs in 'First Love', it is that of artistic inspiration. After all, how much do we know about the object of his affection? This is a poem about a man turning into a poet and becoming doomed love *himself:* 'Poets love nature, and themselves are love'.[53]

The last four lines of 'First Love' suggest the image of the poet-prophet wandering in search of meaningful self-knowledge after the life-changing vision of love. The speaker's heart is mentioned for the third time (once in each stanza) in the poem, which indicates that the tripartite structure is no accident. In fact, the structures of colour, repetition, and imagery are carefully interwoven, and make 'First Love' all the more vivid and ambiguous. These final four lines take us back to the first words of the poem with the negating 'I never' (line 21), and to the physical situation the speaker is in. The love's 'face' is mentioned again as it is earlier (line 3), together with a repetition of the adjective 'sweet' (line 2) further rotating the circular movement and structure of the poem. The speaker is taking us back to the beginning of the poem, returning to a 'before' (line 22) state. Again, for the third time, the speaker mentions his heart (lines 4, 16 and 23), which has been stolen, burnt and has now 'left its dwelling place'. The use of the term 'dwelling place' provides an intertextual link with Byron's 'She Walks in

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[52] *Don Juan,* II, clxxxix, Volume V of *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works,* ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).
[53] First line of 'Sonnet', *LP* I, p. 313.

Beauty',[54] an interesting parallel, and possibly a fertile source for Clare. Certainly the inversion in Byron's poem of the common associations of love imagery (the eponymous 'she' is associated with 'night', 'dark' and 'raven') are significant in the context of the encroaching darkness at the centre of Clare's 'First Love'.

For all the circularity of these last four lines, repeatedly referring the reader back to the start of the poem, the final line denies the possibility of a real return. The 'before' state cannot be returned to. The final words form an interesting end: there is indeed 'no more' of the poem. But the dash which forms the last typographical mark leaves the poem somehow unfinished, and points the reader on, somewhere.

There is no explicit mention of colour in this poem, but there is a three-part development of tone. In the first stanza 'pale' (line 5) is the repeated tint when the speaker's face blanches, together with the obscure tone of 'clay' (line 8), which is perhaps grey, or tan. In the second stanza the 'blood' (lines 9 and 16) is the dominant colour-carrying active noun, surrounding the darkness of 'midnight' (line 4) and the speaker's blindness. Tonally the poem returns to the etiolation of winter and 'snow' (line 17 and 18) in the third and final stanza. Thus the poem offers the following chiastic structure of tonality:

Pale

Clay

Blood

Midnight

[Blindness]

Blood

Winter

Snow.

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[54] The second stanza of Byron's poem reveals more than a passing resemblance to Clare's, particularly with reference to the intermixture of the woman's face with unsounded thoughts:

One shade the more, one ray the less,
  Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
  Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
  How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

There are other structural balances in this poem which are worth noting. The word 'face' is mentioned four times: twice it is the face of the woman (lines 3 and 21) and twice it is the face of the speaker (lines 5 and 9). The significant word 'heart' appears three times (lines 4, 16 and 23), once and once only in each stanza, as indeed is the case with the qualifying verb 'seemed' (lines 8, 4 and 19). The poet is clearly in control of pattern, image-tone, sound, repetition and structural balance. Even at this stage of his career[55] Clare's ability to combine content and form, frame and image - that is to enhance the meaning and potency of his verse by subtle nuances of formal structure - is still worth noting, even if simply as evidence of his artistic agency and authorial control. The poems by Byron and Shelley that Clare clearly echoes support the possibility that Clare could reflect upon Romanticism's concerns with poetic language, form, rhyme, style and the all-encompassing theme of creation itself. In 'First Love' the poet is born out of the dramatic suddenness of love: love gives birth to the prophet. The poet's heart - his core - is unable to return to his pre-birth state, as much as an adult is unable to return to the womb. What is most intriguing is the fear that dominates the entire drama of love, vision and journey in search of something meaningful. The negative adverbs - 'ne'er', 'not' (twice), 'never' and 'no more' - combined with verbs of a certainly shocking, sometimes violent, disposition - 'struck', 'stole', 'refused', 'ail', 'rushed', 'start', and 'burnt' - work to give an overall suggestion that this experience of 'First Love' was horrible. If the heart of the poet 'has left its dwelling place' is he doomed to wander the earth in search of it, physically and emotionally terrified of the visions of midnight and the multiplicity of associations with which his over-stimulated mind is burning? This possibility is similar to Shelley's conclusion of *Epipsychidion,* and vitally different in one aspect:

> We shall become the same, we shall be one
> Spirit within two frames, oh! wherefore two?
> One passion in twin-hearts, which grows and grew,
> Till like two meteors of expanding flame,
> Those spheres instinct with it become the same,
> Touch, mingle, are transfigured; ever still
> Burning, yet ever inconsumable:

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[55] As with the majority of Knight's transcriptions, there is no date appended to this poem. All we can safely say is that Knight left in 1850, so it must have been written before that date. If the later poems are in date order (and there is no possible way of proving that is the case) then the closest dates before and after the position of 'First Love' in MS are February and May 1849 (see *LP* II, pp. 666 and 693).

In one another's substance finding food,
Like flames too pure and light and unimbued
To nourish their bright lives with baser prey,
Which point to Heaven and cannot pass away:
One hope within two wills, one will beneath
Two overshadowing minds, one life, one death,
One Heaven, one Hell, one immortality,
And one annihilation. Woe is me!
The wingèd words on which my soul would pierce
Into the height of Love's rare Universe,
Are chains of lead around its flight of fire—
I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire!

Weak verses, go, kneel at your Sovereign's feet,
And say:—"We are the masters of thy slave;
What wouldest thou with us and ours and thine?"
Then call your sisters from Oblivion's cave,
All singing loud: "Love's very pain is sweet,
But its reward is in the world divine
Which, if not here, it builds beyond the grave."
So shall ye live when I am here. Then haste
Over the hearts of men, until ye meet
Marina, Vanna, Primus, and the rest,
And bid them love each other and be blessed:
And leave the troop which errs, and which reproves,
And come and be my guest,—for I am Love's.[56]

Linguistically, Shelley and Clare are very different. Shelley's language is opulent and universal where Clare's often strikes home with the curt (thus ambiguous), localised and disarmingly simple. On love, Clare's speakers are hesitant where Shelley's are boldly forthright. These conspicuous differences could be a major factor in the critical rarity of their poetry being read intertextually. But for both poets, meanings conveyed through rhyme-pairs are of vital importance.[57] Discussing love, both poets are dramatic, revelatory, apocalyptic and egotistical. And both turn to the writing of poetry itself: to its frustrations in Shelley's case, and amazement in Clare's. Vitally they explicitly figure the communication of love through poetry as a silent language. As I have said, Shelley's poem contains much more of a sense of unification with the object of affection. Where the effects of love on Clare's speaker are to his own body (indeed, he is almost *dis*embodied by love), the love in Shelley's vision is a consummation of the bodies, an intermixture of spirit, a duality become one. Where the heart

[56] *Epipsychidion,* lines 573 to 604.
[57] See my discussion of the final rhyme-pair (prove and love) of Clare's 'I hid my love...' in Chapter 2, p. 39. It is almost the same pair here at the end of *Epipsychidion:* 'reproves' and 'Love's'.

of Clare's speaker is encircled by burning blood, the 'one passion in twin hearts' of Shelley's is 'ever still / Burning, yet ever inconsumable'. Where Shelley's speakers achieve consummation with an addressee, Clare's are more often left with a suspended, or even thwarted love.

The following two lines offer a succinct starting-point for an explanation of the suspended consummations in Clare's love poetry: 'True love's the inward self in secret places / Whats felt bye two in love a third but guesses'[58]. That 'third' party could be the reader - an outsider, destined always to remain so to the intimacy of the experience of love. In 'First Love' the reader understands the effects of the emotion on the speaker, but indeed has to 'guess' as to the ways in which that love develops. But for Clare, love can remain perfectly secret to himself, in a magical way, and yet still form a level of imagined intimacy. 'I would not be a wither'd leaf' portrays a man whose desire is to be almost non-existent in a relationship:

1
I would not be a wither'd leaf
Twirled in an autumn sky
Mine should not be a life so brief
To fade and fall and die

2
Nor would I be a wither'd flower
Whose stalk was broke before
The bud showed bloom in springs young hour
Heart sicken'd at the core

3
But I would be a happy thought
With thy sweet sleep to lie
To live unknown, unseen, unsought
And keep my lonely joy

4
Yes I would be a ray of light
In the apple of thy eye
And watch o'er thee the live long night
In beauty, and in joy [59]

[58] From a 'Childe Harold'-like sequence of Spenserian stanzas (which also include a contemplation of Byron's 'Haidée') *LP* I, p. 213. This quote p. 216, lines 63 and 64. Attributed to early 1845 by the editors.
[59] *LP* I, p. 495. Autograph date: 'March 3rd/[18]47'.

Written in common measure, this is yet another lyric which disarms with its ballad-like simplicity. Indeed it is a ballad, but it is also a lyric, and it is also a love poem. And it contains many of the images and movements crucial to 'First Love', and to Romantic poems like Blake's 'The Sick Rose' (especially the second stanza) and 'The Book of Thel'.

Although it isn't quite a *carpe diem* poem, it certainly portrays the lover's worst fears of heavily encroaching age, impotence and lost opportunities in the first two stanzas so as to counter them with transcendent and spiritual wishes in the last two. The two halves of the poem contrast natural metaphors temporally from opposite ends of the spectrum: autumn and early spring - dead leaves and flowers nipped in the bud. The fears are sexual: the speaker abhors the possibility of premature 'wither'd' flaccidity and of his phallic budding 'stalk' being 'broke before' it has a chance to 'bloom'. Instead, the ideal setting for love is high summer (represented in the apple of the final stanza, metaphorically growing in the eye of the woman), and the ideal time of day is night; the ideal posture is lying down with the lover - and here we encounter the poem's central strangeness - as if 'unknown, unseen, unsought'. Because the speaker wishes to be a 'happy thought' in the female's 'sweet sleep' (that word 'sweet' appearing as it did in 'First Love'), he is coveting embodiment in the female's subconscious. He wishes also to be a 'ray of light' - intangible and almost immaterial. The speaker wishes himself almost to a nothing: he does not want to be noticed at all, or bothered. That strange Blakean 'lonely joy'[60] is somehow the ideal space for the speaker.

Here we arrive at Clare's essential divergence from Shelley. Shelley can construct an obsessive being like hero in *Alastor* who has all the drama of someone committed to solitude for sublime reasons:

> In lone and silent hours,
> When night makes a weird sound of its own stillness,
> Like an inspired and desperate alchymist
> Staking his very life on some dark hope...[61]

Yet for Clare the idea of 'lonely joy' is not an oxymoron.[62] His speaker here can feel at one with the 'eye' or I of his love, and yet not be acknowledged by her at all. The vision he

[60] The phrase sounds like Blake but it isn't: as a adjectival noun phrase 'lonely joy' does not appear anywhere in David Erdman's *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (New York: Doubleday, 1988).
[61] 'Alastor; or The Spirit of Solitude', lines 29 to 32, (*Complete Works,* p. 14).
[62] Cf. these lines from the 1832 sonnet 'Sand Martin':

requires is not anymore complicated than to become a nothing-like 'ray of light' in the eye, and (we can safely assume) the 'I' or identity of his lover. In a sense this is the unification so oddly absent from 'First love', but it is not a coming-together on the equal terms of Shelley's cataclysmic union in *Epipsychidion.* Perhaps the only way the speaker of this poem can conceive of a union between himself and his lover, is if he is so much a 'nothing', that she wouldn't notice him more than she would an unconscious 'unknown, unseen, unsought' thought. If the language of love is silence, as in 'First Love', and the space and place of love is '...the inward self in secret places'[63], then the act of love is a thought unknown, a wish unfulfilled or, to quote Blake, an 'unacted desire'[64].

I discuss in the 'Secrecy and Disclosure' chapter the frustrations which emerge when a male speaker is for some often-unrevealed reason forced to keep his love secret and silent. What I want to consider here is how that silence communicates itself. In terms of simple rhyme, sound is of central importance to Clare. I don't know of any extensive blank verse Clare wrote; certainly in the later period all of his work rhymes. So, for the artist, as for the speakers who give voice to his poems, sound communicates itself in mysterious ways:

1
My spirit lives in silent sighs
And gazing upon thee
I hear thy silence make replies
To everything but me
I see thy silence talk to flowers
The birds will sing to thee
And lonely in these lonely hours
You never talk to me

2
I never hear thy voice or know
Its sound in fancy's ear
A silent shade where'ere I go
In beauty hovers near

Ive seen thee far away from all thy tribe
Flirting about the unfrequented sky
& felt a feeling that I cant describe
Of lone seclusion & a hermit joy
(lines 9-12, *MP* IV, p. 309).

[63] Sequence of stanzas starts on *LP* I, p. 213. This quote p. 216, lines 63 and 64. Attributed to early 1845 by the eds.

[64] 'Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires', Proverbs of Hell, line 67, *THE MARRIAGE of HEAVEN and HELL,* Erdman, p. 38.

Do wild flowers love; I think they do
And often stooping down
I hear them talk to shower and dew
On many a lovely mound

3
I often see thy fairy form
In springs bee singing hours
Light stepping on in fancy warm
As love among the flowers
Just as the breeze in sunshines power
So maids in summer hours
So rove as not to harm the grass
Nor tread upon the flowers[65]

In the first stanza, 'silence' (including its adjectival form 'silent') appears three times: the silence makes itself very apparent. The speaker is effectively existing within a silent world. He understands, interprets, the silence of the 'maid' (third stanza) as she 'replies / To everything *but'* (my emphasis) the speaker. The first line has established that the speaker 'lives in silent sighs': this silence is, however, audible. The speaker hears the woman's 'silence make replies'; he sees her 'silence talk'; he is himself, or is trailed by, a 'silent shade' - a ghost of silence. The lack of noise is reflected in the woman's sensitivity to the natural world[66] - which is the note upon which the poem ends, fairly abruptly. But the image of maids being '[j]ust as the breeze' is apt in the context of the blank distance between what the speaker feels, senses and desires, and what the woman knows of him. This is a poem about distance, and the space between speaker and object of a haunting desire is an ominously silent one. Communication in this poem only voices itself as 'sound in fancy's ear'; the dialogues are imagined and fantastical. The 'gazing' of the second line of the poem is the source of these fantasies; it is the gaze of an outsider, an onlooker, not of a participant. And twice over he is 'lonely in these lonely hours'. Yet, for all this isolation and blankness, the poem works a sort of magic through its sibilant susurration. I say magic, because of the spookiness engendered in the 'silent shade' which '[i]n beauty hovers'. The male lover evokes sympathy because his gaze is not alarming - he is delicate and not leering in his looks, and his silence maintains the allure of a martyr-like pathos about him. For further sympathy he emphasises not only his loneliness, but also his

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[65] *LP* I, p. 453.
[66] Cf. 'I would not pull a weed away', *LP* I, p. 562.

delicate sensitivity to the 'love' of 'wild flowers'. And to end the poem not on a note of self-pity or melancholy, but with a set of similes which unifies the preceding patterns traced by the woman, the poet and the flowers into one of harmonious delicacy, assures a well-turned resolution. In fact the poem offers a world which is silent but not frustrated; the speaker seems content in his unvoiced love. It might almost be that the love is dependent upon silence.

In the poem 'Silent Love' the relationship between love and silence is indeed co-determinant. But like the disappearance of so many things in the natural world effected by their silent obedience to the seasons, love will be withered by time if it is not consummated, or if it does not break its silence:

1
The dew it trembles on the thorn
Then vanishes so love is born
Young love that speaks in silent thought
'Till scorned, then withers and is nought

2
The pleasure of a single hour
The blooming of a single flower
The glitter of the morning dew
Such is young love when it is new

3
The twitter of the wild birds wing
The murmur of the bees
Lays of hay crickets when they sing
Or other things more frail than these

4
Such is young love when silence speaks
Till weary with the joy it seeks
Then fancy shapes sup[p]lies
'Till sick of its own heart it dies

5
The dew drop falls at mornings hour
When none are standing by
And noiseless fades the broken flower
So lovers in their silence die[67]

The key to understanding of silent love here, so very different from the contentment which characterised the speaker's contemplation in 'My spirit lives in silent sighs', is the word 'frail'

[67] *LP* I, p. 499.

in the last line of stanza 3. Love in this instance, is neither eternal nor immutable. Though the particular distinctiveness of young love, or first love, is the subject matter, the fact that this poem is about the *general* experience, determines its detachment and worldliness. But this is not to say that it is a cynical poem. Instead, like 'First Love' it offers both the wonder and the horror of love, but from an impersonal narrative perspective.

The opening image is of dew, trembling. This is a minute world, a microcosm of 'single' (appearing twice in stanza 2) things unseen. Yet as in Andrew Marvell's 'On a Drop of Dew',[68] it is a 'little globe' so significant that it represents, encapsulates and circumscribes the birth of love. The same image begins stanza 5, specified as a 'dew drop' this time, and personified as a lonely entity '[W]here none are standing by'. The dew drop thus encloses the poem, yet its direct meaning is difficult to discern. Perhaps the speaker is pointing to the unutterably perfect silence of the appearance of dew 'at mornings hour', while making the reader aware of its equally miraculous disappearance when it 'is nought'. Love, it seems, is born quite out of the air like dew, but condensing onto the sharp 'thorn' (stanza 1) even at its birth. As in 'First Love', the love is doomed as soon as it is born. The first rhyme pairs of 'thorn' and born', and 'thought' and 'nought' capture both the fragility and indeterminacy of the emotion. And again, as in 'First Love', the appearance of 'love that speaks in silent thought', which is here 'scorned, then withers', suggests that the silence of the love is the quality which threatens it. It begs the question, how can a 'silent thought' be 'scorned'? Surely if the lover keeps his thoughts to himself, then he can't be scorned for them? The fact that sound - or a lack of it - determines the life of love is made clearer in stanza 3; all the similes are to the sound of birds. The rich glory of their sound almost coalesces into a three-piece

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[68] Cf. Andrew Marvell's 1681 poem 'On a Drop of Dew':

Restless it rolls and unsecure,
Trembling lest it grow impure,
Till the warm sun pity its pain,
And to the skies exhale it back again.
So the soul, that drop, that ray
Of the clear fountain of eternal day,
Could it within the human flower be seen,
Rememb'ring still its former height,
Shuns the sweet leaves and blossoms green;
And recollecting its own light,
Does, in its pure and circling thoughts, express
The greater heaven in an heaven less. (lines 15 to 26)

band in this stanza: the 'twitter' of percussion; the 'murmur' of the rhythm section; the 'lays' of the lead singers. But they are all said to be frail and like 'young love when silence speaks': the silent love, like the band, gives the game away when it voices itself.

The fourth stanza is full of ambiguities. The argument seems to be that love can peter out even when it attains the 'joy it seeks'. But how could 'young love' become 'weary with the joy' of fulfilling itself? Imagination plays a part in this weariness, somehow feeding the young love with 'shapes', which cause that love to become 'sick of its own heart'. The 'noiseless' fading of 'the broken flower' in the last stanza (5) is what threatened the speaker of 'I would not be a wither'd leaf' above. This dying love is therefore unconsummated; the desire withers as time moves on without some sort of reciprocation from the object of that desire. The stifling silence becomes a euphemism for the repression of sexual activity.

Although I have suggested there is no evidence that Clare ever had access to his poetry, I think that William Blake is the only poet of the period who might provide some intertextual help in understanding the complexity of this poem. There are two short poems of Blake's which offer parallels to this poem of Clare's. The first, 'The wild flowers song', is so Clare-like that it is hard to believe the two poets were unaware of each other's work:[69]

As I wanderd the forest
The green leaves among
I heard a wild flower
Singing a Song

I slept in the earth
In the silent night
I murmurd my fears
And I felt delight

In the morning I went
As rosy as morn
To seek for new Joy
But I met with scorn[70]

[69] Perhaps the common ground between the two poets was the major influence upon them both of the oral folk tradition of songs and ballads, which is arguably more evident in their work than in any other major male Romantic poet. This might be explained in turn by their similar personal backgrounds of the labouring and artisan classes.
[70] Erdman, p. 472.

The editors of *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* inform us that this poem was written 'just above it [The Sick Rose] on the page, in the same ink'.[71] Blake forged these two poems from the same ideas, so they should really be read together:

O Rose thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.[72]

In both of Blake's poems, the simple 'joy' of either the Rose or the 'I' of 'The wild flowers song', is threatened. The last words of both poems - 'scorn' and 'destroy' - leave a sour taste, exactly as the last word of Clare's 'Silent Love' is 'die'. The sexuality of 'The SICK ROSE' is made clear by '*his* dark secret love': the masculinity of the 'invisible worm' of adulthood seems somehow to violate the Rose's feminine virginal 'bed / Of crimson joy'. (This violation is reminiscent of the line in Clare's poem 'Honey words make charms of blisses' [73] in which 'The flowers are ravished by the bees' [line 23].) So, Blake's poems offer associative patterns of sexualised nature which are similar to Clare's. But in Clare's 'Silent Love' love is made 'sick' by itself; as it is unable to express itself and receive any reciprocity - indeed is 'scorned' - it 'noiseless fades'. There is no consummation in this poem at all, and the silence is the cause, not of joy, but of death.

It is quite rare for Clare to construct a poem in which young love, or first love, is explicitly said to die. More commonly, and perhaps more intriguingly, Clare writes of a love which is past but still alive. The following poem also shows how significant that image of 'dew', which intimately circumscribes the world of 'Silent Love', is to the fertile stage of the natural on which Clare writes his love poetry:

1
Thy spirit visits me like dew
That glistens on the flowers

[71] See 'Textual Notes', Erdman, p. 793.
[72] Erdman, p. 23.
[73] *LP* I, p. 595.

Falling in the morning blue
And in the evening hours
The wild flowers have a feeling
O'er my calm senses stealing
And love's soft dreams revealing
Seem wispering from the bowers[74]

The dew symbolises the magic of the 'spirit' of the speaker's lover, to whom the poem is addressed. This is an intimate poem, made more intimate than 'First Love' in being addressed *to* someone. It is still far from clear whether he consummates his love in the present of the narrative, or is luxuriating in the knowledge of already having done so, but for this poem sexual congress might be unimportant. The world of this love is so rich, so colourful and so comforting, that the speaker can indulge himself - without any sense of threat, doom or frustration - in the fertility of the surroundings enriched, made shiny and attractive, by the 'spirit... like dew'. It is right to think again of Marvell[75] because Clare is indulging in a metaphysical conceit: the spirit of the listener covers the intimate details of the landscape 'like dew'. The moisture that this poem drips with, covers the fecund scene in the same way that the spirit of the woman 'steals' '[o]'er' the 'calm senses' of the speaker. The feminine rhymes of the last four lines of this first stanza lend a sense of falling-off which dreamily suits the sleepy delicacy of the interlaced 'soft dreams...wispering...from the bowers'. The lazy 'l'-sounds, and the internal rhymes ('flowers' [line 5]) and consonance of the '-ing' endings of present tense

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[74] *LP* I, p. 531. The rhyme-scheme of this poem, *ababcccb,* is a rare one. Clare may have picked it up from Robert Burns' 'She's Fair and Fause' or from William Wordsworth's 'Hint from the Mountains for Certain Political Pretenders', published in *The River Duddon* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1820). However, Clare's metrical pattern is different from Burns' common measure, or Wordsworth's trochaic long meter. All three adhere in some sense to common measure, but all poets alter that measure idiosyncratically. For further details of Wordsworth's use of metre, see pp. 77 and 129 of *Numerous Verse: A Guide to the Stanzas and Metrical Structures of Wordsworth's Poetry*, Brennan O'Donnell ('Studies in Philology', Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, Fall, 1989).

[75] Clare was obviously fond of Marvell's work, so much so that he admitted to John Taylor in a letter of February 1st, 1826 that 'a poem in "Hones every day book" signed "Marvel" is mine' (*Letters,* p. 359). A couple of years later, in a panicky defence against an accusation of *'Plagerism',* Clare wrote to Hone humbly admitting that he

> 'did attempt to deceive you in one instance or two which I was gratified to find won your approbation but it was far different to the one of which I was accused & rather <that> then take another persons writings to insert under my name I sent them under the name of another & that might be the means of winning half your praise of which I do assure you I had the vanity to feel proud one of the Poems so sent was entitled 'Death' & offered you as the production of the honest & illustrious Marvel for which offence <perhaps> & blasphemey to his genius I humbly crave pardon...' (To William Hone, Friday, 29 February 1828, *Letters,* p. 416).

Later, when he came to copy out neatly *The Midsummer Cushion,* he quoted Marvell on the title-page:

> "How can such sweet & lovely hours
> "Be reckoned but with herbs & flowers"
> Marvel

(MS transcription: Pet A54, verso preceding p. 1; see also *MC,* p. xvii)

verbs and nouns ('Falling', 'morning', 'evening', 'feeling', 'stealing', 'revealing' and 'wispering') carefully slow the pace of this highly evocative stanza. The mind of the speaker is at peace with a world which is covered for his 'calm senses' by the presence of his lover. She has affected his vision of the natural, but the portrayal of that alteration could not be further from the terrifying changes wrought upon the speaker of 'First Love'. This speaker is in a beatified mental space. Love is 'revealing' itself to him, even if he is on his own:

2
The foxgloves freckled bells
That blossom by the wood
And in the forest dells
In the midst of solitude
There I hear my lover call
Where the whitethorn forms a wall
And the foxglove blossoms tall
In the tears of eve bedewed

The communication between the spirit of the speaker's 'lover' is as odd here as it is in 'First Love'. But it is clear at least that the speaker is comfortable in a place located in 'the midst of solitude', where the speaker is surrounded by the 'foxglove blossoms tall' and the 'whitethorn' which 'forms a wall'. This is a secret, personal space, where the speaker is protected by a natural border of enclosing floriferous density. And in the last line of this middle stanza is the gloss given everything the speaker perceives through the visionary faculties of the poet. The ambiguity of the lowercase 'eve' allows a number of interpretations. Elsewhere in Clare's poetry, Eve can be central to his construction of the fallen women he either pities or condemns.[76] The appearance of the foxgloves, and more importantly, the whitethorn, makes it certain that the scene is the 'end of spring and the beginning of high summer'[77] of love. It

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[76] Cf, 'Kate o' Killarney', stanza 2, lines 11 to 16:
Your daughters are fair as their grandmother Eve
As lovely - as tempting - as fain to deceive
If you set me like Adam to fall by your sin
By the priest o' St Patrick I'm sure I would win (*LP* II, p. 945)
For a more virulently misogynist version of Edenic sin, see the second stanza of *Don Juan a Poem* (LP I, p. 89). The fullest critical account of Clare's earlier utilisation of the Edenic myth can be found in Janet Todd, *In Adam's Garden: A Study of John Clare's Pre-asylum Poetry* (Gainesville, Fl: University of Florida Press, 1973).

[77] Richard Mabey, *Flora Britannica,* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, Reed International, 1996) p. 332. In actual fact, Clare saw foxgloves much later: 'August 28 Saw a very curious bee to day I think its the leaf cutter they were very plentiful about the Iron brown fox glove', *Natural History,* p. 270. According to Margaret Grainger, this foxglove would have been *Digitalis maxima ferrunginea* (see note 3, p. 270). The 'freckled bells' of the flower in this poem, indicates that it is more likely to be the much more common *Digitalis purpurea.* In 1785 William Withering had published an account of its medical uses, noticing for the first time 'its action in slowing

might be worth noting too that the whitethorn bush effectively encloses Clare here, as its major association at that time would have been as a hedge plant[78]. However, as Richard Mabey points out in *Flora Britannica,* it had long been a plant 'chosen to mark boundaries and meeting places'; it was also a plant 'associated with protection and sacrifice' which 'seems to bloom most typically in middle and late May'[79].

A diurnal cycle (from the dew of the morning in the first stanza, to the 'tears of eve' at the end of the second) takes us into the third and final stanza, which begins with an inversion of the first two words of the poem:

3
Spirit thou of every place
Where loves memories are left
Places as green as years of grace
Where hope lives of love bereft
My love lives in these green places
Where woodbine the white thorn embraces
Far from the crowd of worldly faces
Here loves spirit still is left

The third stanza sees a change in the temporal location of the love. It seemed for the most part to be very much in the present of the first two stanzas, but here there is a turn towards a more distant remembrance of a love long since past. The positioning of the love as 'memories... left' precipitates a more ghostly meaning to the governing word, and recipient of the poem - repeated here - 'Spirit'. This positioning is added to by the evocation of passing 'years', and the miserable vestige of 'hope' 'bereft' of love. The poet counters the passing of time, it seems, with an affirmative and alliterative '[m]y love lives'. And in giving his love a fixed natural, geographical location - bordered again by the 'white thorn['s] embraces' - it is almost as if he is giving a concrete reflection of an abstracted memory. The last line, in its triumphant statement of the immutability of 'loves spirit' (the third appearance of 'spirit'), admits by

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down the movements of the heart', *Treasury of Flower Lore,* Josephine Addison (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), p. 51.

[78] *Flora Britannica,* p. 210:
> ...single-species quickthorn hedges simply did not exist before the great parliamentary enclosures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in which something like 200,000 miles of thorn hedge were planted. Before that, hawthorn was a frequent (rather than abundant) component of mixed-species hedges and of chalk scrub, fens and woodland clearings.

[79] Ibid., p. 209.

inference that the physical being who embodied this love is long since past into a spiritual realm.

This then, is essentially a poem about love's eternity. In what is arguably the only sexual image of consummation, or at least of physical (rather than spiritual) contact, the 'woodbine' 'embraces' 'the white thorn'. If the whitethorn is the enclosing border around the space of the poet's memory - protecting him 'from the crowd of worldly faces' - that entangling woodbine might suggest that the speaker seeks protection from 'loves spirit', if the thorn represents the female, and the woodbine represents the male. Another later poem 'Could I but be a flower!' uses precisely the same natural imagery to suggest both spiritual and physical unification. In the unification, in the entanglement, lies protection:

I wish I was the wild woodbine
Twining round the white-thorn bough
I wish I was the wild hedge rose
Upon thy bonny bosom now
To feel thy thumb & finger nip
About my twisted stem
The flowers now touch thy ruby lip
To kiss their morning's gem
My flowers would kiss those lips o' thine
That kiss'd the dew drops made divine

I wish I was what I am not
The wild flower nodding on the lea
To win thy notice on the spot
And touch thy bosom fond and free
To touch thy bosom lily-white
To kiss thy shoulders marble bright
And in thy bosom dwell
To be thy heart's one whole delight
In thought and sense as well
My hearts own love could I but be
A flower I'd gaze my soul on thee[80]

It is in this poem that Clare comes close to - but doesn't quite reach - an evocation of that sense of physical and spiritual unification so lavishly described by Shelley's *Epipsychidion.* As I discuss the sexuality of this poem elsewhere (see 'Representations of Women' chapter), I will consider here what this poem implies for Clare's formal construction of love in general.

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[80] I have transcribed directly from manuscript (Pet MS C4, 307) as in *LP* II (p. 1,050) the paragraph division is omitted, rendering the rhyme-scheme and formal structure unclear. In this manuscript version, in Knight's hand, the poem is called 'Could I but be a flower!'.

The start of the poem signifies that this poem is a 'wish' as yet unfulfilled; that the following intertwining[81] imagery is in the infinitive ('To...': 'feel', 'kiss', 'win', 'touch', or 'be') or conditional future perfect, suggests that it is wishful thinking, as it hasn't 'happened' yet - or that it is wishful thinking in vain because the possibility of fulfilment is long since past. Either way, if this poem is only about wishful thinking - if indeed such 'Twining' could not take place - nor indeed ever did - then we are left with that same governing sense of distance from the object of affection which is significant in so many of Clare's later love poems.

But at least in 'Could I but be a flower!' there is a rich entanglement of rhyme and a compactness of image which offers itself up to a thorough close-reading. In terms of its form, this is Clare at his most adept. If it is a double sonnet, it is as short in metre as it is short in number of lines. The poet flirts with the reader's expectations of common measure, sometimes allowing the metre to dictate the length of a line - line 17 is perfect iambic trimeter - but more often lengthening the line to effect what has to be a deliberate slowing of pace, and to convince the reader that this is a complex poem, not a simple ballad. For all its variation, the metre is readable, and lends the poem a musicality which is reflected in the dense rhyme-scheme. The first couplet (lines 9 and 10) is a break which is confirmed by the repetition in the following line of the 'I wish I was' clause which began the poem. This couplet also resolves what at first appears to be an unrhymed word at the end of the first line. But for all this rhyming and metrical balance, this is a poem which reinforces the implausibility of the wishes ever coming true in the conditional 'could' and 'would'. The infinitives suspend the actualisation of the wished-for love into an impossibly conditional future. In Shelley's *Epipsychidion* the speaker is confident enough to assert a definitive future and present to a clearly-defined audience of one – his lover. In Clare's late love poetry such surety is almost

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[81] A Shelleyan word Clare himself often uses. See for example 'The Woods', stanza 2, *MC,* p. 260:

I seem to be myself
The only one that treads
The earth at such a time
So vacant is the mass
That spreads around me one hugh sea of leaves
& *intertwining* grains of thickest shades (my emphasis)

Shelley's use of the 'inter-' prefix can be confirmed in 'The Witch of Atlas': cf. 'intervolved' (line 92), 'intertangled' (line 245), 'interwoven' (line 398), 'interlunar' (line 418) and 'intertexture' (line 463) *The Complete Works,* p. 367.

entirely absent, unless the poem has an explicit addressee - a named and physically-compartmentalised woman (the subject of chapter 3). In 'I wish I was the wild woodbine' the speaker conceives of a love which is both spiritual and physical; in other words, a complete experience, joining 'thought and sense'. The final statement includes the elided 'I'd'; this unification, this fulfilment, of the male gazing flower is beyond the time of the poem. And even though the speaker is addressing someone intimately, sadness emanates from the hollow repetition of 'I wish', a technique which appears in *Don Juan A Poem* (see chapter 4). The love he wants is impossible: 'I wish I was what I am not' suggests that the speaker's identity somehow prevents him from achieving the intimate unification with his love. The distance which remains between the speakers and their loves in such poems is perhaps one of the reasons his speakers so frequently seek a place of safety, a location which offers solitude, a space for secret contemplation.

To end this chapter, it is fitting to turn again to Shelley, this time to a poem which Clare certainly had access to. In 'The Pine Forest of Cascine Near Pisa' the speaker finds an enclosed, secret and natural location. The similarities with Clare's descriptions of such places of peace and solitude (albeit in Northamptonshire rather than Italy) are clear. But Shelley's speaker has a companion to share the experience with. Clare's speakers in the later love poetry rarely do.

> The inviolable quietness;
> The breath of peace we drew
> With its soft motion made not less
> The calm that round us grew.
>
> It seemed that from the remotest seat
> Of the white mountain's waste
> To the bright flower beneath our feet,
> A magic circle traced...
>
> Were it not crocuses that grew
> Under the ilex-tree
> As beautiful in scent and hue
> As ever fed the bee?[82]

[82] *Miscellaneous Poems by Percy Bysshe Shelley* , (London: William Benbow, 1826), p. 99.

In the next chapter, I discuss the solitude and secrecy of Clare's speakers, which emerge consistently as themes whenever the feminine is considered in verse. Where Shelley's poem addresses an immediate feminine companion, Clare's speakers are often distanced, distracted and somehow displaced by femininity; solitude and secrecy in Clare's love and nature poetry, are the recourse of a male speaker when disturbed by the feminine.

Chapter 2
Secrecy, Solitude and Feminine Space

> An active hermit, even in age the child
> Of Nature, or the Man of Ross run wild.
>
> (Byron, *Don Juan,* VIII, lxiii)

Throughout his natural descriptive poetry, Clare seems to revel in discovering hidden eggs, birds, nests, and animal holes. He delights in finding hidden secret nooks where delicate flowers or animals can be alone, and protected. He offers natural narratives in which small wild animals are saved from the threat of mankind by finding shelter, security and safety:

> While from the rustling scythe the haunted hare
> Scampers circuitous with startled ears
> Prickt up then squat—as bye
> She brushes to the woods
> Where seeded grass breast high & undisturbed
> From pleasant clumps through which the suthering winds
> Softens her rigid fears
> & lulls to calm repose[83]

Humanity, here represented by the scythe, which has all sorts of grim associations, is sweeping away the vegetation which maintains the borders surrounding the hidden, and the hare is forced to retreat to even deeper hiding places. When that most sacred place of 'calm repose' is violated, often, as in this example, by mankind,[84] Clare might express anger and pain, of which the sonnet 'On finding a favourite Nook destroyed' is an excellent example:

> Poor outcast refugees of mother earth
> Condemnd in vain for rest & peace to roam
> Ye birds & beasts of fates despited birth
> Forced from the wilds which nature left your home
> By vile evasions of encroaching men

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[83] From 'Autumn', *MP* III, p. 258, lines 73-80. Also see *RM,* p. 43.

[84] Perhaps the most famous example of the theme is Robert Burns' 'To a Mouse':

> I'm truly sorry man's dominion,
> Has broken nature's social union,
> An' justifies that ill opinion,
> Which makes thee startle
> At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,
> An' fellow-mortal!

From Clare's copy of *The Poetical Works of Robert Burns,* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1817) p.105. The poem appears in *The Works of Robert Burns,* [ed. J. Currie] (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1814), Vol. III, p. 123, which he also owned. Items 134 and 135, *Northampton Catalogue.*

By whom wild natures nearly dispossest
—The rabbit has no waste to make his den
& the coy p[h]easant has not where to rest
& cawing rook as spring returns agen
Scarce finds a tree whereon to build its nest
An tyrant knaves while preaching freedoms laws
Crying down tyranny in stronger powers
You glut your vile unsatiated maws
& freedoms birthright in the weak devours [85]

The invasion and destruction of the 'favourite nook' is highly politicised by Clare. He effectively constructs the wanton and ignorant waste of natural places as a social war: tyrannical man versus the liberty of nature. The secret homes of the orphaned 'refugees' of 'mother earth' are invaded by 'encroaching man'. It is as if the breaking by blind destruction of this almost magical spell of secrecy, of security, forms an institutionalised invasion into personal and social liberties. Nature's nooks seem to offer a guarantee of privacy and secrecy; when this guarantee is threatened by human society, the poet feels his, and nature's, 'freedoms birthright' are being stamped upon. His identification with nature in such cases is politicised and personal.

In order to offer possibilities of protection for the poet and the natural microcosms he describes and places himself within, themes of hiding and secrecy become highly prevalent. Themes of secrecy are tied closely to the theme of trespass; as has been revealed by John Goodridge and Kelsey Thornton, places into which Clare 'trespasses' are themselves socially defined by the laws which govern their private or hidden status. As Goodridge and Thornton point out '...Clare's writings are permeated with the imagery of land boundaries, and of the two functions of boundaries, to enclose, and to exclude.'[86] Boundaries also exist between the hidden and the public, the secret and the disclosed. Historically, in the village, lonely habits were deemed 'odd', as Ronald Blythe has shown:

> Clare brought to a fine art the old village practice of vanishing in the local landscape. A village was, still is in some ways, the least private place on earth. A native village left one exposed and naked. To have kept an important side of oneself from the eyes and ears of the neighbours would have amounted to genius. To be 'different' as Clare was different

[85] *MP* II, p. 34.
[86] 'John Clare: the trespasser' in *John Clare in Context,* p. 99.

> was disastrous. In Suffolk we called it 'sticking out'. As we know, John Clare stuck out a mile, sometimes miserably, often not caring.[87]

The desire for solitude, and the limitations upon private space in a village, forced Clare into trespassing, as Goodridge and Thornton have pointed out. When Clare transgresses normal codes of social behaviour in becoming a trespasser, he displays a challenging interest in the hidden. The hidden can take the form of geographical place and social class, embodied by Burghley Park and the world it represents; and of social role such as in Clare's negotiations with problems of class and work-ethics surrounding his desire to be a reader and writer of poetry of (and perhaps for) the labouring-classes. As soon as he picks up a book he is entering a new and mysterious world; as soon as he enters Burghley Park to read he is challenging the social rules which keep poetry, leisure, and the stately park hidden from him. And yet, as Goodridge and Thornton and Blythe suggest, he is also hiding himself from the looks of his social peers, who would find his actions odd.

The desire for knowledge of the hidden, or disclosure of the secret, and the tensions which arise therein, develop in Clare's poetry into the many examples in which a speaker enjoys some sort of respite from society in a naturally hidden location. The idea of freedoms being encroached upon by the newly erected physical boundaries of enclosure is undoubtedly a prevalent one in Clare's life, but oddly enough it is Clare himself who sets up his own boundaries to 'enclose', as it were, his own secret and private worlds. Or at least his observation of existing boundaries, perhaps known only to the truly vulnerable - himself and small animals - reinforces a secret covert he shares with them, rather than with any class of humans. When those boundaries are infringed by human society, the poet reacts violently as above in 'On finding a favourite Nook destroyed'. In the following fragment these boundaries are formed by 'green bushes' but are always threatened by the 'pathway'. The verb remains in the infinitive, keeping the desire to be 'hid' infinitely alive:

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[87] 'John Clare in Hiding; 'He Hides and Sings', (delivered as the President's Address at the annual festival of the John Clare Society, July 1998) forthcoming in *Talking About John Clare,* (Nottingham: Trent Books, 1999) and available on *The John Clare Page* on the internet at <http://human.ntu.ac.uk/clare/blythe.html>.

To drop among green bushes in the spring
Hid from the thrushes that above head sing
With mossy trunks of trees for couch & seat
Where near a pathway dreads approaching feet[88]

As I have said, Clare repeatedly finds solace in the secret places nature offers to its smaller animals and birds. But here, he himself appears to express a desire to be hidden from boisterous thrushes. Significantly, he also expresses 'dread' at the possibility of being found by humans, but the syntax forces a strange source of that dread: it is 'a pathway' which 'dreads'. (The lack of punctuation forces this reading: place commas after 'seat' and 'pathway' and it is clear that it is the 'mossy trunks of trees' which 'dread'.) Clare then, arranges this short fragment so that his allies in finding solitude are not, strangely, the singing birds, from which he is 'hid'. His conspirators in fear of human discovery are the 'bushes', the 'trees' and perhaps the 'pathway'. The pathway, inevitably, will lead people to Clare's hidden spot, but it is also his ally in fear. Presumably it also provided Clare with his access to this spot. The speaker in this poem has found himself a natural womb - hidden, soft, alone - inside the comfort of his 'mother earth' (a stock phrase which appears in 'On finding a favourite Nook...' above, but rarely elsewhere in Clare's work). He concludes this fragment with a clear reminder that all hidden places are threatened with human discovery - with public knowledge. The 'dread' evoked then, is not merely fear of the loss of solitude, but it is also a fear of public intrusion, of public discovery, possibly even of public*ation.*[89]

For Byron, it is the lack of a pathway which defines the pleasure available for the seeker of solace in nature:

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society, where none intrudes,
By the deep Sea, and music in its roar:
I love not Man the less, but Nature more,
From these our interviews, in which I steal
From all I may be, or have been before,
To mingle with the Universe, and feel

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[88] *MP,* II, p. 237. Cf. 'The woodland stroll', *LP,* I, p. 669, lines 6 and 7: 'I leave the rude noise of the wearisome world / And hide me in thickets of white and black thorn'.

[89] 'The language of hiding and stealing and secrets that runs through Clare's poetry is also the language he uses in his autobiographical writings to describe the actual writing of poems.' Adam Phillips, 'The exposure of John Clare' in *John Clare in Context,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) p. 182.

What I can ne'er express, yet can not all conceal.[90]

Byron provides us with an explicit account of the solace seeker, finding society not in humanity, but in nature. His vista, as ever, is global rather than local, and his posture is performative, rather than personal. (Appearing in the fourth Canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage,* we can be sure of Clare's having read it.) But the fundamental differences between Clare's and Byron's representation of the male poet seeking solace in nature and by definition, solitude, are firstly that Byron makes it clear that the act is not defined by misanthropy - 'I love not Man the less' - and secondly that his poetic persona is unable to 'conceal' the feelings stimulated in him in his co-mingling with 'the Universe'. He admits too, to not being able to 'express' these feelings; maybe it is the lot of the poet never quite to be able to capture exactly the sublime feelings circulating after stolen 'interviews' with Nature. The persona in the poem is in retreat not from society, but from his own future and past: with Nature the poet can have 'interviews, in which I steal / From all I may be, or have been before'. He is thus creating an immutable moment for himself with Nature; time, mortality, and society are all forgotten on the 'lonely shore' or in the 'pathless woods'. Although Byron does not create a misanthrope of his seeker of the sublime, he does define these natural places as those 'where none intrudes'; it is essential for the Byronic seeker of sublimation to be alone. The lack of a pathway would also point to the Byronic desire to be the first man to penetrate the 'woods' of the natural world; by this might be inferred that the penetrating poet will make the obscurity of his experience of Nature clear to humanity. He becomes a poet-pioneer, a trailblazer for humanity, revealing the secrets of 'society' with Nature for the world. The relationship that Clare establishes between his poetic personas and human society is often less confident; Clare's retreat into nature's solitude is, by contrast, a direct result of the ravages of human society. He also suggests that his identity is somehow nurtured by the secrecies of nature, and equally, by the hiding of his love. It is often clearer in Clare's love lyrics than in his loco-descriptive poetry how the speaker's own imagination interacts with the hidden emotion. I would suggest that love, for Clare, *has* to have a fundamentally private nature; that

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[90] *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage,* IV, 178 *(Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works,* ed. Jerome J. McGann, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980, Vol. II, p. 184).

the acts both of hiding something within the self - be it knowledge, emotion or opinion - and of finding something secret, are fundamental to Clare's poetics. For Clare hiding is an act of rebellion and is anti-social. It is however, always complicated by his expression of the hidden in a literary arena; by his very act of writing, he is making the hidden seen, or rather, the hidden represented. The reader, therefore, is implied as a part of the *un*covering of the hidden. The complications of this *Catch 22* situation find a comic parallel in a short story by Flann O'Brien:

> Strictly speaking, this story should not be written or told at all. To write it or to tell it is to spoil it. This is because the man who had the strange experience we are going to talk about never mentioned it to anybody, and the fact that he kept his secret and sealed it up completely in his memory is the whole point of the story. Thus we must admit that handicap at the beginning - that it is absurd for us to tell the story, absurd for anybody to listen and unthinkable that anybody should believe it.[91]

The paradox that O'Brien makes comic, becomes a fragile tension in Clare's work. In the following poem Clare utilises this same paradoxical tension. The speaker of Clare's poem keeps his secret for very different reasons to O'Brien's story:

> I wandered forth to view the streams
> And breath[e] a bit the morning air
> Enjoying mornings summer dreams
> Where every thing looked fresh & fair
> When coming down the dusty road
> A bonny maid I chanced to meet
> Her neck was white her shoulders broad
> Her vacant look was very sweet
>
> Good morning sir the days so warm
> It almost melts one on the road
> Her voice was musics melting charm
> Her bosom soft her shoulders broad
> I wispered to her dont say Nay
> My own hearts secret loves you well
> She said a word - I will not say
> And told a tale I will not tell[92]

The speaker deliberately leaves the reader wondering what went on between the speaker and the 'maid'. It is no surprise to read the physical aspects of the woman being described - neck, shoulders and breasts - as there are literally hundreds of later poems which similarly reduce

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[91] 'John Duffy's Brother', *Stories and Plays,* Flann O'Brien (London: Paladin, Grafton Books, 1991), p. 75.
[92] *LP* II, p. 876.

the representation of 'vacant' women to these parts. But the presence of that ominous 'dont say Nay' and the following reluctance on the speaker's behalf to tell the reader what happened after the 'wispered' discussion, suggests that the mystery is not a sublime or transcendent one at all, but instead is something physical and even shameful. The fact remains that stylistically, the aposiopesis means that the reader is enticed to speculatively uncover the hidden by a speaker who 'will not tell'. And yet in that coy refusal to tell, the reader accepts that the speaker is not refused in his physical desire. The reader, in other words, lifts the veiling mystery of the narrative device, because the narrator provides the preceding sexuality and physicality in the representation of the woman; and the secret is disclosed, and is no more.

A well-known poem that exemplifies this contradictory theme of exposing a secret is 'I hid my love when young while I'. The main concern of the poem is a past secrecy - a 'secret love' - the last two words of the poem. The first four lines suggest that the mind of the speaker is tormented by the very act of hiding:

> I hid my love when young while I
> Coud'nt bear the buzzing of a flye
> I hid my love to my despite
> Till I could not bear to look at light[93]

The internalisation that the speaker experiences is undermining his awareness of his surroundings; it is violently disrupting his perceptions and, as I think is implied here, his usually patient sensory delicacy: he cannot 'bear' the information he is receiving from his ears and eyes. Also, there is a connection here between the flye and the light. A spare and internalised world of the flye 'buzzing' around 'light' is implied as a dominating image here. This image is contrasted with the next four lines of this opening stanza:

> I dare not gaze upon her face
> But left her memory in each place
> Where ere I saw a wild flower lye
> I kissed and bade my love good bye

Here the emphasis changes. The speaker 'dare not gaze'; we have to ask why not? What rule might he break, or what risk does he run, in gazing? Perhaps the gaze is meant to be a poet's long contemplation, or a lover's? Perhaps the gaze is set up to contrast with the 'look' of the

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[93] *LP* II, p. 891.

previous line. Or maybe the 'gaze' would expose the hidden love - simply. Then he moves on to the explicit internalisation of 'her memory', or rather, his memory of her. The movement of the next three lines is ostensibly direct: the memory of her (face?) is put aside by the act of kissing a flower. The fact that this is a repeated act in the past indicates that the kisses bestowed on the wild flowers do not actually ease the torment in the speaker's mind; the act of kissing 'in each place / Where ere I saw a wild flower lye' has a sense of ritual; of an act which, rather than alleviating the burden of sensory irritation, confirms a sort of private intimacy with his own love for the woman. It is as if the flowers become not only his confidants, but also an outward concretization of the emotion he feels for the woman (who at this moment in the poem, remains but a 'face'). The kissing of flowers - as I will explore - is a common expression for the activities of bees searching for nectar. In this image then, the speaker has become a solitary bee.

The pathos is evoked in the first stanza by the final rhyming words: in the 'good bye' the speaker bids to his love. The relationship seems a tragic one to the speaker, before it has even started. It seems as if the secrecy is oddly forcing the speaker to spread his love around, kissing 'her memory in[to] each place'. It is as if, by his act of kissing, the speaker is multiplying the nodes of poignancy which will remind him of his love: the love and memory of 'her' is kissed onto a flower, and left there, then given a good bye. The love then is put in secret, and sexual places. The flowers become passive receivers of the speaker's undisclosed love. As is often the case in Clare's lyrical love poetry, the poem then bursts into colour in the next stanza, and the reader is plunged into a quite magical, opulent natural realm, as the speaker turns to the surroundings. I think this stanza is very evocative of some very famous passages in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,*[94] although here it is the sun, and not the moon, which is the unifying image. What is startling in this stanza is the amount of touching:

I met her in the greenest dells
Where dew drops pearl the wood blue bells

[94] In Act 3, Scene 1, Titania offers Bottom the bounty of nature which is at her command:
The summer still doth tend upon my state;
And I do love thee: therefore go with me.
I'll give thee fairies to attend on thee;
And they shall fetch thee jewels from the deep,
And sing, while thou on pressed flowers dost sleep (Lines 148 to 152).

The lost breeze kissed her bright blue eye
The Bee kissed and went singing bye
A sun beam found a passage there
A gold chain round her neck so fair
As secret as the wild bees song
She lay there all the summer long

All is fertility and activity around 'her', as natural providence bestows gifts upon the recumbent woman. The pearl (here used as a verb) and gold chain are provided by the dew drops and the sun beam. The Bee and the breeze kiss her. It is worth noting here that bees have a literary history of being linked with kissing, most notably in Ben Jonson's fragmentary courtship 'verses of a kiss':

But kiss me once and faith I will be gone;
And I will touch as harmless as the bee
That doth but taste the flower and flee away.
That is but half a one;
What should be done but once should be done long.[95]

The difference in Clare's poem is that the bee kissing appears not only as analogy, but is portrayed as kissing (it seems) the woman itself. A simple simile in Jonson, becomes a complex metaphorical and metaphysical reality in Clare. As well as kissing, the Bee sings around her. The overall image is undoubtedly of some sort of fairy queen, reclining happily at the centre of a world which appears to worship her. All is external, sensual and relaxed, marking a considerable contrast to the internal frenzy implied in the first stanza. But still this scene has a secret magic to it. The line 'As secret as the wild bees song' refers either to the gold chain formed by the sunbeam, or to 'her neck so fair'. Either way, the speaker still manages to keep this scene a secret one. If he is keeping a secret scene, then he claims some sort of possession over it, and by implication, over the woman too. The 'bees song' is secret

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[95] This poem appears in 'Ben Jonson's Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden', *Ben Jonson; The Complete Poems* (Penguin Classics, 1988), p. 463. It is worth noting that there is a reference to a bee in 'Ode on Melancholy': 'Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips'. Again, the image is undoubtedly sexual, but is also used for the pun on 'bee/be', the mouth being the source of sensual existence, of *be*ing. (*John Keats: Complete Poems,* ed. Jack Stillinger [Belknap Harvard, 1982], p. 283, line 24). Also contemporary with Clare are these lines from Winthrop Mackworth Praed, a master of the love lyric, many of which bear a striking similarity in metrical structure and theme to Clare's:

And now is time to kiss the flowers
Which shun the sunbeam's sunny hours ;
For the book is shut, and the mind is free
To gaze on them, and to think of thee.

(Stanza II, 'To —.', *The Poems of Winthrop Mackworth Praed,* London: Edward Moxon & Co., 2nd Ed., 1864. Vol I, p. 243.).

because it is incomprehensible, so the implication here is not that the speaker is possessor of the secret (neck or chain), but that the woman is the possessor of something he can appreciate, but not understand, or, to be more frank, cannot touch. He sees the breeze and Bee kissing - something he cannot do. He sees the sun beam finding 'a passage there' - the passage that the speaker so desperately desires for himself - which is denied him. Why is it that the speaker is driven mad by the 'buzzing of a flye' but finds consolation in 'the wild bees song'? The speaker returns to this puzzling pairing in the third stanza:

I hid my love in field and town
Till e'en the breeze would knock me down
The Bees seemed singing ballads oe'r
The flyes buzz turned a Lions roar
And even silence found a tongue
To haunt me all the summer long
The Riddle nature could not prove
Was nothing else but secret love

So, where the Bees sing 'ballads', the flyes 'buzz' intensifies here to what is probably meant to be a frightening level. Again in this final stanza, the speaker refers to hiding his love; this time he places it in 'field and town' - unspecified geographical locations - vague, unidentified places, with no flowers to kiss this time. And again, the breeze appears; this too has been intensified from its first appearance in the second stanza where it 'kissed'; now it is threatening. The image in the first two lines is one of a madly obsessive lover, indulging ceaselessly in a repeated ritual which physically and mentally weakens him. The reappearances in the text of the phrase 'I hid my love' (for the third time), the breeze, the Bees and the flye(s) help to reinforce both the repetitive quality of the speaker's actions, and a sense of mentally internal entrapment. This disturbing portrayal of the speaker's mental state develops in the final four lines to a picture of solitude and frustrating torment. The very silence is personified and finds a voice.

The speaker is in some sort of personal hell. The very fact that he hides his love, that it is secret and not public - secret to him and only him and not shared with even the object of his passion - is the sole reason for the internalised torture portrayed in the poem. There is no explanation as to why he cannot express his love to us, as to him and 'nature', the affair

remains a 'Riddle'. Finally, the awkward and jarring final rhyme pair 'prove' and 'love'[96] point to the problems facing the speaker who cannot rationalise his love; he cannot test it out in the real world, or in the natural scene he constructs. The love remains internal, but the speaker is unable to rationalise it, or make it clear to himself or indeed understand it. Reasoning requires proof, but the sound of 'prove' cannot sit well with 'love', in the same way that the speaker's intellect - reflected in the natural surroundings he touches and kisses - cannot find harmony with the love he bears. It seems that the very secrecy of the passion prevents it from being a relaxing joy. We are returned, in this final bad rhyme pair, to awkward sounds, to the discomfort the speaker feels in the sounds of bees and flyes. In the last couplet, 'love' does not fit neatly with the previously perfect rhymes. The final word makes the end of the poem disjointed and uneasy - the very effect evoked in the speaker's mind by the love he bears for the nameless woman.

The predominant tension in the poem 'I speak in low calm breathing whispers' is again between the private and the public. In this poem however, it is language which threatens to destroy the magic of concealment.

> The word I would breathe in thy ear
> Is profaned by a cold worlds abuses
> My love to thee's utterd in fear
> Admits of a lovers excuses
> When we know that we feel it
> We try to conceal it
> Though the passion is sent from above
> The illtempered world tries to steal it
> What a gem in the heart is true love[97]

Expression of the 'word' felt by the poet is 'utterd in fear'. The very fact of feeling the emotion of love is said here to mean that we 'try to conceal it'. Love and concealment are thus mutually inclusive. In this first stanza the intruding and debasing enemy is the 'world' which is 'cold' and 'illtempered'. One assumes that the speaker means the world of human society; explicitly, they are deemed to want to 'steal' the love the speaker feels and conceals. The

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[96] By Clare's time this pair of words did not constitute a full rhyme, but there was already a long history of the two words being brought together in poetry. Although Clare is not original in pairing the two words, that every other rhyme-pair in the poem is a full rhyme is certainly significant. The lack of a clean concluding rhyme is a surprise to the ear, if not to the eye.
[97] *LP*, II, p. 1087.

'approaching feet' of humanity which was feared in 'To drop among green bushes in the spring' above, has become a whole world of corruption and dispassionate thieves, attempting to rob the speaker of his 'gem in the heart' of 'true love'. Not only is the world a band of thieves, it is also abusive of 'love'. The holy word is 'profaned' even though its referent 'is sent from above'. The language of the world at large, the public, has denigrated the sacrosanct meaning of the word love, a private and secret feeling, which thus has to be whispered, placed delicately, in the 'ear' of the lover. Again, the public world is threatening, and here actually degrading, the private. It seems that we murder to disclose. Adam Phillips has noted the sexual implications of this theme in Clare's poetry:

> In 'A Simile' it was the moment of appearance, of 'peeping' that was also the moment of 'decay'; in this image everyone is safe as long as the flower hides in the bud. Once out in the open the flower, like a woman (and perhaps Clare as the 'mad poet') is free to run riot, 'to be man's ruin', to be 'nasty'. Exposure corrupts.[98]

In the second stanza of 'I speak in low calm breathing whispers', the speaker reinforces the notion that if 'true love' can survive, it must remain hidden.

> Tis concealed in that white lily bosom
> And in the blue veins of each breast
> In thine eye love it bears a sweet blossom
> In thy heart it reposes in rest
> Yes there is the place where it hides
> And there is the oil it provides
> There nestles the innocent dove
> Where it sleeps like to rippling tides
> Oh there is nothing so sweet as true love

The speaker in this poem seems much more confident of the object of his affections than he does in 'I hid my love when young while I'. And he is more overtly sexual,[99] in a startlingly detailed fashion. The irregular metrical pattern of the first stanza is abandoned for an irregular metre akin to an unsubtle anapaestic trimeter, which lends the poem unsettling and stumbling rhythm. The place of concealment again is the heart, but here also in the 'bosom', 'blue veins

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[98] Adam Phillips, 'The exposure of John Clare' in *John Clare in Context,* p. 183.

[99] The whispering sexuality is comparable to the 'tuneless numbers' of Keats' 'Ode to Psyche':

> O Goddess! hear these tuneless numbers, wrung
> By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear,
> And pardon that thy secrets should be sung
> Even into thine own soft-conched ear...

John Keats: Complete Poems, ed. Jack Stillinger (London: Belknap Harvard Press, 1982), p. 275.

of each breast', and 'eye' of the lover. The love therefore is portrayed as being at the woman's very essence, but only it seems her physical essence. She is broken down into physical compartments, the breasts being the aspects of particular interest. The final stanza reveals that this poem develops into a tool for wooing, as the titular whispering comes into effect.

I speak in low calm breathing whispers
They fall on thy delicate ear
They're pure as the evening vespers
Though tremblingly spoken in fear
I am not fond of vulgar abuses
I come with no idle excuses
Oh let me but call thee my dove
My fond heart it never refuses
To join in the praise of true love

With this poem we are left with the disturbing possibility that the motivation behind the speaker's desire for secrecy is not necessarily purely because he fears the 'worlds abuses' of love; he may also wish to be alone with this 'dove' (the words 'woman', 'she' or 'her' do not appear in this poem) so that he can engage her in the highly charged sexual 'low calm breathing whispers' of the title. In other words, he is prepared to set up the whole structure of public versus private to encourage the woman to find privacy with him so that he can further explore the physical attributes he delineates in the second stanza. In this poem then, the secret arena encloses the private sexual desires of the male. And more literally, the hidden status of 'love' requires a hidden place to continue the speaker's sexual advances. Finally, what distinguishes this poem from many other later love lyrics is the use of various religious terms: 'profaned', 'passion is sent from above', 'evening vespers' and 'join in the praise' all seem to me to lend a disturbingly holy charm to the wooer's discourse. Like John Donne, who uses the language and imagery of love to discuss religion, and the language of religion to discuss love, Clare turns to the authority of the Christian passion to lend a transcendent *gravitas* in the attempt to persuade the woman to 'join' with him. In the pursuit of sexual intimacy the speaker couches his diction in phrases which are used to disarm a negative reaction from the pursued object of his love. Like Romeo's initial banter with Juliet,[100] Clare mixes up the imagery of a holy worship with entirely physical and human lust. To sum up, this is an anti-

[100] See *Romeo and Juliet,* Act I, Scene 5, line 105: '...let lips do what hands do; / They pray, grant thou, lest faith turn to despair'.

social poem, which characterises society in a depressing way in order to provide motivation for the object of the speaker's desire to be alone with the speaker. The desire for sexual secrecy forces Clare to set himself up as a holy loner in contrast to a corrupting and 'vulgar' society.

In an earlier *Midsummer Cushion* poem, Clare's reaction to the sexuality of what we might call 'the hiding moment' is extremely subtle:

> Heres a wild rose just in bud
> Springs beauty in its hood
> My bonny Mary Lee
> Tis the first in all the wood
> I could find for thee
> Though a blush is scarcely seen
> Yet it hides its worth within
> Like my love for Ive no power
> My angel Mary Lee
> To speak unless the flower
> Can plead excuse for me[101]

As becomes more evident in 'Flowers and Spring', flowers frequently play active roles in the 'play' of the narratives of Clare's lyrical love poetry. Here in 'Mary Lee' he interweaves his own sexuality, and that in the blushing innocence of the love-object, with the flower, themes of hiding and expectation, and the impotency of the poet, who cannot 'speak' his love. The virgin-flower bud, with its hymenal 'hood' (in Blake's terms something akin to Thel's 'curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire' or Oothoon's 'virgin mantle'[102]) which 'hides its worth within' appears as an exact allegory to the eponymous Mary Lee. The powerlessness of the speaker is coyly and disarmingly portrayed, but the intent of the speaker is surely for a penetrative or revelatory opening up of the 'bud' of the female's sexuality; the hidden nature of Mary Lee's sexuality is here intensely attractive. Indeed, it seems that the sexuality of the female - and the female genitalia - is exciting for the male speaker because it is hidden. It has the potential to be revealed, but the poem is clearly situated at a pre-revelatory moment. The sexual energy and excitement of this poem is *potential* . As in Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn',

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101 From 'Mary Lee', *MP* III, p. 412, lines 34-44 and *MC,* p. 175.
102 See *The Book of Thel,* Part IV, line 20, and 'The Argument' to *Visions of the Daughters of Albion,* line 8, (*The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake,* ed. David V. Erdman, New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1988), pp. 3 and 45 respectively.

it is the *possibility* and aroused expectation of intimacy that is the source of fascinated male excitement.

In one of Clare's longer late poems 'A Raphsody', the speaker finds peace as opposed to sexual or mental anxiety, in a naturally hidden location. He begins:

> Sweet solitude what joy to be alone
> In wild wood shady dell to stay for hours
> Twould soften hearts if they were hard as stone
> To see glad Butterflies & smiling flowers
> Tis pleasant in these quiet lonely places
> Where not the voice of Man our pleasure mars
> To see the little bees with coal black faces
> Gath'ring sweets from little flowers like stars[103]

It is quite clear here that the main reason the speaker is able to indulge in joy, is that he is alone, away from 'the voice of Man'. His chosen society is not the human variety, and he confirms this further on:

> Theres sweet society in fields and woods
> Sweet are the pleasures mid the long love grass
> I' lakes and rivers and in widest floods
> That in the noon day shine like burnish'd glass
> I like the wild flowers where the lone bees hum
> The clouds which leave their shadows as they pass
> They through the sky like ships & armies come
> I hail thee Nature as my heritage and home[104]

In this stanza there are some delicate tensions which I think indicate that the speaker's loneliness is not altogether as peaceful as it seems to be. The predominant reason is the simile which joins clouds with 'ships & armies'. There is something weak and unconvincing about the 'I hail' of the last line of this stanza, although its warlike or stately resonance does link with the preceding 'ships & armies'. Admittedly, these two stanzas are not the most valuable in the poem, but they do comment on the present theme of deliberate secrecy. Here, the speaker is far away from the concerns of love, and yet secrecy and hiding are still the reasons he is able to enjoy his 'home' in 'Nature'.

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[103] *LP* II, p. 992, lines 1-8.
[104] *LP* II, p. 994, lines 54-61.

The question of Clare's propensity for misanthropic solipsism arises when considering how he envisages the bee. This is made more clear in another late poem, 'The Humble bee',[105] which I quote here in full.

When lifes tempests blow high
In seclusion I tread
Where the primroses lie
And the green mosses spread
Where the bottle tit hangs
At the end of a twig
Where the humble bee bangs
That is almost as big

2
Where I feel my heart lonely
I am solitudes own
Talking to myself only
And walking woods lone
In the wood briars and brambles
Hazel stools and oak trees
I enjoy such wood rambles
And hear the wood bees

3
That sing their wood journey
And stop at wood blooms
Where the primroses burn ye
And the violet perfumes
There to myself talking
I rub through the bushes
And the boughs where I'm walking
Like a sudden wind rushes

4
The wood gate keeps creaking
Opened ever so slow
And from boughs bent to breaking
Often starts the odd crow
Right down the green riding
Gladly winds the wild bee
Then through the wood side in
He sucks flowers in glee

5
He flies through the stovens
Brown hazel and grey
Through fern leaves like ovens

[105] *LP* II, p. 684.

Still singing his way
He rests on a moss bed
And perks up his heels
And strokes o'er his small head
Then hies to the fields

6
I enjoy these wood rambles
And the juicey wheat fields
Where the wood rose – and brambles
A showers covert yields
I love the wood journey
Where the violets melt blue
And primroses burn ye
With flames the day through

Ostensibly about the journey of a bee, the final stanza proves that the speaker feels himself to be the 'humble bee', and it is his solitary way that we follow in this poem. The speaker is retreating from 'lifes tempests', and says he is 'solitudes own' and in 'seclusion'. In the third stanza he repeats what he has said in the second: 'to myself talking'. The final image of the poem is of colour - the primroses' colour is so bright that it is said to 'burn ye' (in stanzas 3 and 6). The speaker is portrayed as, once again, seeking retreat 'walking woods lone' (lone could refer to either the speaker or the woods of course - the brevity of the line forces the poet to elide the suffix 'ly'). He has deliberately sought loneliness and isolation. He is a misanthrope in the sense that he is actively avoiding the society of human beings, to follow the bee who 'sucks flowers in glee'.

In his psychoanalytical analysis of the mind of the Romantic period, *The Self as Mind,* Charles Rzepka claims that the male poet generally displays an

> anxiety over self-representation and misprision in the eyes of the world. The resistance to self-consciousness, which leads ultimately to visionary solipsism, can take the form of physical retreat or mental withdrawal... He is torn between his uneasy feeling that the wholly self-possessed mind lacks reality, and his fears over the loss of self-possession incurred by accepting the self as an object whose meaning depends on recognition from others.[106]

Rzepka's proposition here seems to fit the psychological profile of many of Clare's later-poetry speakers. As in the relationship with the bee in 'The humble bee', they often draw

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106 *The Self as Mind: Vision and Identity in Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats*, Charles J. Rzepka (Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 27. Unfortunately like most Romantic critics, Rzepka ignores Clare, apart from one comment about Clare's 'drifting away' from identity, p. 248.

meaning not from human society, but from the recognition that their own behaviour is a naturally-justified norm. But it seems that the poems discussed above display a pattern in Clare's later poetry which, to simplify, implies firstly that the speaker is often an active seeker of solitude and secret places (problems arise because he is aware that his secret habits are deemed odd by society at large). Secondly that his expression of love to another has to remain secret to be fulfilled; either secret just between him and his lover, or, more dramatically, secret only to himself. The fulfilment of secret love can never be achieved, in the same way love cannot exist in the public domain - an inherent contradiction which provides the speaker of 'I hid my love' with his source of internal frustration. This is close in its contradictory nature to the passage in Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn':

> Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
> Though winning near the goal–yet do not grieve;
> She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
> For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair![107]

Maintaining this excited expectation of pre-consummated physical desire is closely akin to maintaining that love's secrecy. The necessarily secret nature of love in much of Clare's poetry is the quality which prevents that love from even being uttered, let alone consummated. Tension arises in the apparent inability to express love or a self-doubt in considering the expression of love. Thus repeatedly he does not 'dare' look at the object of his hidden affection, nor does he dare speak his love. When the love lyric is written as if spoken directly to the object of affection, as in 'I speak in low calm breathing whispers', the tone becomes immodestly sexual, although prudish and paradoxical claims are still made that the language of love is much abused. In other poems, as I have shown in 'First Love',[108] the language of love is silence: incomprehensible, inexpressible and hidden from all but the speaker.

Perhaps inevitably, silence, solitude and unconsummated, even unreciprocated, love lead to poetic expressions of Rzepka's 'visionary solipsism'. The poem 'There is a charm in Solitude...'[109] reveals a speaker who is at one only with himself.

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[107] 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', *John Keats: Complete Poems,* ed. Jack Stillinger (Belknap Harvard, 1982), p. 282, lines 17-20.
[108] *LP* II, p. 677.
[109] *LP* I, p. 596.

There is a charm in Solitude that cheers
A feeling that the world knows nothing of
A green delight the wounded mind endears
After the hustling world is broken off
Whose whole delight was crime at good to scoff
Green solitude his prison pleasure yields
The bitch fox heeds him not – birds seem to laugh
He lives the Crusoe of his lonely fields
Which dark green oaks his noontide leisure shields

Explicitly literary in its evocation of *Robinson Crusoe,*[110] this poem sits awkwardly for any critic wishing to simply summarise what Clare's relationship was to the natural secrecies and intimacies he was a party to and confidant of. Clare constructs a totally solitary figure, a victim of ridicule seeking shelter (as above in 'To drop among green bushes in the spring') from birds who 'seem to laugh' at him and the 'bitch fox' who just ignores him. Animate members of the natural world are thus set against him. His only succour is to reflect the 'dark green' enclosing walls of an imprisoning wombic and vegetative nature in the 'green delight' and '[g]reen solitude' of his 'wounded mind'. Hidden away from the jeering world, Clare is indeed close to Rzepka's proposed 'visionary solipsism' of the Romantic imagination. His mind has found an enclosed paradise for itself: hidden, secret, solitary and 'dark green'. But Clare's speakers are aware of their isolation, and identify with places whose physical actuality matter to them. The society of the natural prevents Clare's speakers from becoming solipsists. But still, solitude and loneliness, as Seamus Heaney believes, are two of the significant characteristics of Clare's most successful poetry:

> What crowns the lifetime's effort, however, is the great outpouring in his early middle years of short verse about solitary figures in a landscape, or outcast figures, or threatened

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[110] Clare discusses the novel at some length in prose:

> '...the Romance of 'Robinson Crusoe' was the first book of any merit I got hold of after I coud read twas in the winter and I borrowd it of a boy at s[c]hool, who said it was his uncles and seemed very loath to lend it me, but pressing him with anxious persuasions and asuring him of its saftey while in my hands he lent it me that day to be returnd in the morning when I came to school, but in the night a great snow fell which made it impossible to keep my promise as I coud not get, Glinton being 2 miles from our village were I went to school, so I had the pleasure of this delightful companion for a week new ideas from the perusal of this book was now up in arms new Crusoes and new Islands of Solitude was continually mutterd over in my Journeys to and from school but as I had not the chance of reading it well I coud not come at the spirit of the thing to graft a lasting impression on the memory, which if I had woud perhaps have been a little benefit to my future attempts...' (*By Himself,* p. 15).

An 1831 edition of the novel was in the possession of John Clare's son Frederick as a gift of 1834 from John Taylor (item 184, *Northampton Catalogue*). Although the editors of *By Himself* think that the novel was available to Clare only in chapbook form (see note 10 on p. 287), it appears to be clear in Clare's account that the book was highly valued by his friend's uncle. This might suggest that it was an expensive edition, not a chapbook.

> creatures, or lonely creatures, or birds and birds' nests, or dramatic weather changes, all of which manage to encompass uncanny intimations of both vulnerability and staying power.[111]

Indeed Clare does confirm the 'staying power' or emotional strength to be derived from the natural landscape. In the sonnet 'Pastoral Liberty', Clare emphasises the positive aspects of seeking solitary solace in nature:

> O for the unshackled mood as free as air
> & pleasure wild as birds upon the wing
> The unwronged impulse won from seasons fair
> Like birds perrenial travels with the spring
> Come peace & joy the unworn path to trace
> Crossing ling-heaths & hazel crowded glen
> Where health salutes me with its ruddy face
> & joy breaths freely from the strife of men
> O lead me any where but in the crowd
> On some lone island rather would I be
> Than in the world worn knowledge noising loud
> Wealth gathering up & loosing—leave with me
> Calm joy & humble hope from quiet won
> To live in peace unhurt & hurting none[112]

Liberty here is directly related to elements of the natural landscape. And it is liberty from work, from worry, from oppression of any kind. The desire is to internalise the natural elements, not merely to understand their symbolic meaning. This regular Shakespearean sonnet apportions its ideas neatly into three quatrains and a concluding couplet. The first quatrain is an imperative call for the freedom of the sky and its inhabitants; then there is another imperative call on 'peace & joy' in the second quatrain, away from 'the strife of men'; the third quatrain is yet another imperative call, this time to be led away from humanity, and here the speaker finally establishes from what it is he wants freedom. The couplet neatly turns the mood back to the positive assertion of peaceful delight over the preceding 'noising loud' of the 'crowd'. Again, the retreat is from society, and a society which is characterised as strife-ridden, 'worn', noisy and 'loud'. Clare reads the relentless gaining and losing of capital as an on-going process: 'Wealth gathering up & loosing'. And again he refers to *Robinson Crusoe,* wishing himself on 'some lone island'. The sense of quiet space in the natural world - 'as free as air' - is contrasted with the noisy 'crowd' of human society; nature is 'crowded' instead

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[111] Seamus Heaney, 'John Clare: a bi-centenary lecture' in *John Clare in Context,* p. 139.
[112] *MP* IV, p. 303 and *MC,* p. 455.

with 'hazel' trees. The companions of the speaker are to be 'pleasure', 'peace & joy', 'health', 'calm', 'humble hope'; together they are 'the unworn path to trace'. A strong intertextual link can be forged with the stanza from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* discussed above, where Byron writes 'There is a pleasure in the pathless woods'. The joy is heightened for both poets in retreating to places where there is little evidence of humanity's relentless activity. Implicit in this, is that the poet is not really a part of common society. He is somehow different.

Another *Midsummer Cushion*-period sonnet, 'Field Thoughts', details the experiences the speaker might have during a spell of 'pastoral liberty':

> Field thoughts to me are happiness & joy
> Where I can lye upon the pleasant grass
> Or track some little path & so employ
> My mind in trifles pausing as I pass
> The little wild flower clumps by nothing nurst
> But dews & sunshine & impartial rain
> & welcomly to quench my summer thirst
> I bend me by the flaggy dyke to gain
> Dewberrys so delicious to the taste
> & then I wind the flag fringed meadow lake
> & mark the pike plunge with unusual haste
> Through water weeds & many a circle make
> While bursts of happiness from heaven fall
> There all have hopes here fields are free for all[113]

Again the thoughts of the speaker are directly dependent upon the spatial liberties of the natural landscape. It may be that a 'field thought' is one which is opened up by the '[s]kys holding bland communion with the ground'[114] - the internalisation of the topography of the landscape allows for a clarified contemplation of that landscape. Far from being closeted in a wombic embrace, the speaker is supported in this sonnet by the grass on which he lies, and is refreshed and 'nurst' like the 'wild flower clumps' by the 'impartial rain'. The path that appears in this sonnet is 'some little' one - the 'little' suggesting that it might be an animal track.

Indulging in these expansive, yet intricately and delicately detailed 'field thoughts', the speaker becomes as much a part of the watery natural ecosystem as the 'pike', who is the cause of the 'many a circle' on the water's surface. These circles are also the result of the

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[113] *MP* IV, p. 311 and *MC*, p. 461.
[114] 'Early Images', line 22, *MP* IV, p. 304 and *MC*, p. 456.

heaven-sent 'bursts of happiness' of raindrops, purifying and somehow enlightening the speaker. The final line is a statement of political purpose; the speaker wants the freedom of access to such places, and by association, such 'field thoughts', 'free to all'. This could be read as another anti-enclosure poem; or maybe its theme is grander. It is possible that the speaker is positing the possibility of real social freedoms through the example of the poet's 'unshackled mood as free as air'. The fields are the representation, the embodiment, maybe even the realisation of heaven on earth. As Jonathan Bate has pointed out, the pastoral tradition which Clare evokes could be seen to be very much a part of libertarianism:

> Politically alert critics are often suspicious of rural poetry because of its apparent tendency to cover up ugly realities and to fall in with Burkean values. It is easy to argue that Housman's Shropshire and Coleridge's Quantocks elicit a misty-eyed nostalgia which draws attention away from war-mongering governments. But it could equally well be argued that to be at one with nature is to foster liberty.[115]

Society's 'hopes' in the last line of 'Field Thoughts' rest in communion with 'fields... free for all'. The future happiness of society, and its future freedoms, are linked directly to society's consciousness, and that consciousness is somehow formed in the spatial formations of the land. This is reinforced in one of the 'Northborough Sonnets':

> Green quiet peace be ever in the way
> If drove to shelter neath a hedgrow tree
> From troubles storms that fancys moods way lay
> Tis sweeter then a palace shared with thee
> & sweet simplicity give me to know
> That little to my good & small beside
> A harmless meekness that disdains to show
> Man homage to the evilness of pride
> Stern faith & honest guard my humble door
> Give me the help that best of ways to choose
> Rude badness shun for love of goodness more
> & honestys right dealings never loose
> That lease of happy thoughts may have their scope
> Feeding on spring & summer & their hope[116]

The '[g]reen quiet peace' of the pastoral mind has a moral imperative here; it sets itself against the 'evilness of pride' and '[r]ude badness'. It embodies 'stern faith', 'sweet simplicity' and 'harmless meekness'. And importantly it provides a 'lease of happy thoughts' which are

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[115] Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and The Environmental Tradition,* (London: Routledge, 1991) p. 114.
[116] *Northborough Sonnets,* p. 8.

nurtured 'on spring & summer & their hope'. The natural world directly provides a sustenance for hope (and one might presume literally provides the food for the rural community). The simple 'quiet peace' also sets itself up against a materially wealthier readership: the simple, rural solitude is contrasted with the luxuries of 'a palace'. It is possible that the speaker is extolling the virtues of a peaceful, rural life, without material wealth, over the evils of an urban society which houses the ruinous temptations of pride and luxury. Hope, simplicity, faith and humility are all perfectly exemplified in the 'green quiet peace' of rural life. As in the last line of 'Field Thoughts', it is hope which is the end result of such a close coexistence with the simplicities of nature.

The rural poet's seeking of solitude in nature is thus potentially of benefit to a wider society, rather than merely a way of avoiding society altogether. To understand how the figure of a solitary poet in a natural scene came to be such a significant aspect of Romantic poetry, it is necessary to turn to William Wordsworth. In Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence', the achievement of solitude without hope for human society is not necessarily the aim of the poet's lonely quest:

> I heard the sky-lark warbling in the sky;
> And I bethought me of the playful hare:
> Even such a happy Child of earth am I;
> Even as these blissful creatures do I fare;
> Far from the world I walk, and from all care;
> But there may come another day to me—
> Solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty.[117]

Wordsworth sets up the familiar contrast of his present 'summer mood'[118] with the horrible future possibilities of '[s]olitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty'. The 'Traveller'-poet[119] is placed '[f]ar from the world' and free 'from all care', surrounded by a sunny, fecund and busy nature. As is implicit in Clare's 'Field Thoughts', the poet is as much a central part of that natural bounty as the flora and fauna he considers: 'a happy Child of earth am I / Even as these blissful creatures do I fare'. The poet evokes a return to an innocent, nascent and blissful

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[117] Lines 29 to 35 [Fifth stanza] of 'Resolution and Independence', a rare example of rhyme royal. See Clare's edition of *The Miscellaneous Poems of William Wordsworth*, (London: Longman, [&c.], 1820, Four Vols.), Vol. II, p. 197. Item 407, *Northampton Catalogue.*
[118] Ibid., [sixth stanza] line 37.
[119] Ibid., [third stanza] line 15.

state, but cannot help but worry about future cares in the final lines of this stanza. His innocence is somehow corrupted by these stress-inducing concerns. Eventually these worries turn to the legendary Chatterton, whose end was 'despondency and madness'.[120] Wordsworth makes it plain that his societal worries are to do with his own future status as a poet:

> My former thoughts returned: the fear that kills;
> And hope that is unwilling to be fed;
> Cold, pain, and labour, and all fleshly ills;
> And mighty poets in their misery dead.
> —Perplexed, and longing to be comforted,
> My question eagerly did I renew,
> "How is it that you live, and what is it you do?"[121]

The question is asked again of the Leech-gatherer, who is, unlike the temporarily lonely Traveller-poet, someone whose occupation is thoroughly solitary. Wordsworth's persona finds great peace in this man's mind. 'Resolution and Independence' is a poem which places a speaker in a lonely natural world, only to have that speaker unable to calm his personal worries. The freedom and fertility that the natural world offers him also allow him the freedom to nurture his deep-seated fears. The speaker is led by the example of another human-being whose mind is not troubled by such 'untoward thoughts'[122]:

> While he was talking thus the lonely place,
> The old Man's shape, and speech—all troubled me:
> In my mind's eye I seemed to see him pace
> About the weary moors continually,
> Wandering about alone and silently.
> While I these thoughts within myself pursued,
> He, having made a pause, the same discourse renewed.
>
> And soon with this he other matter blended,
> Cheerfully uttered, with demeanour kind,
> But stately in the main; and, when he ended,
> I could have laughed myself to scorn to find
> In that decrepit Man so firm a mind.
> "God," said I, "be my help and stay secure;
> I'll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!"[123]

The speaker is thus finally impressed with the solidity of the Leech-gatherer's intellect, in the midst of such grey and miserable loneliness. The moor, for all its natural bounty, is a place

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[120] Ibid., [seventh stanza] line 49.
[121] Ibid., [seventeenth stanza] line 113 to 119.
[122] Ibid., [eighth stanza] line 53.
[123] Ibid., [nineteenth and twentieth stanzas] lines 127 to 140.

which symbolises a God who takes 'no heed at all' (line 42) of man. Ultimately the Leech-gatherer reaffirms the Traveller-poet's faith in God, as an example of utterly lonely humanity. The earth-Child of humanity is lonely because it has a Father who does not communicate with it. It is loneliness which shakes the speaker's faith in God, and an example of an unshakeable human fortitude in the utterly hopeless solitude of the moor which resolves his arising doubts and fears. His initial delight in being far 'from the world' and free of 'all care' seems to have been a postured stance and is certainly undermined by subsequent profound fears.

Figures similar to the Leech-gatherer appear in Clare's poetry,[124] though typically, he rarely creates a narrator's persona to interact with the figure he represents:

It is a lonely place indeed
The very wild geese stay to feed
The cattle stand & stare for home
& glad to see a stranger come
Will run to see the open tray
& knock you down to get away
the house among the thistles grey
Was robbed & in the open day
The dykes all trampled by the horse
A broken ladder lies to cross
The flaggy forrest & the flood
The otter holes & ozier wood
Are all the shepherd has to see
Theres neither hill nor bush nor tree

So few the lonely journey stray
The very pathway grows away
One lonely man I see no more
Is hacking thistles on the more
A man may trample all the day
Nor see a house for all the way
They dig for trees that deeply lie
So long theyd almost touch the sky
They say who see his lonely face
They would not live in such a place
For all their eyes has ever seen

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[124] Cf. these lines from 'The Mole Catcher':
An ancient man is seen about the woods
& on the plashy paths along the moor
Pottering wi mellancholy paces oer
His propping stick he gogs when days are dry
Glad to escape his neighbours troubles sore
In that sad house – for peace beneath the sky
From pain that in deaths arms on straw beds groaning lye
MP II, p. 21, lines 1-9.

With him the world has hardly been
The shepherd laughs & never cares
Though gipseys shun a dwelling there[125]

One could almost describe these two iambic tetrameter-sonnets as an objective consideration of solitude, in that the speaker only presents himself in the text of the poem in the third line as no longer seeing the shepherd character he describes. The word 'lonely' appears four times, describing the place, the man and the path to the place. It is not made clear, and perhaps is not significant here, whether the loneliness of 'the more' without 'hill nor bush nor tree' (a similar environment to that of Wordsworth's poem) is of benefit or something to be sought after. The house has been 'robbed & in the open day', suggesting that such isolation has potentially dangerous consequences. Society it seems, is generally afraid of the lonely example: '[t]hey would not live in such a place'. There is also something bleak about the meagre existence eked out in such a place. But the final three lines are ambiguous: on the one hand the 'world has hardly been' in interaction with the experiences of the shepherd and he is thus happily free of 'cares'; but the final line suggests that even society's outsiders - the 'gipseys' - consider the lonely 'more' a place to be avoided. The shepherd and his place then, embody an outsider's outsider.

Overall, Clare's vision of loneliness in the later poetry could be seen to be quite the opposite to Wordsworth's in 'Resolution and Independence'; often a heaven on earth can *only* be realised in solitude. The last line of 'Pastoral Liberty' contains a technique which resurfaces dramatically many years later in 'I Am'. Clare uses the same core adverb 'hurt' twice, neatly changing the meaning: 'To live in peace unhurt & hurting none'. He makes similar use of the verb 'to trouble' in 'I Am' in the penultimate line: 'Untroubling, and untroubled where I lie'[126]. In 'Pastoral Liberty' the speaker doesn't want to be the victim or the cause of 'hurt', and the idealised way of achieving this risk-free existence is to create a 'lone island' of himself in a sea of 'calm joy'. In the same way, 'I Am' portrays a speaker whose ideal state is a completely non-interactive stasis. It is a return to the peaceful innocence of a 'childhood, sweetly slept' away. The innocent state is redolent of Wordsworth's initial joy in being 'a

[125] *Northborough Sonnets,* p. 21. Although these are two separate couplet-sonnets, and I concentrate my attention upon the second, they only make sense when read together.
[126] *LP* I, p. 396, line 17.

happy Child of earth' in 'Resolution and Independence' and his desire to be far 'from the world' of man. And this idealised situation in 'I Am' harks back again to Byron's 'pathless woods' in its desire to be a place 'where man hath never trod'[127] but in Clare's verse the purpose of solitary wanderings is not to be a pioneer, or a trailblazer. Instead this embodies an absolute retreat from human society.

The contradictory pleasure potentially available through the theoretical contemplation of utter isolation, while simultaneously maintaining the desire for an echoing presence of woman, becomes the heaven which is evoked in another of the *Northborough Sonnets:*

I hate the very noise of troublous man
Who did & does me all the harm he can
Free from the world I would a prisoner be
& my own shadow all my company
& lone & see the shooting stars apear
World rushing into judgment all the year
O lead me onward to the lonliest shade
The dearest place that quiet ever made
Where kingcups grow most beautious to behold
& shut up green & open into gold
Farewell to poesy & leave the will
Take all the world away & leave me still
The mirth & music of a womans voice
That bids the heart be happy & rejoice[128]

This startling heroic-couplet sonnet was probably written between 1836 and 1837 and 'I Am' in late 1846.[129] The thematic consistencies over the intervening ten-year period surely prove that Clare's interest in isolation did not begin with his entrance into the asylums of High Beech and Northampton, as I think is the common assumption. The other sonnets I have considered from the Northborough period, and from even earlier in *The Midsummer Cushion* collection, support the idea that Clare's aesthetic idealisation of solitude and loneliness did not begin when, biographically, he was possibly at his most lonely in Northampton. Such thematic consistencies might also support the idea that Clare is an artist whose poetic projects are available to us in much wider literary contexts and intertexts; his interests do not necessarily or obviously change when his personal circumstances change.

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[127] *LP* I, p. 396, line 13.
[128] *Northborough Sonnets,* p. 55.
[129] See the 'Introduction' to *Northborough Sonnets,* p. viii and *LP* I, p. 396.

This sonnet 'I hate the very noise...' contains such a wealth of natural imagery and personalised sentiment that it surely deserves a central place not only in Clare's mature poetics,[130] but also in the issue of his reaction to Byronic and Wordsworthian romanticisms. As Clare began only one other fragment of a poem with 'I hate'[131] it comes as a sharp shock to see it used so misanthropically here. (He begins fifty-nine poems with 'I love' or 'I loved'.[132]) Specifically it is the 'noise' of 'man' the hatred is directed against, as indeed it is in 'Pastoral Liberty'. The archaic form of 'troublesome' - 'troublous' - is compact and literary. The conjoining in the second line of the past and present in 'did & does' is similar in its technique to the 'unhurt & hurting' of 'Pastoral Liberty' and the '[u]ntroubling, and untroubled' of 'I am'. The speaker is presenting himself as a resentful victim of a barbaric humanity. The third line reveals how extreme the measures could be to escape the 'harm' the speaker has undergone; he is willing to be 'a prisoner' as long as it means he is '[f]ree from the world'; again the intertextual links with the 'cold worlds abuses' of 'I speak in low calm breathing whispers' and with Wordsworth's 'Far from the world I walk, and from all care' in 'Resolution and Independence' are very palpable. The fourth line is a hint of the Gothic grimness of such solitude. If the speaker were to have only his 'own shadow' as 'all' of his 'company', then it is to be assumed that at least he would be in light (or enlightened) - that light would be cast on his form in order that he might contemplate his own outline, his form. If all he can do is contemplate the form of his own being, then the speaking subject has the same purpose in his solitude as the speaker of the letter to Matthew Allen[133] in which he desires 'to be to himself' like a 'hermit'. The presence in line 4 of the shadow - which is in itself an

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[130] Apart from its appearance in the *Northborough Sonnets* collection, this poem has been fairly popular with the selections of J. W. Tibble, Geoffrey Grigson, Costas Xenophontos and Elaine Feinstein. I am indebted for this and many other instances in this thesis to *A first-line index to the published & unpublished poetry of John Clare,* by John Goodridge (Published on the Internet at <http://human.ntu.ac.uk/clare/clare.html>, Nottingham Trent University, 1992-1999).

[131] *EP* II, p. 539:

I hate to see mans strength employd
To desolate the wood
To see a favourite tree destroyd
That has for ages stood
To see the stript oak stretchd its length
A mournful thought the scene attends
Those seem thats left still green in strength
To mourn their fallen friends

[132] See *A first-line index to the published & unpublished poetry of John Clare.*

[133] *By Himself,* p. 270.

absence of light - marks the start of the visionary element in this sonnet. As the 'lone' prophet-poet contemplates his own shadowy form, he turns his consideration heaven-wards, and is able to 'see the shooting stars apear'; the shooting star is an omen of some grand cataclysmic occurrence in the fate of mankind. The temporal dislocation of this poem is evident here, in that the 'shadow' which keeps company with the poet must surely disappear in the shadows of night as the speaker contemplates the stars. Or perhaps the 'shooting stars' exist inside the shadow of the speaker; the internal referencing of the 'lone' figure considering his own being, as represented by his shadow, could mean that the reading of the fateful shooting-stars is an expression of internal understanding.

Suddenly, in the sixth line, the speaker returns to the business of a doomed '[w]orld rushing into judgment all the year'; he has indeed presented himself as an astrologically-aware prophet, who undergoes an almost revelatory experience by reading the heavens through a process of solitary and internalising meditation. The break in this sonnet comes in the seventh line, the end of which is the numerical mid-point of the poem; the poet pathetically begs an implied listener (it is not at all clear who or what might be implied) to 'lead' him 'onward'; perhaps it is the same listener who is asked 'O lead me any where but in the crowd' by the speaker of 'Pastoral Liberty'. The desired place to be in this imperative plea is 'the lonliest shade', linking with the 'shadow' which has already been referred to, and evoking both a gothic mysticism in the 'shade' of literary etymology - a ghost - and oddly a sense of protection and shelter. The creator of the ideal place of protection is not a Christian God[134],

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[134] God is explicitly evoked however, in the published 'Sighing for Retirement' which contains a similar contrast between the noise of the 'crowd' and the 'peace' of nature:

O TAKE me from the busy crowd,
I cannot bear the noise!
For Nature's voice is never loud;
I seek for quiet joys.

The book I love is everywhere,
And not in idle words;
The book I love is known to all,
And better lore affords.

The book I love is everywhere,
And every place the same;
GOD bade me make my dwelling there,
And look for better fame.
(*LP* I, p. 19, lines 1-12.)

but simply 'quiet', offering an opposite pairing with the 'very noise of troublous man' of the first line. The ideal season of this 'dearest place' is indicated by the presence of the 'kingcups'[135] or marsh-marigold (*caltha palustris*), a wild plant which flowers in spring:

> Until two centuries ago, before the extensive draining of the landscape, kingcups must have been the most conspicuous plant of early spring, blooming at the edges of cattle wallows, in water-meadows and damp flashes on village greens, and growing straight from the dark mud amongst willow and alder roots in wet woods. In the Isle of Man, where plant rituals survived until very recently, it was held in high regard as a spring omen...[136]

Although there is no evidence in his natural history prose that Clare knew of the rituals regarding the kingcup on an island a long way from Northamptonshire, the status of the plant 'as a spring omen' and the fact that it was an increasingly rare and marginal plant in Clare's day, must surely have been available knowledge to one so keen on gathering knowledge on folklore, botany and local traditions. The flower defines the place to which the poet wishes to be led, and in fact it is the only physical image the speaker gives us of that place. As a spring flower, it symbolises new growth and the end of winter. The royal overtones of the name of the flower are confirmed by the wealth the 'cup' of the flower contains in its 'gold'. The hidden golden cups reveal themselves - 'shut up green & open into gold'. This is a sublime moment: the poet has found the holy grail, the golden cup, at the peaceful end of his quest. The enlightenment and liberation now achieved, the poet can bid '[f]arewell to poesy', which implicates his own art, or the art of others, as a *reason* for his troubles. If this is an odd thing to wish to leave, it is stranger still to 'leave the will'; this might contain a number of meanings: the 'will' could be the last testament of the speaker; it could be the ambition and personal volition to do anything further in the world of 'poesy'; it could mean that the poet, in leaving poetry behind, is effectively leaving behind all desire, control or ego; also, 'will' might signify the future existence of the poet, which, in terms of human society, would cease in a state of isolation. (I think actually, because the context is so open, that the phrase can be said

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[135] '...who sees the taller buttercup carpeting the closes in golden fringe without a remembrance of Chattertons beautiful mention of it he knows it 'The king cup brasted with the morning dew'...' in '<Natural History Letter III>', line 94 ff., *Natural History*. The quote, Margaret Grainger notes, is from line 6 of Chatterton's 'Songe to Aella'. In his 'Journal' Clare writes: 'Chatterton seemd fond of taking his similes from nature his favourite flower seems to be the "kingge coppe" and his favourite bird the "pied Chelandrie" (Red cap) the only trees he speaks of are the oak and the elm' (Wednesday, 15 September, 1824, *By Himself,* p. 174.

[136] Richard Mabey, *Flora Britannica* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, Reed International, 1996) p. 40. Mabey also writes that this member of the buttercup family (ranunculaceae) 'is one of the most ancient native plants' in Britain.

to signify all of these meanings at once; as the desire to 'leave the will' is placed immediately after the '[f]arewell to poesy', there must be some link of meaning between the two clauses.) The isolation is universal when, in the subsequent line, the implied listener is asked to '[t]ake all the world away'.

The speaker seems now to have nothing, to wish himself utterly out of existence; but the final place, the orienting stimulation he must have to be content is 'a womans voice'.[137] This sound alone is to provide the sensory foundation of the solipsist's existential universe. But the speaker is not a solipsist now; the voice of another human being is the idealised mainstay of his entire being. In fact the speaker is a humanist; for all the wonder and sublimity of the kingcup-scene, it is the human word which is the final provider of ultimate comfort in an unfriendly and alienated universe. The qualitative judgements the speaker makes are all based on sound, which gives the sonnet a tripartite structure: the 'noise' of 'man'; the 'quiet' which creates 'the dearest place', and finally the 'music of a womans voice'. The voice stills the fears and hatred of the poet entirely, having the same effect as the Leech-gatherer's 'stately speech' in Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence':

> The old Man still stood talking by my side;
> But now his voice to me was like a stream
> Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide;
> And the whole body of the Man did seem
> Like one whom I had met with in a dream;
> Or like a man from some far region sent,
> To give me human strength, by apt admonishment.[138]

In the sonnet 'I hate the very noise...' Clare makes a clear distinction between the male world of noise, and the female possibilities of song; there is music to be heard in a woman's voice, but only trouble in the crowded noises of man. This distinction emerges in other places, especially in the later love songs. In 'The Forest Maid', the speaker concludes with: 'I often met the scorn of man, / But welcome lives with woman!'[139]. The eponymous maid is a creature who is very much 'a happy Child of earth' to use Wordsworth's phrase again. And it

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[137] Perhaps we can further begin to understand how Clare is able to idealise a 'womans voice' while seeking to get thoroughly away from man's dominion. The last two lines of the sonnet 'If any wants a friend the first & best' read: 'If any want seclusion free from care / Go home to womans love & find it there', *Northborough Sonnets,* p. 60.

[138] Op. Cit., [sixteenth stanza] lines 106 to 112.

[139] *LP* I, p. 21.

is a flowery world she occupies and is in a constant tactile relationship with. A poem which enhances this theme of a lonely journey through a flowering wilderness is the late poem 'Flowers and Spring'[140], which involves a male speaker, not a maiden as is more common in Clare's later poetry, relating his own story to the differing 'voices' of each wild flower. It takes a curious six-line verse-form, *ababcc,* which is akin to both the 'Venus and Adonis' stanza and the stanza used by Wordsworth for 'I wandered lonely as a cloud'. The changes Clare makes to the tradition of this form are typical of his continued mediation between literary and oral traditions. He shortens the metrical length from the pentameter of the 'Venus and Adonis' stanza, as does Wordsworth, whose poem is in iambic tetrameter. But Clare goes one stage further, and applies the ballad or common meter to the form, thus arriving at the following verse form: *a4b3a4b3c4c4.* The alternation of tetrameter and trimeter of the first four lines reflects common measure, a very common meter in the ballad-like lyrics of Clare's later poetry. But the final couplet is a surprise and is literary in its evocation of metrical tradition. This combination or mediation of traditions is evinced in the content of the poem, which reflects very much upon the Wordsworthian consideration of the differences in perception and emotion between the poet as a child and, in the present time of the narrative, as a man.[141] Clare's poem is in a sense a return to the haunts of childhood as an embittered, experienced and lonely adult.

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[140] *LP* I, p. 317.

[141] See for example 'Tintern Abbey' in which Wordsworth contrasts the effects of the natural world as a 'thoughtless youth' and later, as a man 'With warmer love... with far deeper zeal / Of holier love...', (*The Miscellaneous Poems of William Wordsworth*, Vol. II, p. 268, lines 90 and 154). *The Prelude,* which Clare almost certainly never had access to, contains Wordsworth's most important work on this theme. But Clare could have read *The Excursion,* (although it is not included in Clare's existing Wordsworth volume) one among many of Wordsworth's poems which foreshadow the various themes of *The Prelude.* One of Clare's longer comments on Wordsworth suggests that the length of *The Prelude* and even that of *The Excursion,* would not have appealed anyway:

> do you know personaly Wordsworth & Coleridge, they are two favourites with me have you seen Wordsworths last production 'Sonnets to the River Duddon' they call em good how like you his Sonnet on 'Westminster Bridge' I think it (& woud say it to the teeth of the critic in spite of his rule & compass) that it owns no equal in the English language Miltons I reckon little of keeping the 'Paradise lost' in view– one might have expected far better but he sat down to write according to the rul[es of] art in the construction of the Sonnet just as an architect sets about abuilding while wordsworth defies all art & in all the lunatic Enthuseism of nature he negligently sets down his thoughts from the tongue of his inspirer but after all dont think I favour his affected fooleries in some of his longer pieces theres some past all bearing–still with his faults & abilities he is a poet with whom for origionallity of description the present day has few if any equals–for the present ('To Markham E. Sherwill', 12 July 1820, *Letters,* p. 85.)

The final 'for the present' is a subtle indicator that Clare thought that eventually his poetry would be 'equal' to Wordsworth's and Coleridge's.

This poem adds to in the above exploration of love-in-solitude, but where the speaker of 'I hid my love when young while I' kisses flowers in an obsessive and ritualistic fashion, the speaker of 'Flowers and Spring' is looking for a sense of community in the many different types of flora he wanders past. He presents us with a history of his relationship with flowers, from child to adult. The most interesting aspect of this poem is the way in which nature - as represented by the flowers - entices, grips, and finally frustrates the speaker. The 'interviews' with nature, to use Byron's word, are not clear communications, nor is it altogether clear what the lovesick speaker gains from the confidence of nature:

1
And has the spring's all glorious eye
No lesson to the mind?
The birds that cleave the golden sky,
Things to the earth resigned;
Wild flowers that dance to every wind,
Do they no memory leave behind?

2
Aye flowers, the very name of flowers,
That bloom in wood and glen;
Bring spring to me in winter hours,
And childhoods dreams again:
The primrose on the woodland lea,
Was more than wealth, and gold to me.

3
The violets by the woodland side,
As thick as they could snive,
Ive talked to them with childish pride,
As things that were alive.
I find them now in mans distress,
They seem as sweet, yet valueless.

4
The cowslips on the meadow lea,
How I have run for them:
I looked with wild and childish glee,
Upon each golden gem:
And when they bowed their heads so shy,
I laughed and thought they danced for joy.[142]

This starts with a philosophical (and rhetorical) question, which, the reader can assume, the poem will attempt to answer. The first stanza asks whether there are any lasting effects of

[142] 'Flowers and Spring', lines 1-24, *LP* I, p. 317.

nature upon the intellect and emotional substance of the human psyche. The internalisation of the season is succinctly captured in 'spring's all glorious eye'; either this means spring is a window through which mankind perceives and thus thinks, or that the perceptions of man are made 'glorious' by the spring. The larger image is of the season being a part of the perceiving faculties of mankind; the world, it seems, is *inside* humanity's consciousness. At least, solitude can make that seem a possibility.

Contrasting with Keats' return from poetical fancy to his 'sole self' at the bidding of 'the very word' forlorn,[143] 'the very name of flowers' (line 7) transports Clare's speaker from winter to spring; and more, they take him from the winter of his life back to the spring of 'childhoods dreams again'. The poet then, is referring surely to the power of poetic language, inferring that it is able to capture a thoroughly imaginable representation of its referents. Via mere words, the poet is returned to 'dreams'. This second stanza sets the psychological and temporal tone of the whole poem. The third stanza continues to contrast the values of adulthood with those of childhood, and bitterness now emerges as the emotion resultant of the comparison. It comes as no small shock to read Clare writing that violets 'seem as sweet, yet valueless', but in the context of the adult/child comparison it is clear that the naïve value placed upon the swarms of violets by the child is undermined by 'mans distress'. The 'wealth, and gold' which the flowers represent to the enraptured child are mere metaphors; in the world of capital, of harsh reality, the flowers have no value. Where they were as 'things alive' to the child, they are dead to the man. If childhood is a dream, then the speaker has woken up into adulthood.

The fourth stanza returns the speaker to his 'dreams' of childhood, with energy and joy. The third appearance of the colour gold in this stanza refers again to the colours of spring and the metaphorical wealth the flowers represented for the child. As above in 'I hate the very noise of troublous man', it is suggested that contemplation of the wealth of golden flowers effects a return to innocence. It also sees the child 'reading' the flowers, personifying them; they 'bowed their heads' and 'danced for joy'. The poem continues:

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[143] 'Ode to a Nightingale', stanzas 7 and 8, *John Keats: Complete Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (London: Belknap Harvard Press, 1982), p. 281.

5
And when a man, in early years,
How sweet they used to come;
And give me tales of smiles and tears,
And thoughts more clear than home:
Secrets which words would then reprove,
They told the names of early love.

6
The primrose turned a babbling flower,
Within its sweet recess:
I blushed to see their secret bower,
And turned her name to bless.
The violet said the eyes were blue,
I loved, and did they tell me true?

7
The cowslip in meadows every where, —
My hearts own thoughts would steal.
I nip't them 'cause they should not hear;
They smiled, and would reveal.
And o'er each meadow right or wrong;
They sing the name I've worshipped long.

8
The brooks that mirrored clear the sky,
Full well I know the spot.
The mouse ear looked with bright blue eye,
And said forget me not.
And from the brook I turn'd away,
But heard it many an after day.

In the fifth stanza, the period of the speaker's life shifts forward to when he was a young man, to the same time-period as 'I hid my love when young while I'. As the flowers are used in that poem to aid the speaker in his secrecy, so here they aid his hidden agenda of love. Yet again, the secrecy is required because 'words would then reprove'; the speaker is afraid of the public rebuke which would result from disclosure of his secret love. The flowers are the source, for the young man, perhaps adolescent, of 'thoughts more dear than home'; they take him mentally beyond the boundaries of his home life, and in providing him 'tales of smiles and tears' the flowers are representative of the boy maturing, experiencing and broadening his knowledge.

The personification of the flowers continues in stanzas 6 and 7, as they gossip to the poet of his secret love. The theme is now becoming that of the love of the speaker, informed by his

understanding and intimacies with flowers. Again in stanza 7 the fear of disclosure is reiterated, the speaker even admitting to having 'nip't' the flowers to prevent them hearing his 'hearts own thoughts'. It seems the flowers threaten to 'reveal', their position as confidants not being entirely secure for the beleaguered lover. Again this paranoia returns us to 'I hid my love...'. In stanza 8 the ambiguity of the way the speaker divines the information on love from the flowers becomes a little clearer. In a clever turn of phrase the 'mouse ear' is personified and given an eye, and utters its alias - 'forget me not'.[144] The colour of the eye is the colour of the flower of course, and the colour of the secret lover's eyes (stanza 6). The name of the lover, which the speaker admits to have 'worshipped long' in stanza 7, seems to be evoked in the imagined utterance of 'forget me not'. The utterance is heard by the speaker 'many an after day'. He is indeed unable to forget. The 'mouse ear', or blue water forget-me-not, is placed carefully alongside 'brooks that mirrored clear the sky'; Clare, as ever, is fastidiously accurate in placing his community of flowers in their specific natural habitats[145]. He has placed the cowslips 'on the meadow lea', the violets 'by the woodland side', the primrose 'on the woodland lea' and the forget-me-not by the 'brook'. Each flower conjures up a personal and

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[144] The 'mouse ear' flower is also known as the blue water forget-me-not (*myosotis scorpioides*). For Clare it had a direct connection with childhood and the superstitions of lovers:

> ...flowers have happy associations of youth they are its sweetest chronicles the herdsman cannot neglect the wild thyme on the hill that made him seats when a boy or the blue caps in the wheat he trimmed his cockade to play at soldiers to the old woman the little blue flower aside the brook \called in botany water mouse ear/ brings the lovers reccolections when she was young she still stoops down & fancys that it smile<s> upward in her eye forgetmenot' (*Natural History,* p. 287).

Grainger notes that this prose fragment was penned during the 1820's. 'Flowers and Spring' exists only as a Knight transcript, so belongs to the 1840's, but the eds. of *Later Poems* include the fact that lines 13-16 were quoted by A. E. Baker in her *Glossary of Northamptonshire Words and Phrases,* 2 vols. (London, 1854). Clare thus provides another instance of the consistency of his associations between objects and ideas over the years.

[145] The water forget-me-not can be found in 'marsh and waterside' areas (*A Handguide to the Wild Flowers of Britain and Northern Europe,* Richard Fitter and Marjorie Blamey, London: Treasure Press, 1985, p. 67). It has essentially, always been a poetical flower, and very recently introduced as such: 'It was almost certainly Coleridge who popularised the name in English. He knew German folklore and would have been familiar with the tale of the knight who picked *Myosotis scorpioides* for his lady as they strolled by a river. The knight fell in, but, before he was drowned, he threw the flowers to his love, crying *vergisz mein nicht'.* In 'The Keepsake', which was first published in a newspaper in 1802, Coleridge writes:

> *...Nor can I find, amid my lonely walk*
> *By rivulet, or spring, or wet roadside*
> *That blue and bright-eyed flowerlet of the brook,*
> *Hope's gentle gem, the sweet Forget-me-not!'*

(Richard Mabey, *Flora Britannica,* [London: Sinclair-Stevenson, Reed International, 1996] p. 310.) This poem is particularly relevant as it concerns a woman, Emmeline, stitching the speaker's favourite flowers into a silk tapestry. It also contains a long list of flowers' names, as the poet wanders through his memories of his lover, memories which are evoked and solidified by the flowers. The poem was also published in Coleridge's *Sibylline Leaves* of 1817, so it is possible that Clare might have seen it.

specific environment. As I have noted already, the kingcup[146] and its damp habitat, is a particular favourite of Clare's:

9
The kingcup on its slender stalk,
  Within the pasture dell;
Would picture there a pleasant walk,
  With one I loved so well.
They said how sweet at eventide,
'Twould be with true love at thy side.

10
And on the pastures woody knoll,
  I saw the wild blue-bell;
On sundays when I used to stroll,
  With her I loved so well.
She culled their flowers the year before,
These bowed, and told the story o'er.

11
And every flower, that had a name,
  Would tell me who was fair,
But those without, as strangers came,
  And blossomed silent there:
I stood to hear but all alone,
They bloomed and kept their thoughts unknown.

In stanza 9, the kingcup is the source of the image, and memory, of a walk with someone the speaker 'loved so well'. The flower reminds the speaker of his present solitude and his previous companionship 'with true love'. In stanza 10 the blue-bells again remind the speaker of lazy days (sundays, indicating a day free of toil) in the lover's company. Even after being 'culled' by the woman, years later the flowers repeat 'the story' of the 'stroll' to the lonely male. Stanza 11 begins the conclusion of this ramble through memory's flowers, and importantly brings the narrative back to the sole figure of the speaker. There is a tension in this stanza which is worth noting, as it seems to sum up the contradictions that are inherent whenever Clare writes of silence and solitude. The named flowers communicate with the speaker; 'those without' names remain 'silent' as if they were 'strangers' to the speaker. In a sense, this is a poem about names: in stanza 2 'the very name of flowers' initiates the poet's meditation; in stanza 5 the flowers 'told the names of early love' to the speaker; in stanza 6 the

[146] In the manuscript the word 'kingcup' is underlined by what is believed by *The Later Poems* editors to be Clare's pencil. See notes on pp. 317 and 319. They don't explain how they know it is his pencil mark.

speaker 'turned her name to bless' in the 'secret bower' of the primrose; stanza 7 has the cowslips 'sing the name' of the speaker's lover. The name of the lover, as in many of Clare's later love poems, remains a secret between him and the flowers. The spring flowers however, are named in turn; as it is hard to imagine a flower which Clare could not name, the idea of a flower as a stranger must be taken as an aesthetic device. The idea distances the speaker from the surroundings he, as a child and young man, communicated so intimately with, and returns us to the 'now' in stanza 3 of 'mans distress'. The speaker, in stanza 11, is 'alone' and surrounded by 'silent' 'strangers' who 'kept their thoughts unknown'. The poem, having prompted a meditation by a question in the first stanza, and having then moved backwards in time to youth, moves through young adulthood to finally arrive again at the lonely maturity of the poet who no longer values, nor understands clearly, the voices of nature. This conclusion is brought to a thorough closure, and circular return to the last two lines of stanza 3, in the final stanza:

12
But seasons now have nought to say,
  The flowers no news to bring;
Alone I live from day to day,
  Flowers seem the bier of spring;
And birds upon the bush, or tree,
All sing a different tale to me!

Echoing Clare's favourite Shakespeare play *Macbeth*[147] in its use of 'day to day', the speaker evokes a loneliness which is as complete and absolute as anywhere else in his poetry. The appearance of the trappings of death, in the shape of a 'bier', at the end of a poem about spring, reveals how truly isolated the speaker feels. For the speaker, the natural world is largely silent, and if it does communicate anything, the message is ominously and ambiguously 'a different tale' to the joyful 'tales of smiles' (stanza 5) of the poet's early years.

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[147] See *Macbeth,* V, v, lines 19-20: 'To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow / Creeps in this petty pace from *day to day*...', [my emphasis] the beginning of the crucial speech which, significantly, occurs immediately after news of Lady Macbeth's death: Macbeth is now alone. In evoking this place in the play, Clare is establishing the tragic isolation of his speaker. *Macbeth* was Clare's favourite Shakespeare play, as he writes in his 'Journal':

> Read Macbeth what a soul thrilling power hovers about this tragedy I have read it over about twenty times and it chains my feelings still to its perusal like a new thing it is Shakspears masterpiece – the thrilling feelings created by the description of lady Macbeths terror haunted walkings in her sleep sinks deeper then a thousand ghosts at least in my visions of the terrible she is a ghost herself and feels with spirit and body a double terror

('Journal' entry for Wednesday, 10 November, 1824, *By Himself,* p. 194).

The change of social circumstances, from sociable young lover to a lonely old man, has utterly destroyed the speaker's understanding of nature; but of course the underlying tension is that the poet is still able to write of memories of joy through nature. Those memories are stimulated by the flowers. The bitterness the poem closes with is that the flowers only communicate with his past, with his youth; their 'thoughts' are 'unknown' to the older man.

Perhaps we can begin to account for the reasons Clare might continually seek personal and topographical solitude, or why he returns to it repeatedly, if we go back to the nature poetry where this chapter started. A natural image which seems to be central to the idea of protected and hidden solitude is the bird's nest. There are of course many nest (and bird) poems, so many in fact that to date there have been three selections of Clare's bird poetry, one of which is entirely devoted to the poetical phenomenon of birds' nests.[148] An important characteristic of Clare's description of the birds' habitats is that they are almost always explicitly set apart from the world of man, a pattern which echoes through some of the lyrical later poems I have looked at above. This is especially the case in 'To the Snipe'[149] of which seven of the twenty-two stanzas imply that the most important quality of the snipe's 'solitudes' is '[h]iding in spots that never knew his [man's] tread' (line 39). Indeed, the repeated resentment and fear of man is startling:

> The trembling grass
> Quakes from the human foot
> Nor bear the weight of man to let him pass...
>
> Boys thread the woods...
>
> Places untrodden lye
> Where man nor boy nor stock hath ventured near...
>
> And fowl that dread
> The very breath of man
> Hiding in spots that never knew his tread...
>
> ...restless lot

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[148] See *Bird's Nest: Poems by John Clare*, ed. Anne Tibble (Ashington: Mid-NAG, 1973), *Bird Poems*, introduced by Peter Levi (London: Folio Society, 1980), *John Clare's Birds*, ed. Eric Robinson and Richard Fitter (1982).
[149] *Oxford Authors*, p. 205.

That from mans dreaded sight will ever steal...

Where they who dread mans sight the water fowl
Hide and are frighted not...

The firmer ground where skulking fowler goes
With searching dogs and gun...

Free booters there
Intent to kill and slay
Startle with cracking guns the trepid air...[150]

Danger is always threatening, but never quite managing, to destroy the habitat of the bird. The delicate balance between safety (mentioned four times) and danger, is upset it seems only by the presence of 'skulking' and armed man. The nest of the bird remains secret from man in general; but the poet has some sort of special status and is able to find it. The nest is 'mystic' (repeated twice: lines 24 and 25) and a 'home alone' (line 4) 'where fear encamps / Around' (lines 3 to 4). The security of the nest is defined then by the continual 'fear' and 'dread' of humanity (exactly as in the fragment 'To drop among green bushes in the spring' the last line of which is 'Where near a pathway dreads approaching feet'[151]), as much as it is defined by its lonely situation. The poem is a rare case of the speaker revealing what the contemplation of such scenes does for his own situation:

Thy solitudes
The unbounded heaven esteems
And here my heart warms into higher moods
And dignifying dreams[152]

The bird's habitat is thus a source of the sublime: it literally raises the poet's mind to 'higher moods' and somehow increases the dignity of his subconsciousness. This would imply that for the speaker, there is a direct link between his own mind and the habitat of the bird.

The solitude of birds' habitations is repeatedly referred to. In the sonnet 'Birds Nests', the final four lines are a celebration of loneliness:

Dead grass & mosses green an hermitage
For secresy & shelter rightly made
& beautiful it is to walk beside

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[150] Lines 5 to 7; 29; 34 and 35; 37 to 39; 42 and 43; 47 and 48; 55 and 56; 65 to 67.
[151] *MP* II, p. 237. Cf. 'The woodland stroll', *LP* I, p. 669, lines 6 and 7: 'I leave the rude noise of the wearisome world / And hide me in thickets of white and black thorn'.
[152] 'To the Snipe', *Oxford Authors,* p. 205, lines 77 to 80. See also *MP* IV, p. 574.

The lanes & hedges where their homes abide[153]

The sonnet on the sand martin refers to the bird as a 'hermit haunter of the lonely glen' who inhabits a world 'far away from men'. Indeed, this bird's world is defined by its seeming estrangement from society. The sonnet concludes:

> Ive seen thee far away from all thy tribe
> Flirting about the unfrequented sky
> & felt a feeling that I cant describe
> Of lone seclusion & a hermit joy
> To see thee circle round nor go beyond
> That lone heath & its melancholly pond[154]

The image of an encircled world is, not surprisingly, comforting to the speaker. As we have seen already, Clare frequently draws security and peace in knowing that the bounds of a small world are delimited and enclosing. Perhaps this is ironic for someone who protested so vehemently in earlier verse against the destruction wrought by enclosure, but I think it is not as much of a contradiction as it might seem. The speaker's feeling of 'lone seclusion and a hermit joy' is perhaps a retreat from the encroaching territorial divisions of man; the smaller the world one occupies, surely the less likely it is to be divided, bordered, hedged or split by fencing.[155] A microcosm can also be a complete world: a small, independent ecosystem which seems to be self-sufficient, is often what a bird's lonely world will represent for Clare.

In longer nest poems, Clare uses the image of the nest as a place to situate his own secret identity as a poet. In 'The Robins Nest'[156] it seems to be the speaker who is making a nest for himself, for the first sixty-seven lines at least; it is only then that the robin is mentioned (line 68). In a poem of a hundred and one lines, this is surely deliberate. Almost immediately, the speaker's movement to an inner nesting place is again set up in contrast to the troublesome world of man:

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[153] *MC,* p. 489 and *MP* IV, p. 348.
[154] *MC,* p. 460 and *MP* IV, p. 309.
[155] Nicholas Birns identifies another reason for geographical 'openness' being an anathema to Clare. Talking of industrialisation and enclosure, he writes:

> ...they did not figuratively close the landscape as much as open it, render cognitively possible the kind of expansive commercialism that was to be later symbolically embodied by the railroad. Openness can be deracinated as well as unfettered, and being enclosed can embody a sheltering protectiveness as well as a constriction. One suspects that Clare feared enclosure not because it reined in his mental universe, but because it opened it up, threatened to render it too available to human technology and human explanation.

('"The riddle nature could not prove": hidden landscapes in Clare's poetry', *John Clare in Context,* p. 196.)
[156] *MP* III, p. 532.

—to seek and harbour in
Far from the ruder worlds inglor[i]ous din
Who see no glory but in sordid pelf
& nought of greatness but its little self
Scorning the splendid gift that nature gives
Where natures glory ever breaths & lives... (lines 5-10)

It is perhaps no surprise that a poet of this period should contrast the business of man with the peace of nature. Coleridge does so famously and relevantly in 'Frost at Midnight':

For I was reared
In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.
But *thou,* my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.[157]

Unlike Coleridge's contrasting of the liberating expanse of nature with the confining claustrophobia of the city, Clare often portrays the ideal natural scene as a comfortingly walled or enclosed embrace. Admittedly he also refers to the liberating possibilities of wide nature (as in 'Field Thoughts' and 'Pastoral Liberty' above), but in his nest poems it is the pleasure of close concealment which dominates the presentation of and communication with the natural. But here, however, the world of man is obsessed with its 'little self' (rhymed wittily with the jocular 'pelf' - wealth) and juxtaposed with the broader horizon of 'natures glory'. Where Coleridge swoops around the natural world, taking the perspective of a panoramic aerial shot of a film, Clare, after his grand introduction of nature, settles upon a particular 'stulp':

Seated in crimping ferns uncurling now
In russet fringes ere in leaves they bow
& moss as green as silk—there let me be
By the grey powdered trunk of old oak tree
Buried in green delights to which the heart
Clings with delight & beats as loath to part
The birds unbid come round about to give
Their music to my pleasures—wild flowers live

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[157] *English Romantic Writers,* ed. David Perkins, [Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967] p. 422, lines 51 to 62.

About as if for me—they smile & bloom
Like uninvited guests that love to come
Their wild [&] fragrant offerings all to bring
Paying me kindness like a throned king (lines 11-22)[158]

Indeed, Clare's desire to be closeted in a natural womb is so extreme as to warrant the use of the word '[b]uried'[159]. In exactly the same manner as the later poem 'There is a charm in Solitude...'[160] which I discuss above, and which contains the same 'green delight' (line 3) as this poem, the speaker seems to be wishing to make a Crusoe of himself, only here with the community of nature surrounding him like the wealth and riches of a 'throned king'. His position as a king in this natural setting indicates how this poem is really about an ideal nest for his own ego, and how unlike many other loco-descriptive poems of Clare's this is. After all here 'wild flowers live / About as if for *me'*, [my emphasis]: the speaker foregrounds himself. The obvious link with 'There is a charm in Solitude...' and other later poems which place a speaker in a similarly characterised situation indicates that the reasons for Clare's later desire to be closeted in a secure, natural and uninhabited heaven are not simply the result of his biographical circumstances. The desire for natural solitude emerges much earlier than the asylum period. The idea I have suggested already, that Clare's wished-for retreat into an enclosing nature could be likened to a desire to be returned to the safety of the womb, is reaffirmed in the next lines of 'The Robins Nest':

Lost in such extacys in this old spot

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158 In other MS variants of line 21, 'Their wild [&] fragrant' becomes 'Their wildwood fragrant', which is probably the more finished version.

159 This albeit metaphorical expression of the desire to be buried is rare in Clare's poetry, but surfaces again very significantly in another late poem, 'I peeled bits o straws...':

Crowded places I shunned them as noises to[o] rude
And flew to the silence of sweet solitude
Where the flower in green darkness, buds, blossoms & fades
Unseen of a shepherds & flower loving maids
The hermit bees find them but once & away
There I'll burry alive & in silence decay (*LP* II, p. 906, second stanza, lines 7 to 12.)

Cf.:

The painted tulip in her bloom begun
Opens her painted bosom to the sun
The tempted bee looks on with amorous gaze
To taste her beauty toys & plays
Clouds hide the sun the fair deluder frowns
& in her bosoms gall the plunderer drowns
In vain he buzzes round the clown
& dies self buried & its treasure flown (*MP* II, p. 245).

160 *LP* I, p. 596.

I feel that rapture which the world hath not
That joy like health that flushes in my face
Amid the brambles of this ancient place
Shut out from all but that superior power
That guards & glads & cheers me every hour
That wraps me like a mantle from the storm
Of care & bids the cold[est] hope be warm
That speaks in spots where all things silent be
In words not heard but felt—each ancient tree
With lickens deckt—times hoary pedigree
Becomes a monitor to teach & bless
& rid me of the evils cares possess
& bids me look above the trivial things
To which prides me[r]cenary spirit clings
The pomps the wealth & artificial toys
That men call wealth beleagued with strife & noise
To seek the silence of their ancient reign
& be my self in memory once again (lines 23-41)

Having imagined himself a regal figure in a benign and worshipping court, the speaker then adds the wisdom of antiquity to his kingdom: it is an 'ancient place' where 'each ancient tree' confirms the 'ancient reign' and 'times hoary pedigree' upon the natural world. At the centre of this 'superior power', the speaker is '[s]hut out from all' and 'rid... of all the evils cares possess'. I have already noted this structure in Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence' above, in 'Pastoral Liberty', and in 'I hate the very noise of troublous man' to name three: a natural place of solace is defined by what it is not. It is not a place of 'trivial' cares, nor of 'wealth', 'artificial' stimulations; nor is it a place of 'strife and noise'. Instead, it is a place 'where all things silent be'; where the speaker is able to raise his thoughts 'above' the 'mercenary' competitive world of man. In short his thoughts can achieve transcendence over the day-to-day. He is cleansed of the tawdry stresses of toil in human society, and he learns from the wisdom of nature: it is able 'to teach and bless' the speaker. The 'superior power' is not a deity it seems: there is no evidence for that in this poem. Instead the power is that of this natural womb which 'wraps' around the speaker 'like a mantle'. It 'guards and glads and cheers', comforts, protects, informs, relaxes and relieves the speaker. And importantly it communicates its lesson in 'words not heard but felt': this is a sensory world, a pre-linguistic primordial communicative space where, in the opening five lines, the sensual delights of spring are the signs of meaning:

Come luscious spring come with thy mossy roots
Thy weed strown banks—young grass—and tender shoots
Of woods new plashed sweet smells of opening blooms
Sweet sunny mornings and right glorious dooms
Of happiness... (lines 1-5)

It is most importantly the place where the speaker says he can 'be my self in memory once again' (line 41). This odd phrase could mean that the poet is only able to 'be himself', or affirm his own identity as he sees it, when he is alone and able to attain a state of relaxed self-awareness. It is either a sad indictment of the circumstances he is normally in, in human society, or it points to the speaker's inability to maintain his identity as he would want it, in the company of man. Or perhaps it is both. What is certain is that the sanctity of this natural world represents, directly, an inner and remembered self, or inner state; the freedom that allows weeds to do as they please is the same freedom which enables the poet to turn his thoughts inwards:

...there is no curb
Of interest industry or slavish gain
To war with nature so the weeds remain
And wear an ancient passion that arrays
Ones feelings with the shadows of old days
The rest of peace the sacredness of mind
In such deep solitudes we seek and find
Where moss grows old and keeps an evergreen
And footmarks seem like miracles when seen (lines 53 to 61)

Again that word 'ancient' defines the status of the place. As Bob Heyes has written, 'the world of the past, of ruins and antiquities, was always an integral part of his vision of the English countryside.[161] It seems to me that this natural scene is endowed with a sense of antiquity precisely because man-made ruins and antiquity had, for Clare as Heyes suggests, a sense of awe, dignity and wonder. It is as if he is going back, not only to his own self as his memory suggest it to him, but to a place of pre-history, indeed a place where 'footmarks' would be 'like miracles', perhaps to the mental equivalent of Crusoe's island. The place is sacrosanct, and offers a model for the sacredness of some place inside the poet's mind. The Biblical words here - 'passion', 'sacredness' and 'miracles' - suggest that the speaker regards the state of

161 '"Triumphs of Time": John Clare and the Uses of Antiquity', *John Clare Society Journal,* 16 (July 1997), p. 5.

'deep' solitude as the most holy of holies. The hidden sanctuary exists as a place in his own mind as much as it does in the natural place. A little later, in line 68, the speaker finally introduces the other inhabitant, of this 'ancient home' (line 70): 'the wood robin'. The poem ends with a description of the quirky and bold habits of this territorial bird[162] and a succinct account of the speaker's relationship with it:

> & when in woodland solitudes I wend
> I always hail him as my hermit friend
> & naturally enough whenere they come
> Before me search my pockets for a crumb
> At which he turns his eye & seems to stand
> As if expecting somthing from my hand
> & there these feathered heirs of solitude
> Remain the tennants of this quiet wood (lines 82-89)

It is the male bird with whom the speaker enjoys this relationship, which marks its major difference from 'The Nightingales Nest' (see below). But, like the nightingale, the robin inhabits a world of 'solitude' and is therefore a 'hermit' for the speaker. The last words of the poem are 'this woodland privacy', and it is privacy which is ultimately what the speaker finds in the hallowed ground of the 'harbour' and arbour of the wood.

Perhaps of all the bird poems 'The Nightingale's Nest' is the most celebrated and is beginning to occupy an increasingly central place in Clare's corpus. Hugh Haughton's insightful study of the poem alongside Keats's poetic reaction to the same bird provides a starting point for my consideration of the poem:

> One of the triumphs of 'The Nightingale's Nest' is to bring us on a bird-nesting expedition into the 'same solitudes', bring us close to the bird's threatened private nesting space and leave it still intact.[163]

Haughton suggests that, as in 'The Robins Nest', the privacy of the nest is the governing characteristic which irresistibly attracts Clare. Critics have tended to accept the common notion that Clare's representation of birds and their habitats is almost objective and transparent, innocent of the usual Romantic shenanigans regarding sublimation and subjective

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[162] Clare gives many accounts of the robin, the most interesting of which can be found on pp. 51 to 53 of *Natural History*. As if to support the locale of the poem, Clare writes that the robin '...is found in the deepest solitudes of woods & forrests were it lives on insects & builds its nest on the roots or stools of the underwood or under a hanging bank by a dyke side which is often mistook for that \of the/ nightingales...' (p. 52).

[163] 'Progress and Rhyme: "The Nightingale's Nest" and Romantic Poetry' by Hugh Haughton in *John Clare in Context*, p. 57.

identification and reflection. But Haughton provides a fresh approach to the 'Clare and the Romantics' problem, and notes important characteristics inherent in Clare's 'following eye', which suggest that Clare's natural representation is not plainly photographic at all. I would go further; I think that there are many aspects of 'The Nightingale's Nest' which suggest a profound and complex foundation for the subject/object positioning and physical movements of the poem in adult sexuality, which, while not being strictly peculiar to Clare, is certainly characteristic of his repeated use of the hidden. The bird is a female: its 'threatened private nesting space' as Haughton calls it, is hidden beneath many layers of obstructing vegetation, which the speaker has to insinuate himself through, between and under to reach. Indeed, he recalls crawling: 'There have I hunted like a very boy / Creeping on hands and knees through matted thorns / To find her nest...'[164] As this return to childhood 'nesting' experiences occurs at the beginning of the poem, it could be that the speaker is regressing to a pre-adult state (as he does to a similar extent in 'Flowers and Spring') in order to begin his penetration (or re-penetration) into a female and natural domain. 'All seemed as hidden as a thought unborn' (line 16) he says of the nightingale's world; likening the feminine bird's hidden world to pre-consciousness may be an indication that the innocence is not simply Edenic. It is a pre-thinking, pre-responsibility and pre-complicated state. Clare's portrayal of the world of the nest *has* to be hidden because it is representative of his deepest, almost primordial, self. The visual depth of the topographical scene is startling because it rests upon the concomitant peeling away of layers of the represented speaker's consciousness. And at the centre of the consciousness of the poet is a female world:

> Her curious house is hidden—part aside
> These hazle branches in a gentle way
> And stoop right cautious neath the rustling boughs (line 44)

Wordsworth makes the same movement into a hidden natural space clearly sexual in 'Nutting':

> O'er pathless rocks,
> Through beds of matted fern, and tangled thickets,
> Forcing my way, I came to one dear nook

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164 'The Nightingales Nest', *Oxford Authors,* p. 213, lines 12 to 14 (This poem also appears on p. 201 of *The Midsummer Cushion*).

Unvisited, where not a broken bough
Drooped with its withered leaves, ungracious sign
Of devastation; but the hazels rose
Tall and erect, with tempting clusters hung,
A virgin scene![165]

In 'Nutting' the speaker, in 'boyish hope' (line 4) forces his way through thickets to penetrate into the inner sanctum of a natural, and by implication, feminine 'virgin scene'. The same penetrative movement is explored in Clare's poem. The physical positioning of the nightingale's nest in an interior (and anterior) space, for the reaching of which the speaker has to 'part aside... in a gentle way' the covering layers, is both sexual and psychological. In the same movement that takes us (we are explicitly implicated as a readership in the poem[166]) and the speaker on a regressive journey to the acts and joys of childhood, we are also moving inwards, ever deeper, ever safer, and ever penetrating into the hidden and female world of the speaker's consciousness. The inhabitant of that feminized world, the female nightingale, is described in ways which are as sexual as they are literary:

Her wings would tremble in her extacy
And feathers stand on end as twere with joy
And mouth wide open to release her heart
Of its sobbing songs... (line 22)

It is no coincidence that in 'The Robins Nest' both the speaker and the bird experience the same 'extacy' (see lines 23 and 74). The nightingale seems to embody a sexual entity, and a 'timid' 'hidden' and fearful one. Is she being represented as somehow sexually coy? The speaker of 'I speak in low calm breathing whispers' would concur with the speaker of this poem who writes 'lets be hush' (line 42) as he begins to come upon the 'curious house' of the bird. I am not suggesting that the poem is presented as a courtship poem or a poem of

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[165] *The Miscellaneous Poems of William Wordsworth,* (London: Longman, [&c.], 4 Vols., 1820) Vol. II, p. 129. Item 407, *Northampton Catalogue.*

[166] Janet Todd considers the implications of the speaker taking the reader into a world which is threatened by man:

> The effect is something like a dramatic monologue, but with the reader as the recipient of the speech within the poem, an actor with a prescribed part. Thus he can be guided physically and mentally by the narrator to see with him the otherness of nature, the secrecy of her ways, and the destructiveness of man. In these [bird's nest] poems, man is, however, still only the potential destroyer; and the reader, through the narrator who helps him to perceive this potential, is taught to restrain the destructiveness within himself. Ultimately he is persuaded to the narrator's pacific actions, as well as to his view of nature... In the sequestered spot he must submit to the narrator's awe towards nature's sanctity, and learn his attitude, in the same way that he learned the path. (*In Adam's Garden: A Study of John Clare's Pre-asylum Poetry* [Gainesville, Florida, 1973], p. 47).

seduction. Rather, Clare is using the same defining qualities of quiet, solitude, and disclosure of the hidden to create sensations of excited expectation. As a result the association of the poet's own inner being - indeed his anterior identity - with the female world of the bird, has to be significant in any reading of Clare's representation of sexuality. If the desire for exploration of the hidden, and the act of hiding an albeit unvoiceable desire, are reducible to issues of gender, then perhaps the *reason* for the frequent occurrences of this theme in Clare's poetry lies in a dialogue, or continuing tussle, between combating gendered spaces (themes enlarged upon in the following two chapters).

One reason for Clare silencing and hiding his speakers' love - one might even say repressing it - is that love, as he represents it, is idealised and feminized. In repressing his love a speaker is repressing the feminine voice of his own psyche, and repressing the woman he loves, or at the very least, the *idea* of woman. Her voice, as is almost always the case in the love poetry, is never actually heard; it is discussed theoretically by the male speaker as an abstract, but we never hear it. His masculine identity is confirmed, reasserted and founded within, the silence of his feminized voice. Ultimately this voice is heard (in the words of the poem), the secrets are disclosed, and the masculine framework is undermined, by the irrepressible feminized poetic voice of Clare's verse: he can't help writing his secrets down in verse.

Perhaps the masculine poetic identities of Clare's verse are fundamentally based upon and determined by the silent status of the feminine: of female characters, lovers, muses and nature. Silence and hiding are thus forms of masculine repression, and are the basis of Clare's male identities in poetry. And yet, as in so many of the poems, Clare, like Wordsworth, seems to offer models of psychological depth through a regression to childhood scenes, in which he peels back the layers of the corrupting world which he so often abhors. As the speaker approaches the world of the nightingale's nest, he seems to be approaching not only scenes of his childhood, but also he realises that nascent joy - that 'extacy' of song (the 'legacy of song' forms the last words of the poem, line 93) in the creation of the poem. I suggested earlier in this chapter that Clare's desire for a green and hidden world was akin to a desire to return to a

womb of mother earth.[167] That same heaven exists in 'I Am', which I will return to. But it is the detailed microcosmic heavens, like the tiny world of the nightingale's retreat, threatened by 'danger nigh' (line 58), which Clare is famous for portraying so vividly. Again, as we have seen elsewhere, the possibility of that secret, hidden female world, being penetrated by the stomping tread of other human feet, is represented by the path:

> Well leave it as we found it—safetys guard
> Of pathless solitude shall keep it still
> See there shes sitting on the old oak bough
> Mute in her fears our presence doth retard
> Her joys and doubt turns all her rapture chill (line 61)

This poem is atypical in its inclusion of the reader as a companion to the speaker.[168] Nevertheless, the significance of the word 'solitude' is not reduced. The nightingale's world is the embodiment of an ideal for Clare: solitary, hidden, cut off from society with no path to encourage the encroachment of that private space by public others. It is a place inhabited by the holy: 'Where solitudes deciples spend their lives' (line 85). It is 'an hermits mossy cell'[169] (line 88) and yet the nightingale's 'world is wide' (line 41). In short, the nightingale occupies that space, psychological, sexual and emotional, which the mature poetry suggests Clare often

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[167] Timothy Brownlow suggests that nature becomes a 'tomb' (rather than my proposition that it is a womb) to Clare in the later period, quoting 'The Tulip and the Bee':

> This identification with nature is a dangerous process, of course. Nature is nature and art is art, and sometimes Clare seems to blur the distinction between them. Complete nakedness of spirit, like undefiled innocence, cannot be achieved in this world. In his desire to be 'too like nature'... Clare is, in a sense, swallowed up by nature; there is an Asylum poem in which he describes a bee dying 'self poisoned in a trecherous flower'. The landscape which he saw with such acuity eventually became, in his madness, a living tomb.

John Clare and Picturesque Landscape, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) p. 131.

[168] It is an atypical narrative ploy in most of Clare's nature poems, but in the nest poems it is more frequent. Cf. 'The Yellow Hammers Nest': 'To reach the misty dewberry–let us stoop / & seek its nest–the brook we need not dread' (*MP* III, p. 515, lines 3-4) and 'The Pettichaps Nest': '...& you & I / Had surely passed it in out walk today / Had chance not led us by it...' (*MP* III, p. 517, lines 9-11).

[169] See Clare's much later desire: 'I should [like] to be to myself a few years and lead the life of a hermit', Letter to Matthew Allen, *By Himself*, p. 270. Also the 'mossy' quality of the nightingale's home is exactly the same as that of the robin in 'The Robins Nest': 'moss' or 'mossy' appear six times, and are especially significant in the last lines of the poem (See lines 1, 13, 60, 95, 97 and 98). Another similarity between the two poems is the number of eggs housed by the nest: Clare's favourite, one might even say mystically meaningful, number is five (See 'The Eternity of Nature', p. 247, *The Midsummer Cushion*) and sure enough both the nightingale (line 89) and the robin (line 99) have five eggs. Perhaps these poems are meant to be read as companion poems? Janet Todd reads Clare's repeated allusion to the sacred number as a religious comment on his reading of nature as Eden:

> But [the] five wounds of Christ were proof of man's redemption and Christ's divinity, so it seems here that Clare has taken the "five crimson spots" on the brow of the cowslip, the five leaves on the plants, and the five eggs laid by birds as proofs of the innocence and eternity, and perhaps the redemptive power, of nature... (*In Adam's Garden: A Study of John Clare's Pre-asylum Poetry* [Gainesville, Fla., 1973], p. 35.)

longs for.[170] Ultimately, the poem constructs a pattern of increasingly intimate self-consideration which at the last, leaves us - the explicitly evoked readership - with the 'legacy of song'; and in this instance that legacy is self-awareness. Perhaps the approach to, observation of, and delicate retreat from the nest is representative of the passage of self-consideration the speaker analogously undergoes. When the speaker leaves that inner sanctum, he does so somehow changed, somehow deepened by penetrating 'deep adown' (line 87). Thus he has found some sort of concentrate of meaning in this sacred place which encapsulates something much larger ('her world is wide' in line 41) than its confined physical size might suggest. The poet's special task is to make that depth of experience, that natural and spiritual profundity, communicable to the wider world of man, perhaps without breaking the spell of its specialness (or secret magic). The hidden is thus a vital source of meaning for the poet, as its disclosure is directly related to his own identity as a performer and enlightener; at the same time his own secrets - whether they be of love, place or identity - when disclosed, are under those same dangers - of the trampling intrusive 'paths' of populous mankind - that threaten the existence of the nightingale. And here we arrive at the contradictory nature of the writer of love songs and the poetic naturalist. The poet is split into the strange dual roles of being observer, outsider (as he inevitably is in his descriptive nature poetry) and the threatened; his own act of revelation threatens the secret habitat he has constructed for himself within his own identity. In 'The Nightingale's Nest' he is both the observer, leading us gently into a secret place - probing, moving forward, shushing us - and he is the thing observed - timid, fearful, but boldly singing nonetheless. Hugh Haughton expresses, but does not fully explore, this contradiction:

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[170] Cf. these lines from Shelley's 'To a Skylark' which Clare could well have read as the poem appears in the Benbow edition of 1826:

Like a Poet hidden
In the light of thought,
Singing hymns unbidden,
Till the world is wrought
To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not...

(*Miscellaneous Poems,* [London: William Benbow, 1826], p. 128). Hugh Haughton notes only the dissimilarities between the two poets. Certainly it is true that where Shelley *explicitly* establishes similes between poet and bird, poem and song, Clare is careful to *imply* the links. But they establish the same effects, and it is perhaps simplistic on Haughton's part to suggest 'how antithetical were their respective modes of opposition – and their poetics' (Haughton, *John Clare in Context,* p. 75).

> Clare is unusual among poets in his nesting instinct. Songs are related to nests, and if songs are in a manner public, nests are inherently private, hidden.[171]

The tension arises here in that relation between the song - a public performance, be it in voice or text - and the private nature of the nest. If they are so different, then what is the relationship? How can Clare maintain secrecy in the public domain? Why does he repeatedly do so?

The answer must be that to keep a secret, or to suggest that one might have one - and to then explore the possibilities of that secret is to experience joy, revelation, delight, in new awareness and in the evocation of depth and mystery. Clare's real success in 'The Nightingale's Nest' is in the contrasting tensions which arise between the private and the public, the internal and the external, and the masculine interloper and the feminine nest.

Janet Todd, provides a useful model for the gender specifics of the Romantic 'world':

> The Romantic poet's world is infinite, eternal and one, and the one, like the one of matrimony, is male. In the poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and even of Blake and Shelley, the female enters not usually as creating subject but as the symbol of otherness and immanence by the side of the male transcendence, as a component in metaphors of reconciliation and integration, as emanation, shadow, mirror and epipsyche.[172]

If 'The Nightingale's Nest' is used as a paradigm for a broader discussion of Clare's poetics, it becomes apparent that a discussion of gender issues would be central to assessing his position in relation to his contemporaries, as well as being vital to understanding why themes of secrecy, the hidden and solitude appear so frequently in his poetry. Todd suggests that, ultimately, the world of the Romantic poet is male; is this true of Clare's poetic world? In 'The Nightingale's Nest' the world with which the speaker is trying to achieve some sort of union is undoubtedly female. The nest is of course the place where the mother bird broods upon the eggs, which are described in detail in the poem, so it has to be a female space. Indeed, the very word 'nest' would have implied the female genitals.[173] The nightingale is also very clearly a

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[171] Haughton in *John Clare in Context,* pp. 57, 64 and 64 respectively.

[172] Janet Todd, *Feminist Literary History: A Defence* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1988), p. 114.

[173] See Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English,* revised edition by Paul Beale (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 8th ed., 1984). The entry provides an important intertextual source for this meaning of the word:

> *nest,* n. The female pudend: low coll[oquial] when not euph[emistic] S[tandard] E[nglish]: C.18–early 20. (Robert Burns)... In *be on the nest,* to enjoy the gratification of the marriage bed: low coll.: C19–20.
> *nest,* v. To defecate: C.17–early 18? coll. or dial[ect] (Scots)...

The following lines from 'The Pettichaps Nest' should quell any doubts about the fairly overt sexuality of nest-imagery in Clare's work of this period (mid to late 1820's):

'creating subject': she sings a '[r]ich extacy' in 'luscious strain' (line 33). Indeed, it is her immanent feminine creativity - in rearing young and singing - which is the mainspring of the poet's identification with her. The question remains, whether Clare's representation of the feminine is an integral part of his understanding of the natural, or does it serve merely - as Todd says it does for other male poets of the period - as an adjunct to his male realisation of the natural world? It seems to me that femininity is indeed an integral part of Clare's poetic formation of male speakers, while at the same time being an oddly secret, hidden and distracting mirror which threatens his masculine poetic voice. As I have revealed in 'First Love', the confusion and impossibility of communication Clare's speakers experience with the feminine - be that represented by bird, muse or human figuration - can undermine their entire poetic being. Far from being 'at one' with their own world, the male speakers seem repeatedly to give voice to a silent struggle between an outward masculinity and what Todd would call an immanent and inward femininity. The delicate retreat away from the hidden interior world of the nightingale's nest at the end of the poem suggests that as an artist Clare is doomed to remain at a frustrated and uncomprehending distance from femininity, while the 'legacy of song' and 'mirth & music of a womans voice'[174] continue to echo around his poetry like the infuriating 'buzzing of a flye'.

Clare's contradictory positioning of the feminine both as the reason for his retreat into nature, and as the quality of nature that he finds most comfort in, is clarified to some degree in the late poem 'I love thee nature with a boundless love'. It is a poem which also models its speaker's strength on an pagan-like and elemental god:

1
I love thee nature with a boundless love
The calm of earth, the storms of roaring woods
The winds breathe happiness where e'er I rove
Theres lifes own music in the swelling floods
My harp is in the thunder of melting clouds

Built like a oven with a little hole
Hard to discover–that snug entrance wins
Scarcely admitting e'en two fingers in
& lined with feathers warm as silken stole
& soft as seats of down for painless ease (*MP* III, p. 517, lines 19-23).

[174] *Northborough Sonnets*, p. 55.

The snow capt mountain, and the rolling sea
And hear ye not the voice where darkness shrouds
The heavens, — there lives happiness for me

2
Death breathes its pleasures when it speaks of him
My pulse beats calmer while its lightnings play
My eye with earths delusions waxing dim
Clears with the brightness of eternal day
The elements crash around me — it is he
And do I hear his voice and never start
From Eve's posterity I stand quite free
Nor feel her curses rankle round my heart

3
Love is not here — hope is — and in his voice
The rolling thunder and the roaring sea
My pulse they leap and with the hills rejoice
Then strife and turmoil is a peace to me
No matter where lifes ocean leads me on
For nature is my mother and I rest
When tempests trouble and the sun is gone
Like to a weary child upon her breast —[175]

Clare follows in the ancient tradition of making a pariah of Eve. The blank statement that 'Love is not here' might suggest that this poem derives its hard-nosed stance from bitter experience, not merely from the Blake-like cleansing of the perceptions. Although it is no surprise to see a breast in the last line of a later poem, it is perhaps atypical of Clare to clearly position his speaker as a child in a relationship with a maternal nature. That nature is clearly feminine and physically personified so far as to have a comforting and nurturing breast; in the same poem the speaker makes it clear that a heaven or Eden can only exist for him if he positions himself outwith the curse of woman, embodied in Eve. This feminization of nature, and implied masculinisation of heaven, is not as contradictory as it might seem; if the speaker is to live without woman, he can at least personify nature as a mother (and even as a lover) to compensate for the absence of Eve's progeny. But in the majority of Clare's later love poems woman is present in an overt and central fashion, as the next two chapters will reveal.

[175] *LP* I, p. 505.

Chapter 3
Representations of Women

In Clare's most anthologised and quoted poem, 'I Am', the speaker offers a reason in the third and final stanza for the personal misery he bemoans in the first two:

> I long for scenes, where man hath never trod
> A place where woman never smiled or wept
> There to abide with my Creator, God;
> And sleep as I in childhood, sweetly slept,
> Untroubling, and untroubled where I lie,
> The grass below – above the vaulted sky.[176]

The second line of this stanza suggests that woman is a major cause in the speaker's troubles; that life, or life-in-death, would be a great deal more peaceful were woman not around. It does not necessarily imply that the speaker despises woman. In fact, in the context of the self-pitying and self-condemnatory preceding stanzas, the line might imply that the speaker's troubles with woman are of his own making. This sense of balance - wherein the speaker condemns himself as much as he does his experiences - is captured in the penultimate line of this last stanza. Perhaps it is this self-effacing honesty, balanced with a Romantic and Hamlet-like world-weariness, that makes the poem so successful: the speaker admits that he has caused as much trouble as he has experienced from others.

However, if the ending presents the speaker's ideal of heaven, then it is a heaven that is inhabited only by the speaker and his 'Creator, God'. The intruding footsteps of man, and the emotions of woman, are not to be admitted. Furthermore, any adult experiences are to be forgotten. This is a church, delicately evoked in the penultimate word of the poem ('vaulted'), which is a place of solitude, of childhood simplicity and unconsciousness. It is tempting to suggest that the speaker is promoting a oneness with his God, but such a comfortable Christian unity is not convincingly present. Instead, the speaker seems to be clearly defining heaven on his own terms. The word 'abide' can signify 'remain faithful to' or 'tolerate', as well as 'dwell'. It does not mean 'unify' or 'love'. The weakest line in the poem (especially weak in the light of Clare's general lack of references to God in his poetry) is perhaps this very one,

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[176] *LP* I, p. 396, lines 13-18.

since it is surely unnecessary to include both 'Creator' and 'God'. Still, it fits the rhyme-scheme; rhythmically it stutters before it end-stops with a heavy emphasis on 'God'.

The heaven implied is one inhabited only by the speaker and God. The speaker is a misanthrope in death. Death is a release and relief from the society of man and woman. Woman is characterised, and possibly condemned by, emotional display: smiling and weeping. These displays, emerging presumably from happiness and sadness, cause the speaker some trouble. In the speaker's desired return to childhood sleep, woman is apparently not present as lover or mother. This heaven is thus a personal, private and masculine space.[177] Although of course it is only masculine because the speaker, we assume, is male. In fact all human society is banished, so it might be meant to be an *asexual* place. If childhood is the predominating temporal definition, then it is a heaven of pre-sexual-awareness. Perhaps then, it is adult sexuality itself, and not woman, that is the problem. But if adult sexuality is a problem explored in Clare's poetry, then the relationships of male speakers with their female objects might provide an insight into what exactly that problem might be. This chapter will seek to outline other ways in which Clare portrays woman, in order to provide an understanding of the poet's sexual politics, especially as evinced in his later work. I will look at the ways that Clare constructs female sexuality, in the later lusty love lyric. The intention of this chapter is to reveal hitherto un-discussed aspects of Clare's representations of women in ballad-like poems which are rarely mentioned critically, if at all. If the lusty poems are rarely mentioned, then feminist appraisals of Clare's poetry are almost non-existent. Lynne Pearce has written the only significant feminist reaction to Clare's later poetry. It is a reaction which is personally inscribed with resentment of a patriarchal academia, as much as it is written with an openly-embittered distaste for Clare:

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[177] A longer and in many ways more interesting poem than 'I Am', but one which adheres to a similar desire to get away from everything but a natural scene, is one dated 18 April 1842, called 'I long to forget them - the love of my life'. In the fifth line of the poem, the speaker expresses a desire 'To live in myself, and to be what I am...'. In the last stanza he associates the female with 'falsehood':

O, bear me away from this tumult and strife
Where woman or falsehood is not to be found -
To the scenes which I loved in the childhood of life,
In the fields which the thorn-hedges sheltered around;
Where trees without order in spinney clumps stand,
And in corners the aged or the whattled sheep pen;
O bear me to those dearest spots in the land,
And the peace of my lowly thatch'd cottage again! (*LP* I, p. 14).

> My clearest response to John Clare today is that he took up five years of my life that could have been much better spent doing something else... I do, indeed, perceive my 'involvement' with John Clare to have been pre-determined by institutional forces. Clare was made my academic destiny when I was just 20 years old and submitting my applications for postgraduate research. John Clare, my tutor suggested, was a 'safe bet': on the margins, but respectable. He told me that a 'good book on Clare' had yet to be written. Not knowing what I really wanted to do, the subject of my doctoral thesis was thus decided for me.[178]

Although these comments are interesting in their own right, as a short history of mid-eighties female experience in male-dominated literary studies, they are relevant here because they impinge upon Pearce's comments on Clare's 'profound misogyny'[179]. At least she is open about her agenda: '...readers will appreciate that the reading which follows is inscribed in resentment: that its resentment is the site of its feminism.'[180]

Even acknowledging her resentment, it is clear that Pearce makes a balanced and well-argued case for re-assessing Clare's sexual politics. Occasionally she moves into hyperbole, writing for instance that '[t]he catalogues of names and addresses found in Northampton MS 19... are as disturbing as those sometimes found amongst the documents of sex-murderers.'[181] But still this is an important essay, because so few critical works on Clare are theoretically explicit about their agendas, and so few are written from anything like a feminist perspective. Pearce poses serious questions of literary worth, reader-exclusion and the sexual politics of academia which have been all but ignored by Clare scholars. The dearth of interaction with such issues in Clare studies begs the question: why does Clare scholarship - healthier now than ever before - not attract feminist critics? Helen Boden makes one of the few comments about feminism and Clare studies:

> Feminist critics seem to have avoided Clare, perhaps following the example of Janet Todd who after writing an early book on Clare, moved away from the subject to write principally on early women's writing. Similarly Lynne Pearce in a recent 'reluctant' and 'resenting' essay regrets the time she spent on Clare. Pearce argues that Clare's expressions of desire,

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[178] 'John Clare's *Child Harold:* The Road Not Taken', *Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice,* ed. Susan Sellers (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) p. 143-144.
[179] Ibid., p. 145.
[180] Ibid., p. 144.
[181] Ibid., p. 147.

> loss, etc., refuse access to a female readership, because they are derived from an exclusively male tradition.[182]

If two feminist critics have 'moved away' from Clare, it is not really a pattern - yet. But maybe it is an inevitable result of Clare's poetically-represented sexual politics, combined with a current critical (male) fear of 'resentful' work like Pearce's. This fear may emerge from a sense that Clare's canonical position is not yet secure enough for his work and life to be pejoratively criticised. Pearce suggests that because of Clare's misogyny, so outrageous in *Don Juan A Poem* and *Child Harold,* feminists have a moral obligation, as it were, to avoid him and writers like him, because his texts exclude women as readers and because his 'obsessional eye' as she calls it, consistently objectifies women. Thus she offers a reason *not* to read poems by Clare whose principal object is the representation of women, because they belong 'to literary traditions that constitute the female merely as object.'[183] I am not arguing that Pearce is wrong; there are plenty of female writers of the period who are even more neglected than Clare, and when one considers her personal history as a critic, one cannot argue that Pearce should not recommend female-authored texts over Clare's. They fit a feminist's agenda more directly. But, studying artistic misogyny in male verse is way of understanding the sexual politics of the period. This is surely as valid a reason for a feminist reading of any text. To neglect such texts would be to do Clare's reclamation an injustice, as it would be ignoring - possibly repressing - poems which are distasteful to modern criticism. Helen Boden continues:

> ...it is important and necessary that feminist critiques of the canon continue to take place. After all, the mixture of false modesty and fear often in evidence rarely actually deters men from engaging critically with *women's* writing. Clare will continue to be a man speaking to men unless women listen and respond to him... There may be an important role for women critics of those male writers who have never quite made it into the canon.[184]

For this chapter I will be looking at poems which, for various reasons, haven't quite made it into Clare's personal 'canon', let alone the wider educational one. In the genre of the lusty

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[182] 'Clare, gender and art', *The Independent Spirit: John Clare and the Self-Taught Tradition,* ed. John Goodridge (Helpston: The John Clare Society and The Margaret Grainger Memorial Trust, 1994), p. 198-208.
[183] Pearce, op. cit, p. 145.
[184] Boden, op. cit., pp. 198-199. In actual fact, Boden is wrong about the maleness of Clare's audience: there have been many successful female scholars and enthusiasts who have had as much to do with Clare's 20th-century reclamation as anyone male: among them are Pauline Buttery, Johanne Clare, Barbara Estermann, Margaret Grainger, Bridget Keegan, Mary Moyse, Valerie Pedlar, Barbara Strang, Anne Tibble and June Wilson. But none of these critics, editors and fans could be said to have an explicitly feminist agenda. As the varied membership of the John Clare Society substantiates, attracting women isn't the problem; attracting feminists is.

love ballad-like poem (for want of better terminology) Clare predictably returns time and again to a set of motifs to describe women. These descriptions are invariably physical. The sexual frustration of the male speaker, often conceived and expressed as a 'gaze' or 'look', binds many later poems together thematically.

The heaven in 'I Am' discussed above, partly based on female absence, in the lusty ballad can only be envisaged through - indeed is entirely dependent upon - the physical and sexual *presence* of woman. In the following poem 'We're lost as strangers', a similar over-arching heaven is conditionally structured around woman, only the structural scaffolding she has previously provided is indeed absent.

The summer rose in love's own hue
Blushes and blooms so fair and free
I gaze on thee with looks as true
Thou look'st on me and vacancy
Canst thou look here and all forget
The place the time is nothing there
Then pity man who's so beset
And woman ne'er was made so fair

Thy swelling breast is just the same
As when we met and loved so true
The enemy sun went down in flame
And shed her shower of pearly dew
My arm was o'er thy shoulders thrown
Thy gentle hand was held in mine
And now I pass to thee unknown
Thy eye that brightens only mine

I guess and know and own it not
We're lost as strangers, and we pass
Though there's green places unforgot
Where love would clasp my bonny lass
Aye clasp her in the fondest arms
And hold her like a lump of love
The same flowers grow in fields and farms
The same blue sky is arched above[185]

This poem is dependent upon the idea of the gazes and looks of both participants in the past relationship. In the first stanza the male speaker gazes 'with looks', and the female looks back (twice). But the speaker feels sorrow (and asks for pity) because he detects 'vacancy' in the

[185] I have transcribed directly from Pet C4 293. A transcription of the Nor 20 390 version of the poem entitled 'Lost as strangers as we pass' can be found in *LP* II, p. 1043. In Pet MS the poem is entitled 'We're lost as strangers' and in line 8 the 'n' in 'ne'er' is crossed out in pencil.

forgetful look of the woman. The ambiguity in the first line of the opening 'rose' - which could be either a flower or a verb suggesting a past summer sun rising into the colour ('hue') of love - is clarified and answered by that 'same blue sky' of the last line of the poem. But the sky is not the 'same blue sky' which similarly arches at the end of 'I Am'. The sky in this poem circumscribes a remembered idyllic scene of physical love. Indeed, the physical presence of that love is suggested with an usual heaviness in the phrase 'lump of love'. The woman is being referred to as a 'lump'; perhaps her actual shape is immaterial, the word affecting an odd indeterminacy to both the emotions felt, and its physical embodiment. It might also be a play on our expectations; would not 'lamp of love' be a more expected phrase in this genre?

The second stanza emphasises the physicality of that love - detailing not only the visual aspects of the woman's form, but also the physical intimacy they shared, touching and holding one another. In the last stanza, the speaker focuses upon the sheer wonder of touch, of physical contact; 'clasp' is repeated in succeeding lines, then 'hold' is used in the next. But before the speaker reaches this climax of weighted physicality, he has progressed through stages of his gaze in the first stanza and a physical compartmentalisation of the female object in the second. In all three stanzas there appears a sense of indeterminacy and doubt from the speaker, which emanates from a sense of the closing paradise having long moved into the past. But the sense of female physicality - the 'swelling breast', the 'shoulders', the 'hand', and the simile of 'a lump of love' - is the bedrock of the speaker's remembrance and figuration of the woman.

Generally in these 'lusty lyrics', the male speakers are determinedly interested in stimulating and portraying healthy female sexuality in its virgin state. It is rare that this construction of the female in an often highly-charged and eroticised natural scene is combined with any sense of her personality or character; nor will she be granted a personality with any complex history or sense of development. Invariably, it is made clear that she is at the very beginning of her sexual life.

Sometimes, the male speaker might have a slight Scots or Irish accent, using words like 'bonny', 'lassie' or 'shamrock' to evoke a place and tradition ostensibly far away from the

environs of Helpston.[186] The object of his[187] affections is invariably a woman, a young woman, probably a maid or virgin, or even specifically '[n]ot older than fifteen',[188] 'five years wanting sweet sixteen' or 'wants three month O' seventeen'.[189] Often the speaker will name his prospective love, and, as in many ballads,[190] her name might well become the repeated refrain of the poem.[191] The woman might be defined by her occupation - she might be a milk maid, work with a plough, be an opera singer or even a queen[192]. She might be defined less directly by the work of her father - 'the gardeners bonny daughter' or 'the millers daughter'[193] for example. She might be a literary figure, and is thus outlined by her intertextual source - Robert Bloomfield's daughter Hannah,[194] Haidee from Byron[195], Robert Burns' wife Jeanie[196] or Imogen from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline.*[197] Sometimes, the only biographical information available about the female character is her place of origin, which can be celebrated by the speaker as much as the woman herself. Indeed she might be a cause for the celebration of the locality around her. And the place might not necessarily be near Helpston or in Northamptonshire as it is for Lucy o' Northampton,[198] Oundle Phebe[199] or the Maid of

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[186] E.g.: 'Song' ['O Edinborough Katys a beautifull girl'] (*LP* I, p. 232); 'I pull'd a wild rose fra the brere' (*LP* II, p. 854); 'I'll gang and see Phemie' (*LP* II, p. 1009); 'Good e'enin to ye lassie' (*LP* II, p. 1028); 'Pretty Kate Kearney' (*LP* II, p. 1039).

[187] The speaker is very occasionally a woman, e.g.: 'I've got an old crummaching Cow' (*LP* II, p. 863), 'He loved me best o' ony –' (*LP* II, p. 919) and 'When the sheep are in the pen' (*LP* II, p. 740).

[188] 'She is a sweet and bonny thing', *LP* II, p. 874, line 2.

[189] 'My love she's bonny', *LP* II, p. 729, lines 10 and 13.

[190] See George Deacon, *John Clare and the Folk Tradition* (London: Sinclair Browne, 1983).

[191] E.g.: 'My sweet bonny Ann' (*LP* II, p. 830) and 'Bonny Jenny O' (*LP* II, p. 805).

[192] See 'The Milkmaid' (*LP* I, p. 631), 'The Milkmaid is bonny and fair' (*LP* II, p. 817) and 'The Milking Maid' (*LP* II, p. 865); 'Mary the maid o' the Plough' (*LP* II, p. 766); 'To Jenny Lind' (*LP* II, p. 666); 'O for one real imaginary blessing' (*LP* I, p. 224, line 38).

[193] 'The gardeners bonny daughter' (*LP* II, p. 739); 'The Millers daughter' (*LP* II, p. 686).

[194] 'Song' [The rushbeds touched the boiling spring] *LP* I, p. 527, stanza 2:

Here Bloomfield lay beside the brook
His memory haunts the silver flood
Musing upon the open book
In happy and poetic mood
His fancies left on every place
The landscape seems his waking dream
Where Hannah shewed her rosey face
'And leap't across the infant stream'

[195] '& what is Love the sweetest of all pains', *LP* I, p. 213, lines 10 and 17.

[196] 'Scotland' (line 10) and 'Here's to auld Scotland' (line 9), *LP* II, p. 690 and 691 respectively.

[197] 'Song' [In bed she like a lily lay], *LP* I, p. 341, line 24.

[198] 'Sweet Lucy o Northampton', *LP* II, p. 884.

[199] 'Oundle Phebe', *LP* I, p. 190.

Walkherd;[200] take for example Edinborough Katy,[201] Susan Chaplin of Kildare,[202] the Snowden maid[203] or Irish Kitty[204] (who is curiously from both Dublin and Killarney, towns separated by a couple of hundred miles at least). These songs are not meant to be realistic; they bear the traces of oral and folk traditions, of Clare's reading of volumes such as Joseph Ritson's *A Select Collection of English Songs,*[205] Allan Cunningham's Scottish song collections,[206] poems by Robert Fergusson,[207] Allan Ramsay, James Hogg, Robert Tannahill, Robert Bloomfield, Robert Burns and Walter Scott.[208] There are over 80 different female names in the two *Later Poems* volumes. The perspective of this chapter, indeed of this thesis, is that it doesn't really matter whether the women were women Clare actually knew, as it doesn't immediately help an understanding of the poetry. For instance, the fact that 'Oundle Phebe' is written not in a Northamptonshire but in a Scots voice (Oundle is a village in Northamptonshire), would suggest that there is something more complicated going on in Clare's lusty love poetry than mere reminiscence and autobiographical nostalgia, even when the speaker constructs the narrative confessionally. To understand fully what issues are raised in these poems, it is necessary to take another example. The following poem is called 'No Use in Trying':

> My love is as sweet as a bean field in blossom
> Like the pea bloom her cheek like the dog rose her bosom
> My love she's as rich as brook banks of daiseys
> Gold eyes and silver rims meeting mens praises
> Her eyes are as bright as the brooks silver ripples
> Milk white are her twin breast[s] & rose pink the nipples
> Her ancles are sweet as a man can conceive
> And her arms are as fine to[o] though hid in her sleeve
>
> –2–

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200 '[MAID of Walkherd, meet again'] and 'The Courtship', *LP* I, pp. 18 and 32 respectively.
201 'Song' ['O Edinborough Katys a beautifull girl'], *LP* I, p. 232.
202 'Song' [Sweet Susan Chaplin was a maid], *LP* I, p. 197.
203 'The Snowden maid', *LP* II, p. 756.
204 'Song' [My sweet Irish Kitty], *LP* II, p. 674.
205 Second Edition, 3 Vols., (London: F.C. and J. Rivington [&c.], 1813). Item 344, *Northampton Catalogue.*
206 See *Northampton Catalogue,* items 171-175, and *Letters,* pp. 302, 421, 422, 456, 573 and 600.
207 *The Poems of Robert Fergusson,* (Edinburgh: John Fairburn, &c., 1821). Clare was sent a number of volumes of Scottish origin, by Walter Scott, George Reid (of Alloa and Glasgow) and William Smith (of Alloa). See *Northampton Catalogue,* items 135, 350 (Scott); 204, 241, 248, 290, 306, 307, 320, 332, 333 (Reid); and 148 (Smith).
208 See *Northampton Catalogue,* items 340, 341; 244, 245, 246, 247, 248; 372; 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124; 134, 135; 350, 351 and 352.

She's as rosey as morning as mild as the even
I sing her love songs but she's hard o believeing
She'll bid me good day if we meet on the causeway
If I stop to talk love, in a minute she's saucey
To kiss or come nigh her there's no use in trying
She wouldn't toutch a mans face though he were dying
And yet she is lovely as ever was seen
As the rose o' the wood or pink o' the green

–3–

My love is as sweet as a bean field in blossom
The snow drop's not whiter than is her soft bosom
The plash o' the brook it is nothing so bright
As the beam of her eye by bonny moonlight
The rose o' her cheeks no garden so fair
Can match with the red & carnations there
We met where the bean fields were misted wi dew
And if she had kissed me why nobody knew[209]

This is a poem about male sexual frustration, and perhaps the speaker cannot help but contemplate the individual parts of the desired woman he wants. As in so many other poems, she is likened to a variety of flowers - bean blossoms, pea blooms, dog roses, daiseys, pinks, carnations and snow drops. She is coloured and foregrounded with bright splashes of red, pink, white, gold and silver contrasting with a hinted-at backdrop of verdant green. The fertility of the woman and the world that surrounds her is irrigated by the watery imagery of the 'silver ripples' and the 'plash of the brook', and moistened and 'misted wi dew'.

But what do we know about her? That she is a pretty country woman, that men praise her looks and that she is intelligent - or 'saucey' enough - not to succumb to the advances of the singing narrator, who seems to know that even the power of the ballad won't work its wicked way on *this* woman: hence the title. Other than that, the woman is constructed by what we know of her cheeks, eyes, breasts, nipples, ankles and arms. This poem has structure - the anapaestic tetrameter 'is characteristically the foot of hurried motion and excitement',[210] and a difficult metre to sustain, and awkward to read aloud. Also, the cheek, eyes and breasts of the first stanza appear in chiasmic reverse order in the last as the frustrated narrator draws to an annoyed closure. The rhyme-pair of bosom and blossom also appears twice at the beginning

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209 'No use in trying', *LP* II, p. 958.
210 *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics,* eds. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 73.

and end of the poem. Perhaps it cannot be written off as a simple ballad. What is so typical of this poem however, is that we gain hardly any sense of the character of the woman; that she is objectified, sought after, lusted after – the only hint of her personality being that she will not indulge the sexual desire of the speaker.

Many of the female figures in such poems seem to be peeled away at, layer by layer, from the clothes to the face, down the neck, to shoulders, to a broad back, through the locks of the hair, to the breasts, arms, hands, ankles.[211] As the male speaker gazes at her she develops into little more than a detailed object for the poet's masturbatory fantasies. She is reduced, as a construction, to a passive set of images which are brought together by the territorial wanderings of the male gaze. And the women are of a physical type - always healthily (and I quote from various poems) big or even fat, buxom, with thick ankles, calves and arms, strong backs, ruddy cheeks either red with hot blood or tanned by the sun[212] - these are working women - the 'red and rosey' farmers' daughters Clare bemoans the loss of in *The Parish.*[213]

Breasts offer a place of rest - they are called pillows for the poet to sleep upon, or clouds for him to float upon, and sometimes they represent the transcendent, raising the relaxed thoughts of the male: in the poem 'Angels of earth' for example, the essence of womanhood is

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[211] Many examples could be given (perhaps over one hundred), but the following song [She is a sweet and bonny thing] seems as apposite as any:

I love to see her gown of green
Her breast of fairest clay
Her thoughts are purity within
Like th' pink inside o' may
And frae the ancle to the shin
She's like a bunch o' flowers
Lovely without & fair within
Like summer choices hours (*LP* II, p. 874, lines 9-16).

[212] C.f. e.gs.: *LP* I, pp. 192; *LP* II, pp. 770, 771, 831, 839, 860, 867, 906, 921, 1013.

[213] E.g.:

Thus housed mid cocks and hens in idle state
Aping at fashions which their betters hate
Affecting high lifes airs to scorn the past
Trying to be somthing makes them nought at last
These are the shadows that supply the place
Of farmers daughters of the vanished race
And what are these rude names will do them harm
O rather call them 'Ladys of the Farm'

The Parish: A Satire, eds. Eric Robinson and David Powell, [London: Penguin, 1986] lines 173 to 180. Also see Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity; Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) for a cultural analysis of the middle-class late nineteenth-century fashion for female palor and thinness, and the male fetishisation of female illness. Perhaps in *The Parish* Clare detected the changes in female body-fashion much earlier.

embedded in her '...bosoms white all full o' joy / Wafting our thoughts above'.[214] They represent angelic and Edenic natural purity, as they are invariably said to be like milk, cloud, swan, lily or snow. They are the source and seat of female passion and the main stimulant of male desire - the emotional and lustful heat they are said to contain sometimes contrasting with their external coolness:

> In beauty there is joy for ever
> That fadeth not and never will
> It changeth not to sorrow never
> Its smiles are balm for every ill
> It burns in love from its own bosom
> Yet never melts those hills of snow[215]

Clare's concentration on breasts is obsessive. They heave, swell, beat, bud, ripen, nest; they can be bare, fat, big, soft as silk or eider down, purple or blue veins map them and moles adorn them. They are leant on, slept on, handled, kissed, and most importantly, gazed at.[216] The speaker, we are always reminded, is watching, waiting, like a predator. He delights in the stolen glimpse of an exposed bosom.

> Neath ribb'd maple stovens sweet lies the blue bell
> And Harrietts bosom bent low to the ground
> To crop two or three as she liked them so well[217]

Like Harriett here, the woman will often be surrounded by flowers, placed in a fecund spring or summer scene, with colours and light dazzling the narrator and enhancing his portrayal of the woman. Often the half-rhyme pair of bosom and blossom, which we have seen already, dominates the way the woman is represented - not only is she in a flowery scene, with 'wild flowers spread round at her feet'[218] for example; she might also be called the most beautiful flower herself, or a flower might evoke a memory of a woman, for example in the line 'wild flowers are the image of Susan'.[219] Parts of her anatomy might also be likened to a flower: lily-white necks,[220] rosey cheeks, budding breasts, or she might have 'breath... like the violets

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214 'Angels of earth', *LP* II, p. 969, lines 11-12.
215 'In beauty there is joy', *LP* II, p. 983, first stanza.
216 E.gs. can be found in poems in *LP* II, pp. 703, 719, 721, 722, 756, 764, 767, 768, 770, 771, 772, 779, 782, 789, 790, 793, 804, 817, 830, 831, 842, 860, 861 (etc.).
217 'Oh whither fair maiden', *LP* II, p. 991, lines 25-27.
218 'O sweet is the sound', *LP* II, p. 791, line 22.
219 ['Of thee I keep dreaming still thee'], *LP* II, p. 873, line 16
220 'The corn craiks rispy song', *LP* II, p. 788, line 7.

bed'.[221] Flowers can also have the anatomical characteristics of a woman: 'the bosom of a flower'[222] is one of Clare's stock images, as is 'lily bosom'.[223] Indeed, the words and images of the bosom and the blossom are almost interchangeable, and this feminized personification of flora is added to by the repeated appearance of bees. The male speaker is often positioned as a bee, penetrating the female flower, of which the following is a clear example:

2
The busy bee will kiss the flower
As often as he pleases
The butterfly in sunny hour
Will kiss but never teazes
The skylark mounts to kiss the sun
That o'er the green corn glitters
Then like a stone he drops when done
And in the meadow twitters
3
The twilight kisses mornings blush
In coal black night's retreating
And midday breezes kiss the bush
Its pleasant shadows meeting
Grass, corn and leaves in windy days
Are stirred by mighty putther
The flowers are ravished by the bees
The rest kiss one another
4
But Mary fairest of thy kind
No woman ne'er was fairer
Nature's a puzzle to my mind
A flirt I cannot bear her
For me and love she only cheats
Days sunshine and eve's dew
She kisses everything she meets
And I've not once kissed you[224]

If the bee is the male speaker, and the flower is Mary, then it is clear that the poet is positioning himself as a ravisher, who wishes to kiss 'as often as he pleases'. The activity and power rests with the male - the woman is passive and accepting. If she is not, the speaker will say that she should be. The dreamy sexuality of accommodating flowers is extended to an image akin to a lesbian love-nest of flowers kissing one another - those flowers that is, that are

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[221] *LP* II, p. 875, variant in footnote to 'She is a sweet and bonny thing', line 3.
[222] 'The corn craiks rispy song', *LP* II, p. 788, line 11.
[223] 'Good e'enin to ye lassie', *LP* II, p. 1029, line 44.
[224] [Honey words make charms of blisses], *LP* I, p. 595, lines 9-32.

unfortunate enough not to be ravished by the bee. It is perhaps typical of Clare's poetry as a whole that the speaker remains as an outsider to all this kissing; the poem ends with a whinge of familiar sexual frustration.

But consummation, for a man figured as a bee, is not always to be wished for, as in the following earlier fragment:

> The painted tulip in her bloom begun
> Opens her painted bosom to the sun
> The tempted bee looks on with amorous gaze
> To taste her beauty toys & plays
> Clouds hide the sun the fair deluder frowns
> & in her bosoms gall the plunderer drowns
> In vain he buzzes round the clown
> & dies self buried & its treasure flown[225]

A poet who undoubtedly influences much of the imagery in Clare's lusty later lyrics is his friend Allan Cunningham.[226] It is clear in the following extract from Cunningham's 'Jeanie' just how much Clare was indebted to him:

> Were my fair Jean yon ruddy rose,
> Disclosing on its fragrant tree,
> Its golden lips I would unseal,
> Transform'd into a little bee;
> There murmuring blythe in balmy room,
> I'd richly feast midst honey bloom.[227]

We can see Clare similarly using the bee as a sexual image and his culturally specific reaction not only to Cunningham, but also to other Scottish poets in his library (as I've mentioned above) in the following extract from 'We'll wander through the heather':

> We'll wanner O'er the mountain
> We'll loiter in the dell
> And we'll sit by the fountain
> Both together by our sel
> And we'll be pleased wi nature
> The blossom and the bee
> Thou beautiful in feature
> I'll love thee and only thee

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[225] [The painted tulip in her bloom begun], *MP* II, p. 245.

[226] Clare initially addressed Cunningham in a letter of 1824 as 'Brother Bard and Fellow Labourer', which, as Mark Storey points out, 'was the salutation used by Bloomfield in his letter to Clare of 25 July 1820' (*Letters,* p. 302.); this is high praise indeed from Clare, and reveals how significant Cunningham's work may have been.

[227] 'Jeanie', Song XXI, *Songs: Chiefly in the Rural Language of Scotland,* (London: Printed for the Author, By Smith & Davy [etc.], 1813) p.37. Item 172 in *Northampton Catalogue.* There are three different editions of Cunningham's poetry (items 171 to 174) in the Northampton collection.

The gold drops on the broom
Like those upon thy breast
Are moulded on its bloom
At sunset in the west
The blush upon the brere
Sae courted by the bee
Are naething half so dear
As thy kisses are to me

We'll wanner through the heather
We'll hide amang the broom
And enjoy the simmer weather
And the mountains simmer bloom
And well sit down by the braeken
And lovely scenes we'll see
For dear is Mary Aiken
As the blossom to the bee[228]

Lips are often described as rosebuds in Clare's poetry, and the mouth and the desire to kiss it, and even its pearly white teeth[229] are almost as central as a node in his portrayal of women as the breasts are. Robert Herrick's poem 'Cherry-Ripe' offers another clear intertextual source:

Cherry-ripe, ripe, ripe, I cry,
Full and fair ones; come and buy.
If so be you ask me where
They do grow, I answer: There,
Where my Julia's lips do smile;
There's the land, or cherry-isle:
Whose plantations fully show
All the year where cherries grow.[230]

The male speaker of Herrick's poem has objectified Julia's lips to the extent that he imagines them being for sale, farmed, grown, sold and one supposes, eaten, by the salivating male. His gaze is gobbling her up, just as the bee in Cunningham's poem will feast, and in Clare's will ravish. Cunningham and Clare metaphorically link cherries with lips - Cunningham in the first stanza of 'The Bonnie Lassie' writes:

My damsel with the raven locks is young and balte witha',
'Twin cherries are her lips, and her bosom is the snaw;[231]

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[228] *LP* II, p. 1,051, lines 9-32.
[229] 'I clasp my lovely girl', *LP* II, p. 804, line 23.
[230] Robert Herrick, *Hesperides,* 1648. (Witherspoon, Alexander M. and Frank J. Warnke, eds., *Seventeenth-Century Prose and Poetry,* Second Edition [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982], p. 810.

Another poem which confirms Clare's reading of Herrick and Cunningham is 'Mary o the west':

The gouden clouds o'er westling sky's
Where the retireing day
On goud and crimson cushions lies
While a' the east is grey
Grey with the dewy fa' o' e'en
That pearls the earths green breast
How beautiful the sky is seen
O'er Mary o' the West

She lives beneath yon dappled sky
And goud and siller clouds
Where dark blue mountains pileing lye
And night in e'ening shrouds
I wonder as I often do
If fields o' blossomed thorn
Are seen by foreign Marys eye
As here both e'en and morn

If so we both are gazeing now
Upon the self same things
The daisy sward the may bush bough
The clouds o'gouden wings
And shoud the self same thoughts as mine
Now fill her snowy breast
I shoud in these soft moments join
Sweet Mary o' the West

To lean upon her snowy breast
Where sea waves gently swirl
And kiss her neck for sweeter rest
Where inky ringlets curl
I kiss her lip sae Cherry ripe
With soft endearments blest
Nip her white hand with gentle gripe
Sweet Mary o' the West[232]

This poem illustrates the way in which Clare combines imagery from literary texts and the traditions associated with the popular folk ballad. The geographical reading of the physical female form is idiosyncratic however, and is part of and dependent upon a thorough feminizing of the natural. The dual gaze upon nature - imagined to be from both the male

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[231] Song XXXI, *Songs: Chiefly in the Rural Language of Scotland,* p. 32.
[232] *LP* II, p. 853.

speaker and the 'foreign eye' of his female lover - facilitates his fantasy; and as he gazes upon the female forms of nature - fetishising and eroticising the landscape, he envisions the shapes and colours of his absent love. The joining of the speaker with Mary is conditional on her 'breast' being filled with the same thoughts. It is significant that the male speaker places her thoughts in the breast and not the head. Here we have confirmation of the gender stereotype of woman thinking instinctively, passionately, through her sex, from the heart.

Nature offers a metaphorical link for the poet, between him and his love, in the blooms of flowers. As I have tried to show, flowers are vital in Clare's pattern of constructing the female form, and in figuring sexual congress and courting behaviour between a man and a woman. Woman in such poems, *is* a flower - to be looked at; a source of sublime nectar; to be entered and enjoyed. But oddly, it is in perhaps Clare's most successful lust poem of all, 'Could I but be a flower!', that a gazing male speaker positions himself as a flower:

I wish I was the wild woodbine
Twining round the white-thorn bough
I wish I was the wild hedge rose
Upon thy bonny bosom now
To feel thy thumb & finger nip
About my twisted stem
The flowers now touch thy ruby lip
To kiss their morning's gem
My flowers would kiss those lips o' thine
That kiss'd the dew drops made divine

I wish I was what I am not
The wild flower nodding on the lea
To win thy notice on the spot
And touch thy bosom fond and free
To touch thy bosom lily-white
To kiss thy shoulders marble bright
And in thy bosom dwell
To be thy heart's one whole delight
In thought and sense as well
My hearts own love could I but be
A flower I'd gaze my soul on thee[233]

Although like many other poems it concentrates upon the tactile and sensuous aspect of a relationship, the desire to be 'one whole delight / In thought and sense as well' makes this poem rather different. It is here, where Clare effectively feminizes the male speaker's

[233] As above in chapter 1 I have transcribed directly from manuscript (Pet MS C4, 307). See footnote 80.

metaphorical desire, that some sense of emotional depth is attained. The bosom offers the speaker an affirmation of maternal security - he expresses a desire to dwell *inside* the bosom. The highly charged tactile senses of the speaker are miniaturised in the 'thumb and finger ' of his lover, which are imagined in contact with the phallic 'stem' of the male flower. The lovers are to be unified in the act of gazing - it is through the gaze that the soul-transference between lovers is to take place. If this is a poem about kissing and touching it is also a poem which is carefully structured to include an intelligent and surprising intermixture and entanglement of the usual set of images associated by the same poet with either sex. The unification is achieved - or would be - in this sharing and consuming of the usual binary opposites. It would be a unification of identities and soul, not just a male speaker giving an account of his lusty gaze. As is usually characteristic of Clare's later and middle-period love poems, the consummation is something to be wished for; it is conditional, a vague possibility, and of course the actual wish to be a flower is an impossibility. Implied sub-textually in this impossibility is a pathos and sadness which colours almost all of Clare's love poetry.

The sheer number of poems which establish Clare's later poetical obsession with the female form amounts to something pathetically pitiable. Perhaps it is no wonder that most scholars have chosen to ignore this huge part of his later poetic output, as in any reader's overall impression the poems coalesce into a pathetic sadness. It is almost impossible (unless a reader did not know of Clare's biographical situation) not to feel sorrow for the author of these sexually-frustrated, repetitive, reductive and often dull representations of women. 'Could I but be a flower!' is a startling exception, and there are others which can only be discovered through critical close-reading, which excludes no poems as a result of value judgements of past critics. In the following poem, 'A Lament', the speaker seems to be quietly saddened by his own multi-mused dependence upon - even addiction to - the figuring of woman. The poem also reveals how significant femininity was to Clare's poetic production - and to his creative process, the subject of the next chapter.

1
I cannot if I would be gay
Nor love what I adored
Strife stole my feelings all away
Nor e'er a thought restored

I felt a love for many things
That would in raptures fall
Creations light on varied wings
And woman most of all

2

I loved them with a Poets love
And loved them as a man
I loved them as the blest above
And will do while I can
I loved them for a better place
Birds woman flowers and grass
And worship on the red rose face
Of every bonny lass

3

My muses they – and Poets too
The sum of every song
I see them in the sun and dew
And the year long
Angels on earth they are and give
My feelings thoughts and tears
Fond hopes new feelings still to live
A longer length of years

4

To live and see when strife shall cease
And kindred kindred meet
A land of love of health and peace
In cottage town and street
The winds shall blow and rivers flow
And clouds slow sail above
When earth shall turn to heaven below
And love be lost in love[234]

[234] 'A Lament; I cannot if I would be gay', *LP* I, p. 567.

Chapter 4
Clare and Byron: Sex, Poetry and the Marketplace

'A poet is born, not paid.' – Wilson Mizner.

> Began Don Juan 2 verses of the Shipwreck very fine and the character of Haidee is the best I have yet met it is very beautiful the Hero seems a fit partner for Tom and Jerry fond of getting into scrapes and always finding means to get out agen for ever in the company of ladys who seem to watch at night for oppertunitys for every thing but saying their prayers perhaps they are as good as their neighbours nay better they do with out that fas[h]ionable veil hypocrisy
>
> (Clare's *Journal,* 1824)[235]

On one face of John Clare's gravestone in the churchyard of St Botolph's in Helpston, Northamptonshire, are carved the words 'A POET IS BORN NOT MADE'.[236] In 1841 Clare wrote two poems which overtly react to the work of Byron, his own *Child Harold* and *Don Juan A Poem.*[237] The latter begins 'Poets are born, and so are whores'. In his early career Clare was marketed by John Taylor as a 'Northamptonshire Peasant Poet', as a natural genius, as a Wordsworthian 'Child of Nature'[238], a policy which was to make its mark on Clare's grave on its other face. If Clare's feelings about such marketing were always ambivalent, by 1841 they had become terribly problematic, to the point where he could conflate the making of a poet with that of a prostitute. Attacking the proverb which ended up on his gravestone, Clare implies that a poet is no more 'born' a poet than a woman is born a whore; both are formed by circumstance, by society and by money.

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[235] Clare's 'Journal' entry for Friday, 17 September, 1824, *By Himself,* p. 174.

[236] See note 272 below.

[237] The most extensive study of Clare's *Child Harold* appears in chapters 5 and 6 of Lynne Pearce's unpublished PhD thesis, *John Clare and Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogic Principle. Readings from John Clare's Manuscripts 1832-1845* (University of Birmingham, 1987). For a historical and biographical consideration of Byron's influence on Clare, see 'John Clare Reads Lord Byron' by Anne Barton (*Romanticism,* 2.2, 1996). Edward Strickland's article 'Boxer Byron: A Clare Obsession', (*Byron Journal,* 17, 1989) on Clare's fascination with Byron adds to this historical criticism.

[238] See Taylor's Introduction to *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1820).

In Clare's *Child Harold* the narrator seems to be under the spell of the most delicate and least cynical moments of both Byron's *Childe Harold* (especially Canto IV) and *Don Juan* (Canto II perhaps, in which Juan has an affair with Haidée). The narrator portrays himself as a victim of embittering absence from his lovers, Mary and Martha, but also as someone who will remain ever faithful to love in absentia, comforted and shielded from life's blows by a feminized Nature. Interspersed between the Spenserian stanzas, the songs and ballads that form the polyphony[239] of *Child Harold* owe as much to Byron's lyrical love poetry (for example *The Hebrew Melodies*) as they do to the oral folk tradition.

It is *Don Juan A Poem* that is most violently stimulated by Byron's poetry. In Byron's *Don Juan* the sexuality of English women in the later cantos is represented on the whole as controlled if not entirely chaste, in direct contrast to the earlier cantos' displays of openly libidinous and lesbian female desire in the Orient. Racially stereotyping both east and west, orient and occident, Byron presents the hot, passionate & racially dark blood of Julia, Haidée and a whole harem of Turkish women in contrast to the cooler, whiter blood of Adeline and Aurora[240]. In Clare's *Don Juan A Poem* the narrator instead attacks the prurience and deviousness of only English women. While Clare's poem agrees with Byron's in believing that the control of female sexuality is essential to a happy, free and decent society (Byron's narrator's phrase is 'chaste wives, pure lives' [XI, 10, 1]) Clare's goes further in attempting to comically represent sexual profligacy at its endemic worst. Indeed, it is in *Don Juan A Poem* that Clare is at his most outrageously sexual, bawdy, frivolous, misogynist and one might even say carefree; it seems that the speaker no longer cares about polite sensibility, decorum or his audience. Perhaps Clare is finally writing with the venom which his patrons and editors were so quick to repress in his earlier work. If in his earlier satirical moments Clare attacked cant and decadence, wealth and exploitation - in *The Parish* most notably and extensively - in *Don Juan A Poem* he vents his not inconsiderable spleen at women. It is quite common for Clare to

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[239] The most extensive study of Clare's *Child Harold* appears in chapters 5 and 6 of Lynne Pearce's unpublished PhD thesis, *John Clare and Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogic Principle. Readings from John Clare's Manuscripts 1832-1845* (University of Birmingham, 1987). Pearce sums up: '[t]he personal pronoun of this poem... is a picaresque adventurer; a chameleon who adopts many personae, but who resides permanently in none...' (p. 212).

[240] For a detailed account of the racial and sexual positioning of east and west, and of femininity and masculinity in *Don Juan,* see 'Juan's Sea Changes: Class, Race and Gender in Byron's *Don Juan*' by Caroline Franklin in *Theory in Practice: Don Juan,* ed. Nigel Wood (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1993), pp. 56-89.

feminize personified qualities of society such as honour, virtue and honesty, and to reveal how they have lost their virginal purity. As we shall see, unbridled female sexuality is the ultimate definition of a corrupt society for Clare. Women are blamed as the cause of all of society's ills: from the recently crowned Queen Victoria to the common hussy - Clare condemns them all. In *The Parish* of the early 1820's Clare's most common attack is upon cant, displayed in every area of society:

> Poor honour now yields to the stronger side
> A wrinkld maid turnd stale and past her pride
> Knavery and cant in triumph take her place
> Unblushing strumpets with a tempting face
> Religion now is little more than cant
> A cloak to hide what godliness may want...[241]

Notably, Byron's *Don Juan* begins with the same rhyming pair of 'want' and 'cant' we see here, defining the stance of the albeit slippery narrator for the rest of the poem:

> I want a hero: an uncommon want,
> When every year and month sends forth a new one,
> Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,
> The age discovers he is not the true one;
> Of such as these I should not care to vaunt,
> I'll therefore take our ancient friend Don Juan,
> We all have seen him in the pantomime
> Sent to the devil, somewhat ere his time. (I, 1)

Try and rhyme 'want', 'cant' and 'vaunt' and another word, less palatable even than cant, might appear as an imposition on the sounds of this first stanza. It is an aural trick: Byron deliberately forces the reader to hear the word 'cunt' in the first rhyming word.[242] especially when we back-track after hearing the longer vowel sound of 'vaunt'. Clare, it seems, picks up on this aural complexity, and makes it a more explicit and central topic of his own *Don Juan A Poem:*

> Childern are fond of sucking sugar candy
> & maids of sausages - larger the better
> Shopmen are fond of good sigars & brandy
> & I of blunt - & if you change the letter
> To C or K it would be quite as handy

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[241] *The Parish,* eds. Eric Robinson and David Powell (London: Penguin Classics, 1986), p. 42, lines 451-456. The word 'cant' appears at least 10 times in the poem.

[242] I am indebted to Professor Robert Kirkpatrick of the Department of English Literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for this interpretation of the rhyme sounds of the opening stanza.

& throw the next away - but I'm your debtor
For modesty - yet wishing nought between us
I'd hawl close to a she as vulcan did to venus (lines 65-72)[243]

The speaker's cynicism here is astounding. As Vulcan - the repugnant outcast blacksmith god of fire - and Milton's architect of Pandemonium - the speaker sexualises the eating habits of children, and implies the hungry fellatory needs of women. He denigrates the decadence of 'shopmen' - who could be pimps - and then openly admits, via some unsubtle trickery, that his desire for sexual gratification is reducible to the desire for cunt - equated with the desire for 'blunt' which was the current slang for money. Women are thus reduced to voracious genitalia and associated, via the speaker, with an equally powerful hunger for money — an association that is supported by the frequency of the word 'whore' in the poem as a whole, and the punning occurrence of the word 'cunning'. The speaker is a poet however, rhyming in decent ottava rima and throwing in the odd hudibrastic, polysyllabic rhyme. In the first stanza of *Don Juan A Poem,* Clare makes it quite clear that if women are to be reduced to a purchasable sexual organ, then poets are equally degraded in the contemporary world:

'Poets are born' - & so are whores - the trade is
Grown universal - in these canting days
Women of fashion must of course be ladies
& whoreing is the business - that still pays
Playhouses Ball rooms - there the masquerade is
- To do what was of old - & now adays
Their maids - nay wives so innoscent & blooming
Cuckold their spouses to seem honest women (lines 1-8)

The appearance of 'canting' has the underlying sound of 'cunting' implicit in it, as the subject here is whoring. Clare's narrator then, is utterly open about the nature of writing verse in his day; he implies that he himself is a poet-whore, willing to sell his verse for money, and that writing poetry is cheap, commonplace, corrupt and diseased. The same sentiment closes the poem, as the narrator begs the reader for cash; the speaker is clearly sending himself up as one of these poet-whores:

Now i'n't this canto worth a single pound
From anybodys pocket who will buy
As thieves are worth a halter I'll be bound

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[243] All references to Clare's *Child Harold* and *Don Juan A Poem* are to the poems in *LP* I, pp. 40-88 and 89-101 respectively.

Now honest reader take the book & try
& if as I have said it is not found
I'll write a better canto bye & bye
So reader now the money till unlock it
& buy the book & help to fill my pocket (lines 295-302, final stanza.)

It is relevant that Clare employs a halter or hanging-noose as the value society gives thieves. Death and futility are very central to Clare's miserable vision of a society that will repay even the worthwhile and honest endeavour of the poet with undervaluing and ignorance. The very word 'canto' is caught up in the complex of sounds and meanings which echo through the poem - cant, canting, cunt, cunning - the implication being that each division of the poem, each canto, is available for sale to the highest bidder, who will be fooled into purchasing a disease-ridden exercise in empty cant. Byron's narrator is ironically open about the 'trade' of selling cantos; he sells the poem as he goes along, just as Clare does at the end of his. Byron writes:

Love, war, a tempest – surely there's variety,
  Also a seasoning slight of lubrication,
A bird's-eye view too of that wild, society,
  A slight glance thrown on men of every station.
If you have nought else, here's at least satiety
  Both in performance and in preparation,
And though these lines should only line portmanteaus,
Trade will be all the better for these cantos. (XIV, xiv)

According to the *OED,* the two other relevant meanings of 'canting' which would have been available in Clare's day were '[t]he practice of using thieves' cant; the secret language or jargon used by thieves, professional beggars etc.' and 'use of a special phraseology of a particular class or subject (*always contemptuous*); jargon; gibberish'. The sound complex is further complicated by the word 'cantabank'[244] which meant a 'singer on a stage or platform, hence, *contemptuously,* a common ballad singer'. It is clear then, that the narrator is subversively reinforcing his overt portrayal of poetry as a contemptibly futile and degraded art-form, while also suggesting that the writing of poetry is a subversive act.

The 'cant' sound-complex is supplemented in the following stanza:

Love worse then debt or drink or any fate
It is the damnest smart of matrimony

[244] Used by Sir Henry Taylor in *Philip van Artevelde,* in 1834, according to the *OED.*

> A hell incarnate is a woman-mate
> The knot is tied – & then we loose the honey
> A wife is just the prototype to hate
> Commons for stock & warrens for the coney
> Are not more tresspassed over in rights plan
> Then this incumberance on the rights of man (lines 33-40)

This stanza is the high watermark of Clare's bile vented at woman and the institution of marriage. Twisting the normative associations, the speaker suggests that love is in fact the greatest root of pain in marriage. A wife is a 'prototype' - an original model, of hatred; she is hatred's prime example, perhaps its prime source. Here the poem reflects the opening denigration of Eve in the second stanza, and a parallel becomes apparent with Byron's frequent reference to Eve in his poem.[245] The editors of the Oxford text interpret the line beginning 'Commons...' in this way: "i.e. women are often 'trespassed' upon as unenclosed land is by farm animals or rabbit colonies by people in search of rabbits".[246] This description does not reveal all. The language does indeed suggest the idea of territory and 'rights'; but the colloquial origins of 'warrens for the coney' includes it in the 'cant/cunt/canto/can't' sound complex. Clare includes the idea of the countryside in this territorial version of female sexuality, reducing it again to the pudenda: Eric Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang*[247] clears up the confusion:

> **cunny.** The *pudendum muliebre* : low coll[oquial], C.17-20. Influenced by L[atin] *cunnus,* it is actually a † [obsolete] form of *cony,* a rabbit... As *the cunny,* it = the countryside... Ex *coun*try...

The wife is therefore the territory ('commons' and 'warrens') which is encroached upon by others; the wife's 'stock' - her value, or use - is her cunt. The 'countryside' is twisted into the 'cuntryside' of woman; the territory of the woman is an infringement upon the 'rights of man'. Her sexuality is an 'incumberance': it threatens because it is available to be 'tresspassed over'. Female sexuality, as it is represented here, embodies a threat because it allows any trespasser, and in doing so trespasses upon the rights of masculinity to define borders. The image of the rabbits is particular to this metaphor; they are known proverbially for their procreative

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[245] See *Don Juan:* I, xviii; II, clxxxix & ccxiii; III, x; V, lxxxiv & cix; VIII, lxxxiii; IX, xix; XI, xxi; XII, lxiv; XIII xcix; XIV, lxxii & lxxviii. It is surprising perhaps, and indicative of the different concerns of the two long poems, that in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* Eve is only mentioned once (I, xlvii).
[246] *LP* I, note 38, p. 90.
[247] Partridge, op. cit..

energies. The Oxford editors also overlook the vital fact that the word 'warren' signified a brothel (and a boarding-school), and that the term 'cunny-warren', which also signified a brothel, was obsolete only in 1930. As ever in this poem, another text is playfully referred to, Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* (1791); women - in or out of wedlock it seems - infringe upon the sexual and political rights of man. Byron doesn't have much that is good to say about marriage either, but his sense of cheeky humour is maintained where Clare's humour is sour.[248] The model of marriage being the 'antithesis' of love which Clare adopts in the above stanza, is straight from Byron's poem. Byron writes 'love and marriage rarely can combine' (III, v, line 3) and:

> There's doubtless something in domestic doings,
> Which forms in fact true love's antithesis.
> Romances paint at full length people's wooings,
> But only give a bust of marriages,
> For no one cares for matrimonial cooings;
> There's nothing wrong in a connubial kiss.
> Think you, if Laura had been Petrarch's wife,
> He would have written sonnets all his life? (III, viii)

The motto to cantos VI to XVI of Byron's poem is a quote from *Twelfth Night,* in which Malvolio is ridiculed by Sir Toby Belch and the Clown, who consequently display their own propensity towards prodigality:

> 'Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?'
> 'Yes, by St Anne; and ginger shall be hot i' the mouth too!'[249]

The narrator is most closely aligned with Belch and the Clown, and perhaps positions his critics as the puritanical Malvolio - who had already got their teeth into his first five cantos.[250] The way Clare moulds this reference into his own work is fascinating, and provides a clear

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[248] Although Byron would probably think that Clare's attitude had been soured *by* marriage: 'Marriage from love, like vinegar from wine – / A sad, sour, sober beverage...' (III, v, lines 5-6).

[249] *Twelfth Night,* II, iii, lines 124-8.

[250] In Clare's copy of *The Literary Speculum: Original Essays, Criticism, Poetry,* "By Various Hands" (London: Richardson, 1821 [ff.]) an anonymous critic writes a highly ambivalent essay dated November 1821 on the first five cantos of *Don Juan:*

> ...the same desire to lacerate and trifle with our feelings, the same unnatural facetiousness on the most tender subjects, continually and obviously recur; and what is still more to be regretted... there is an equal air of voluptuousness breathing over all, – the same alloying dross of sensuality running through the otherwise rich vein of his poetry. (p. 5).

insight into the objectives of his continuation. It seems unlikely to be a coincidence that 'ginger' appears in Clare's poem:

> O glorious constitution what a picking
> Ye've had from your tax harvest & your tythe
> Old hens which cluck about that fair young chicken
> - Cocks without spurs that yet can grow so blythe
> Truth is shut up in prison while ye're licking
> The gold from off the gingerbread – be lythe
> In winding that patched broken old state clock up
> Playhouses open – but madhouses lock up (lines 239-246)

The central image here is that of 'licking / The gold from off the gingerbread'. The Oxford Editors do not explain it, but this is a slang colloquialism of the 1830's, which in its original form of 'take gilt off the gingerbread' meant 'To destroy an illusion, lessen a value'[251]. Clare changes gilt to gold, and take to lick. He makes the phrase richer, more sensual and more oral, perhaps returning to the earlier fellatory imagery. In placing it in a stanza which seems to be condemning the 'constitution' of the nation - which is characterised as an orgiastic chicken farm fed on tax and tythe, and a malfunctioning clock - it seems that the subject is exploitation. 'Truth is shut up in prison' which means that the state (the 'you' of this stanza) is able to destroy the illusion of honesty and fair-dealing of society. That 'truth' is the poet himself who is imprisoned (cf. lines 224, 261, 270); he is silenced - 'shut up'.

To return to Byron's motto, the characters Belch and the Clown are deliberately sending up the gravely serious and puritanical Malvolio; they are exposing his conservative delicacies, and trying to reveal the truth behind his graveness by ridicule. Clare positions himself as Belch and the Clown: he is prodigal, sensual and liberal; here he is at pains to ridicule the nation state through bawdy and flagrant sexual puns (cocks, chicken, cluck - the latter signifying pregnant[252]) and colloquial metaphor. The poet, being locked away, can only watch as the value in society is consumed by the hunger of those in power. Truth is compromised as a result. The poem itself could be interpreted as an exercise in 'licking the gold from the gingerbread'; it repeatedly devalues society, claiming it is worthless, and destroying its credibility. As a result, it leaves a bitter taste in the mouth.

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[251] Partridge, op. cit.. The reference to this phrase appears in G. L. Apperson, *English Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases,* 1929.
[252] Partridge, op. cit..

Locking poets away is not the only threat to their ability to contribute to society. Byron's 'Dedication' to his *Don Juan* is characterised by contempt for poetry. The narrator attacks the celebrated lake-poets of his day, including Southey, Coleridge and Wordsworth, implying specifically that they write verse for cash:

I would not imitate the petty thought,
  Nor coin my self-love to so base a vice,
For all the glory your conversion bought,
  Since gold alone should not have been its price.
You have your salary - was't for that you wrought?
  And Wordsworth has his place in the Excise.
You're shabby fellows - true - but poets still,
And duly seated on the immortal hill. (Dedication, 6)

Clare seems to have picked up on this cynical portrayal of the famous poets of his day[253] and the problems all poets face in their mediations with the marketplace. The English Parnassus is inhabited by poets who are incapable of writing verse without writing to the order and desire of the buyer, with money as their muse: they have no financial freedom to do otherwise, and if they do take a position to provide themselves with security, they are to be condemned, like Wordsworth. Clare, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, was well aware of the problems of having a patron, and of the whimsy of the marketplace. In an anonymous 1825 *Continuation of Don Juan* a copy of which Clare owned (and which might have given him the idea for his own continuation) the pious narrator considers the balance that ought to be wrought between the poet and the marketplace:

The price of books is hurtful to our nation:
  Not that I wish an author or a poet
To die, like Otway, of extreme starvation;
  He, who has genius, may surely shew it
And purchase in the Funds; and the creation
  Of family possessions, if he owe it,
Not to the usual chances of the crowd,
But to his rich brains, may make him proud.[254]

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[253] Although by the time Clare started his *Don Juan A Poem* all but Southey and Wordsworth were dead.

[254] Stanza LXVIII, *Continuation of Don Juan, Cantos XVII and XVIII,* (London: G. B. Whittaker [&c.], 1825) p. 35. Item no. 139 in the *Northampton Catalogue.* It is incorrectly ascribed to the authorship of Byron, even though the author writes as piously as in Canto XVII, stanza XXXII:

I cannot join in thinking Southey stupid,
  Or Wellington a tyrant: I deny
That English morals give to little Cupid
  An easy reign; or that our clouded sky
Low'rs o'er a fallen nation; and if you bid

The author of this continuation is perhaps being a little optimistic about the way poetic genius can be judged by society. But s/he at least displays a keen awareness of the often harrowing problems poets faced in their negotiations with the practicalities of keeping themselves fed. The impossibilities of the negotiations the poet has to undergo to maintain a relationship with the marketplace brings us to the other possible reading of 'cant' in Clare - and that is the conflated 'can not' or 'can't', especially in Clare's manuscripts which often lack punctuation. In *Don Juan A Poem*, a negation of ability, or a lack of creative possibility, is implied repeatedly. This inability can be understood in the light of a consideration of Clare's relationship with the marketplace. Back in 1822 Clare was confident enough to send a parody (now lost) of Wordsworth to John Taylor, following his celebrated attack upon the standardisation of the language in the same letter. The fury of this letter strikes a parallel with *Don Juan A Poem* not only in narrative tone, but also in Clare's sense of his own place in the contemporary poetic landscape.

> ...grammer in learning is like Tyranny in government—confound the bitch Ill never be her slave & have vast good mind not to alter the verse in question—by g—d Ive tryd an hour & cannot do a syllable so do your best or let it pass... do you mistake my imitation of W[iliiam] W[ordsworth] as a serious attempt in his manner—twas written in ridicule of his affectations of simplicity—& I had thoughts of imitating the styles of all the living poets as I got hold of them to read them nor has the thought left me yet—Southey & Crabb I fancy I can do a little the ones affectation in mouthing over big words & the others tedious prosing about trifles often border on the ridiculous tho they are both great men & geniuses as I venerate & esteem—[255]

This letter also contains the memorable attacks upon Clare's muse who was an idle 'hussey' who, having let him down, was to blame for his having 'written no sonnets latly'; he was, he wrote, 'sick of the short winded p[e]evishness that hovers round this 14 line article in poetry'. The anger which may prevent this letter from being taken seriously as a statement of radical political agenda has been overlooked by critics who leap upon Clare's seeming position on the

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Me look through Britain's changeful history,
I cannot see from old or modern story,
That we're at all behind our sires in glory. (p. 17)

This poem may indeed have given Clare the idea of a continuation, but its conservative pieties, quiet condemnation of Byron, and its desire to distance itself from all of Byron's attitudes - bizarre in a continuation of the latter's work - does not seem to have had any influence on Clare's poem at all. In fact it might have galled him into writing his own. This continuation is a shameless money-spinner, using Byron's fame to attract consumers, as were the many others, including William Hone's of 1819.

[255] To John Taylor, Thursday, 21 February 1822, *Letters*, p. 231.

issue of linguistic standardisation. Surely he is an artist frustrated; he can't write, he's fed up with the restrictions of the sonnet (something he artistically tackles with some great and extensive success in the 'Northborough Sonnets' which he started 10 years later in 1832), Taylor didn't appreciate his satirical parody, and worst of all he 'cannot do a syllable' to correct the verse that doesn't meet Taylor's approval. He is considering more parodic imitation, and he is angry at language because he can't work with it at the time of writing. There are plenty of other biographical problems which feed into this letter[256] but what is relevant is the way Clare can suddenly feel himself misunderstood as an artist, and can so quickly lose a sense of his own artistic ability. This letter is essentially about a loss of artistic confidence at the time of his feeling 'hipt at the Village minstrels success': Taylor had tried to console Clare about the lull in sales by reminding him that 'Of Keats's Poems there have never yet been 500 sold'.[257] So, at this early and formative stage in his poetic career, after only a brief and intense flurry of remarkable success, Clare's actual ability to write was being infected by severe worries about the marketplace. As usual in such circumstances, he portrays himself as a victim for pity:

> ...the old Vol has gone thro 2 editions ere this & I think a notice in the london agen of a New vol of Poems preparing is nessesary as a stimulant to revive the flattness of these for I am jealous of their ill sucess at least I feel somthing that tells me they dont go off like others & I prevent that feeling as much as ever I can from damping my further exertions but I cannot help it doing so at times—still Im determind in the teeth of vexation to surmount dissapointment by unwearied struggles—[258]

From the start of his career Clare was thus desperately vexed with - and sensitively aware of - a fickle marketplace. All of his artistic frustration with a neglectful marketplace, which was to increase vastly from this time onwards, informs *Don Juan A Poem.* The wish to offer an advert as a 'stimulant to revive the flattness' of sales could easily be twisted into the lines beginning 'I wish' in *Don Juan A Poem* (echoing Byron's 'I want'). As we might expect of the narrator

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[256] See the previous letter to Taylor of Friday, 8 February 1822, in which Clare moans that
'the muse is a fickle Hussey with me she sometimes stilts me up to madness & then leaves me as a beggar by the way side with no more life then whats mortal & that nearly extinguishd by mellancholy forbodings—I wish I livd nearer you at least I wish London w[oud] creep within 20 miles of helpstone [ ] I dont wish helpstone to shift its station I live here among the ignorant like a lost man in fact like one whom the rest seems careless of having anything to do with—' (*Letters,* p. 229).

[257] *Letters,* note 6, p. 229: "Taylor wrote on 5 Dec. 1821: 'about 800 Copies I believe have been sold of the *Minstrel...* we printed 2000'".

[258] To John Taylor, Friday, 8 February 1822, *Letters,* p. 229.

of Byron's poem, the empty desires are immediately undermined. The wishes are empty, because in the diseased contemporary world, they simply can't come true:

> I wish — but there is little got bye wishing
> I wish that bread & great coats ne'er had risen
> I wish that there was some such word as 'pishun
> For rhyme sake for my verses must be dizen
> With dresses fine — as hooks with baits for fishing
> I wish all honest men were out of prison
> I wish M.P.'s would spin less yarn — nor doubt
> But burn false bills & cross bad taxes out (lines 49-56)

The speaker suggests here that his verses need 'dresses fine', as if his poetry were a prostitute in need of tarting up, as it were, to catch the eyes, and cash, of the punters, thus forging a palpable link with the letter of 1822. The poet-whore has to put the bait of 'dresses fine' on his hook to provide a 'stimulant to revive the flattness' of sales. Ben Jonson uses a similar image to describe the construction of poetry, but it is 'Nature', rather than a whore, who dons the verse:

> Nature herself was proud of his designs,
> And joyed to wear the dressing of his lines!
> Which were so richly spun, and woven so fit,
> As, since, she will vouchsafe no other wit.[259]

(I will return to this poem later on.) Clare's image of the prostitute wearing 'dresses fine' is linked with the M.P.'s 'spinning yarn' who are therefore implied as 'dressing up' their speeches - in other words, of talking fashionable rubbish, or cant. Clare's attacks on politicians are in some ways similar to Byron's, in that he shows no particular allegiance to any party: he writes 'I wish the Whigs were out of office' and 'I'm weary of old Whigs' but also writes 'Ive seen a Whig & Tory / Turn imps of hell — & all for Englands glory'(lines 98, 135 and 143). Byron tends towards the Whigs in *Don Juan*, but he condemns all politicians frequently. Clare's reaction to political parties, and attacks upon individuals such as the shortly-to-resign Prime Minister Melbourne, suggest that he is attempting to write a poem situated very much at the centre of urban and capital life. Lord Melbourne - as plain William Lamb in 1812 - had been made into a cuckold by his wife Caroline Lamb's celebrated affair with none other than

[259] Ben Jonson, 'To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author Mr William Shakespeare: And What He Hath Left Us' in *Ben Jonson: The Complete Poems,* ed. George Parfitt, (London: Penguin, 1988 [rev. ed.]) p. 263, lines 47-50. The poem was written for the First Folio edition of Shakespeare, 1623.

Byron; Clare would have been well aware of this controversy.[260] 1841 was a terrible year for the Whig Prime Minister as it was for Clare: Melbourne resigned on August 28th, 1841.[261] It is curious that historical accounts confirm Melbourne's fawning intimacy with Queen Victoria, his passion for the Royal court, and his fluid political allegiances. Clare makes much of these popular views:

> Me-b-ne may throw his wig to little Vicky
> & so resign his humbug & his power
> & she with the young princess mount the dickey
> On ass milk diet for her german tour
> Asses like ministers are rather tricky
> I & the country proves it every hour
> W-ll-gt-n & M-lb—n in their station
> Coblers to queens - are phisic to the nation (lines 113-120)

This stanza might indicate that one of the reasons for the attack on women in general is that the leading men of the day are seen by the narrator to be subservient to a woman, and a young one at that. Her coronation is cast as emancipation for woman, and incapacitation for man. Seen in sexual terms, the potency of the patriarchy is usurped by the governing matriarch, dismissed as 'little Vicky'.

Overall, perhaps the speaker is condemning Victoria, Albert, Melbourne, Wellington[262] and perhaps even the ghost of Byron as members of a corrupted, venereally infected, failing ruling class, one which he wishes 'were out of office' (line 98). The 'phisic' that Wellington and Melbourne bestow upon the nation is undermined not only by the appearance of the *physician* 'Docter Bottle imp who deals in urine' (line 223), but also by phisic's slang meanings of sexual coition, gambling losses, hard punching and strong drink,[263] the latter

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[260] Not only did Clare own Medwin's *Conversations,* but also *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries,* by Leigh Hunt (London: Henry Colburn, 2nd ed., 1828) and William Hazlitt's less-than-favourable criticism of Byron in his *Lectures on the English Poets, Delivered at the Surrey Institution* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1819).

[261] Cf. *LP* I, p. 94, note, and chapter 24 of *Melbourne* by Philip Ziegler (London: Fontana / Collins, 1976) p. 336 ff.. On a biographical note, 1841 was a bad year for John Clare. He started it as a resident in an asylum in Essex, under the auspices of a quack, Matthew Allen, (Clare had been there since 1837 as a voluntary patient). He wrote *Child Harold* and *Don Juan A Poem,* then in July he left Allen's institution of his own volition, and walked all the way back to his family in Northborough, Northamptonshire.

[262] Byron attacks Wellington for seven stanzas in *Don Juan,* IX, i - vii.

[263] Partridge (op. cit.) has five meanings, all relevant to the text:
1–Sexual attentions, coition... C.17-mid-18.
2–Medicine;
3–Losses; wagers, points: gaming: from ca. 1820;
4–Hard hitting: pugilistic: from ca. 1830;
5–Strong drink: from ca. 1840.

three of which were available meanings in the two decades before Clare started writing the poem. All of these meanings make sense in the context of the politicians' serving the nation, bizarrely enough, as (with the exception of medicine) they are all vice- or violence- oriented. The overall sense is clear: politicians do no good whatsoever for the body politic, while doctors only damage and debase the body and mind of the individual.

Up to 1841, Clare's poetry had almost always been characterised by its location in the provincial environs of Northamptonshire. As I mentioned earlier, after *Don Juan* he writes poems about Scotland and Ireland, yet the greater proportion of his later poetry has no specified location. Most critics have seen this poetic move outside of the boundaries of Helpston as an indication of his dissolving personality and the loosening of his grip on his own sense of place and identity. It could however be regarded as a watershed; a poet who can write, albeit with humour, self-parody and irony, that 'I think myself as great a bard as Byron' (line 284) is not going to be limited by mere geography as to his subject matter. This is no insult to Byron, but neither is it meant simply as fawning. It could be read as a reaction to the ironic vanity of the following stanza of Byron's poem:

> I say, in my slight way I may proceed
> To play upon the surface of humanity.
> I write the world nor care if the world read;
> At least for this I cannot spare its vanity.
> My Muse hath bred and still perhaps may breed
> More foes by this same scroll. When I began it, I
> Thought that it might turn out so; now I know it,
> But still I am, or was, a pretty poet. (XV, 60)

If Byron plays 'upon the surface', Clare throws a big fat pebble, deliberately wanting to make a bigger, cruder splash. But it is easy to see how Byron's poem would 'breed / More foes'; elsewhere his speaker declares 'So now all things are damned, one feels at ease' (VI, 23). The narrative mode which deliberately seeks to provoke its audience, and openly discusses the reasons for doing so, binds Clare's poem to Byron's very closely. Byron's narrative model legitimises Clare's. But Clare's artistic admiration for and homage to Byron is not idle or sycophantically partisan: it is ambivalent and bound up with what Clare is able to understand through Byron's texts. Clare characterises Byron as a visionary, a prophet and an over-inflated aristocrat:

Now this day is the eleventh of July
& being sunday I will seek no flaw
In man or woman — but prepare to die
in two days more I may that ticket draw
& so many thousands more as well as I
To day is here — the next who ever saw
& In a madhouse I can find no mirth pay
— Next tuesday used to be Lord Byrons birthday

Lord Byron poh — the man wot writes the werses
& is just what he is & nothing more
Who with his pen lies like the mist disperses
& makes all nothing as it was before
Who wed two wives & oft the truth rehearses
& might have had some twenty thousand more
Who has been dead so fools their lies are giving
& still in Allens madhouse caged & living

That word 'poh' pops the balloon of Byron's inflated reputation, which by 1841 was in severe decline. Like Byron's personae, Clare's here dextrously utilises ambiguity and punning to make his speaker's relationship to the Lord highly entangled, and caught up in issues of semantics, class, mutability, time and truth. Death again appears in the first stanza, as do the limits of perception: the speaker points to humanity's inability to experience anything but the present. In the first of these two stanzas the speaker confuses Clare's birthday - July 13th - with the birthday of Byron (which was in fact the 22nd of January). Clare is playing games with his own fictional identity, at the reader's expense. The personalities of Clare's Byronic narrator and Byron himself are again tangled into one at the end of the second stanza - where he is both dead and living in Matthew Allen's asylum - High Beech, the place of composition of this poem. The most significantly ambiguous comment Clare makes is that Byron 'makes all nothing as it was before'; this could mean that he does one, all or none, of the following: he alters the reader's perceptions of existence completely, or reaffirms the nothingness of life by making reality clearer, or he creates a world of seeming meanings which in truth mean nothing.

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The ambivalence of Clare's narrator's attitude to Byron is very reminiscent of Byron's call on Coleridge to 'explain his explanation'[264] - *Biographia Literaria* - which is both a comic undermining of Coleridge, and a serious desire to understand him. To understand Clare's speaker's conflation of his identity with Byron's we have to find out when Clare and Byron were born, and whatever it might mean, an intertextual link - even a biographical one - is forged between the two poets by the reader. The poem requires the reader to acknowledge and process the links forged, and as such it is a poem which depends upon a complex of intertextuality to promote its meaning. In a sense, without its relationships to other texts, to other sources, it is meaningless. As a continuation of another poem, it requires intertextual fore-knowledge. Its construction is explicitly intertextual, and its narrator is explicitly ambiguous about his own origins.

Ambiguity arises in the assertion in the second of these stanzas that Byron 'with his pen lies like the mist disperses': the narrator might be accusing Byron of lying - of writing untruths - or of writing in a deliberately obscure fashion - obscuring, then making clear, the truth of his 'werses'. Or perhaps Byron's pen is a crudely wielded phallic 'tool', in the manner of the farces in the stanza previous to these two - where 'To show plain truth you act in bawdy farces / Men show their tools — & maids expose their arses'. Does Byron 'show plain truth' in his poetry, or is he merely the writer of farcical pantomime, as he himself suggests in the first stanza of *Don Juan?* Perhaps Clare suggests that he achieves both - there is truth in his lies, and seriousness in his farce. Finally, does rehearsal of the truth signify that the truth has a hollow ring in Byron? After all Byron's poem repeatedly offers itself up as an elaborate play with truth and falsehood:

> And after all what is a lie? 'Tis but
> The truth in masquerade, and I defy
> Historians, heroes, lawyers, priests to put
> A fact without some leaven of a lie.
> The very shadow of true truth would shut
> Up annals, revelations, poesy... (XI, xxxvii)

Clare's poem highlights the perspective that the Byronic persona is staged, adopted and contrived; it may or may not be honest and the narrator is not Byron himself but instead is a

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[264] See *Don Juan,* Dedication, 2.

mask for public display. Is the identity of Byron in the poetry just a pose, an act, a farce? Are the 'werses' just 'what he is & nothing more'? Does this mean that Byron does not exist for Clare beyond his poetry? By 1841, Byron exists only in verse; therefore he does not really exist at all.

Perhaps the narrator is suggesting that his own narrative is a farcical act; loud, crude and empty - a masquerade (line 5). All of these questions, arising from Clare's poem, point back at Clare's own 'act' as Byron. The whole poem seems designed to undermine itself at any expense, and as such, it is a whirlwind of self-deprecation and an attempt, half-successful perhaps, to utterly satirise itself, its speaker, the poet and poem it extends, and the wider world both *Don Juans* farcically and falsely portray.

The theme of lying appears as an explicit irony in a text in which selling in the marketplace is an act which embodies deception. If everything is for sale - then everything has the objective of deceit and misrepresentation - be it sexuality, literature, gambling, medicine or politics - everything is diseased, corrupted and unoriginal. The next stanzas make it clear why Clare chose to adopt the work of another poet to continue: in contemporary society everything bears the stain of misuse and the tawdry, tatty quality of being second-hand and unoriginal. The poem's origins, in being unoriginal, reflect that society. The repetition of 'new' in the first line of the following stanzas forms a double negative; the second 'new' is old[265] - it is a copy of the first - and its appearance proves that the first 'new' is a sham:

> Now this new poem is entirely new
> As wedding gowns or money from the mint
> For all I know it is entirely true
> For I would scorn to put a lie in print
> – I scorn to lie for princes – so would you
> & ere I shoot I try my pistol flint
> – The cattle salesman – knows the way in trying
> & feels his bullocks ere he thinks of buying (lines 183-190)

The poem is likened by its narrator to objects associated with dependable honesty and security - a virgin-white wedding dress and newly coined money. The poem itself has already offered

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[265] John Goodridge has pointed out that in the 1841 prose account 'Journey Out of Essex' Clare writes:
...when I was told it was my second wife Patty I got in and was soon at Northborough but Mary was not there neither could I get any information about her further then the old story of her being dead six years ago which might be taken from *a bran new old Newspaper printed a dozen years ago* but I took no notice of the blarney... (my emphasis, *By Himself*, p. 264).

opposing versions of the intrinsic 'value' of both: the 'road to marriage is – "the road to ruin"' and marriage is an 'incumberance on the rights of man' (lines 32 and 40); and bills of payment can be 'false' (line 56). The speaker duplicitously defends himself, after a fashion, colloquially suggesting both the limits of his ability and insight in saying '[f]or all I know', and hammering home that he 'would scorn to put a lie in print'. This is a sort of Iago speaking - so the reader is on guard whenever he uses words as simple as 'honest', 'truth' or 'lie'. The 'lie' is repeated in the next line; this poet would not, it seems, sell out to mere 'princes' - he has his scruples. He suggests that, perhaps unlike other writers 'in print', he would be loath to write for royalty or riches. The first two lines of Byron's 'Dedication' to his *Don Juan* attack a poet whose status is built upon doing exactly what Clare's narrator claims he would never do: he works for royalty - 'Bob Southey! You're a poet, poet laureate, / And representative of all the race.' Southey was still laureate in 1841, and was succeeded by Wordsworth in 1843.

Now the speaker evokes a very Byronic image - the preparing of pistols; but the image's association with a rich patron and print, can only mean that before he publishes the speaker makes sure his weapon is ready to spark. The word 'pistol' was colloquial slang, verging on euphemism, for 'the male member'. The verb 'to shoot'[266] was available to Clare as a colloquial expression referring to the male orgasm. It is therefore a thoroughly masculine sexual image, and this interpretation is supported by the farcical punning image that follows of a salesman feeling 'his bullocks' before a sale. The preparation then, before publication - before the sale - is a strutting and posturing of reassuringly masculine similes. The phallic 'pistol' is prepared, and the 'bullocks' are fondled. Either Clare is undermining by parody the pomposity of the Romantic-period writer; or the poem reveals a problem for the male writer with performing in print. As the animal which is for sale is not a potent bull but a castrated 'bullock', it could be that the anxiety of going into print is an anxiety which affects the poet's masculinity. Although the pun made available to the reader via 'feels his bullocks' is 'feels his bollocks', in actual fact the bullock has none. This suggests that the poet is not only a whore for entering into negotiations with the marketplace via a 'cattle salesman', but also that he is a castrato because he is a poet. The image of the cattle-market returns us to the dominating

[266] Partridge, op. cit.. This meaning of 'shoot' was prevalent from the mid-nineteenth century.

image of the poet-whore. As Sonia Hofkosh points out, Byron and Keats display similar tensions about the masculinity of being a writer:

> The alteration of the male writer's gender – a mark of his powerlessness within his culture – may frighten him; what is sinister in the metaphor is that it evokes at once feminine powerlessness and power. The prostitute is powerless in her dependence on masculine desire for her livelihood; but like Keats's jilting gypsy, this wandering woman is also empowered in the male imagination by the evasive and undiscriminating nature of her own desire. She favors no individual man, eluding possession by any one man in order to sell herself repeatedly, only temporarily, to a great many, even a mob of men.[267]

The poet-whore is at the beck and call of the marketplace. The poet who writes for princes is patronised out of his artistic freedom; the bull without testicles is just live meat. He cannot procreate because he has been manufactured into sterility. The poet-whore is a prisoner of the public. In Clare's poem the whore is an image of powerlessness and degradation not - as Hofkosh implies - of power. If the image of the whore does have any power over the speaker, he is always repulsed by the attraction, and is violently misogynist as a result. She represents the manufactory of desire - a lie, an untruth, a deception of love. She is functionality without spirituality. She is castrated of love, as is the poet who writes verse 'to fill his pocket'. Hofkosh considers Romantic masculinity's anxiety about authorship to be the result of writing becoming increasingly feminized, and she traces the image of the prostitute in other poets' work, particularly Byron's:

> ...the difficulty of being a writer in this culture repeatedly takes the form of prostitution. The prostitute figures the writer who depersonalizes the self-expression by marketing it; even more, her promiscuity, her failure to distinguish among men, vexes to its depths the foundation of self-expression – the logic of personality and property by which men determine what they are and what they own.[268]

In the next stanza of Clare's *Don Juan A Poem*, the speaker admits to the material desire 'to purchase' just such a woman:

> Lord bless me now the day is in the gloaming
> & every evil thought is out of sight
> How I should like to purchase some sweet woman
> Or else creep in with my two wives to night –
> Surely that wedding day is on the comeing
> Abscence like phisic poisons all delight –
> Mary & Martha both an evil omen

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[267] Sonia Hofkosh, *Sexual Politics and the Romantic Author* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 43.
[268] Hofkosh, op. cit., p. 44.

Though both my own – they still belong to no man (lines 183-198)

Firstly the speaker deepens his irony with a touch of rural, ballad-like tone in the twilight 'gloaming'. The irony of the second line is also cleverly wrought: 'every evil thought' is always 'out of sight' because it is just that - a thought. That the thoughts are hidden only increases their menace. What appears to be the reassurance of the natural in the evocation of the diurnal cycle, is in fact an assurance of malevolence. This menace is substantiated in the expressed desire to 'purchase' a female - a prostitute. This is a speaker who is unsettling the reader's expectations with the charm of an 'honest' Iago - gentle then foul, duplicitous and ironic then openly morally outrageous. As if to create an unholy female trinity, the speaker then admits to bigamy, in a further undercutting of the marriage-bed as a sacred foundation for society. Instead of absence that 'makes the heart grow fonder'[269] as a reader might expect, the speaker emphasises its detrimental and debilitating effects upon love (if love is what he is talking about). If by 'phisic' the speaker means sexual coition, then the sexual act is said to 'poison all delight', which concurs with the general sense in the poem that libidinous female sexuality is an indicator of a degraded society.[270] It could be that he is discussing sexual frustration here - certainly it is odd for him to contemplate three women, and to then move immediately to absence; it is only logical if we read the speaker's triumvirate of whore, Mary and Martha as elements of a sexual fantasy. The desired 'purchase' of a prostitute's services is added to by the speaker's claim that the 'two wives' are 'both [his] own'. The possessiveness is an assertion of patriarchal power, and is built up to by the cattle salesman's 'bullocks' and the 'pistol flint' of the previous stanza. This building of masculine power is undermined by the closing gesture of the speaker who contradicts himself immediately in saying that these possessed and purchasable women 'still belong to no man'. It is as if the versified assertions of masculine power over women is just the hot air of a poet strutting his feathers. But also, the poet is very definitely positioning himself as a Christ-figure; he surrounds himself in this stanza with the evocation of a prostitute and 'Mary & Martha both an evil omen'. In the New

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[269] Ascribed to Davison's *Poetical Rhapsody* of 1602 by *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations,* (Oxford University Press, 1979) p. 4, quote 10.

[270] The other meanings could also be available (see above note), which complicate the possibilities of this sentence.

Testament, Mary and Martha are said to be the sisters of Lazarus,[271] who Jesus raises from the dead. Mary Magdalene - the most famous reformed prostitute of western tradition - could be suggested by the 'sweet woman' of this stanza. John Clare's initials - J.C. - are the same as Jesus Christ's - a connection I think worth mentioning. If he - or rather his speaker - is positioned as a Christ-figure alongside Mary and Martha, thus evoking the Lazarus motif, who is Clare resurrecting? Byron? If the narrator does position himself as Christ, he clearly controverts the supposed asexuality of the biblical figure. Clare's relationship with Mary and Martha as it is represented here is one of a frustrated bigamist; a bigamist who cannot assert his ownership over them or the prostitute, who, as Hofkosh asserts is always 'eluding possession by any one man'.

At the mention of the impossibility of male possession of women ('they belong to no man') the speaker loses his thread. The theme jars his poetic flow, such as it is. Clare seems explicitly to confirm Hofkosh's thesis that femininity challenges 'the logic of personality and property by which men determine what they are'. So the next stanza begins:

> But to our text again - & pray where is it
> Begin as parsons do at the beginning
> Take the first line friend & you cannot miss it
> 'Poets are born' & so are whores for sinning
> – Here's the court circular – o Lord is this it
> Court cards like lists of – not the naked meaning...(lines 199-204)

Surely 'we' never left 'our text'? The speaker is remonstrating with himself - and including the readership - for personal digression, just as Byron's does so often. The religious theme is carried on in that word 'pray' and in the appearance of parsons. The repetition of 'begin' and 'beginning' is an oblique biblical reference to two beginnings, as it were; referring back to the beginning of the poem when it is more than half way through its length is a parodic wink at the Bible - the new beginning of John's Gospel points back to Genesis.[272] A link is forged in Clare's poem between the Creation and the Word, between Eden and language. The first line of the second stanza of the poem is 'Milton sung Eden & the fall of man'. Clare's poem evokes Genesis and Eden, but at a literary remove, through Milton's *Paradise Lost.* And 'the

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[271] Luke 10:38-42 and John 11 and 12.

[272] Cf. 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth' (Genesis, 1:1) and 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (John, 1:1).

fall of man' is not at the beginning of Clare's poem - the sinning is not at the beginning quite - but one stanza on. Byron also rhymes 'beginning' with 'sinning'. After condemning 'epic poets' who 'plunge in *medias res'*, Byron's narrator writes:

> That is the usual method, but not mine;
> My way is to begin with the beginning.
> The regularity of my design
> Forbids all wandering as the worst of sinning,
> And therefore I shall open with a line
> (Although it cost me half an hour in spinning)
> Narrating somewhat of Don Juan's father
> And also of his mother, if you'd rather. (I, vii)

Again this isn't quite the start of the poem. (With the dedication attached this is in fact the twenty-fourth stanza, and even without it, is the seventh.) But the pairing of 'beginning', 'sinning' and 'spinning' is full of possibilities. We have already seen Clare's narrator 'wish M.P.'s would spin less yarn' (line 55), and the poem itself makes it clear that it is woven like 'dresses fine' (line 53) or 'wedding gowns' (line 184). The poet is openly 'spinning' his poem, going through the motions of production. In the beginning which is not quite the beginning, Clare's narrator writes (it is worth repeating) 'Milton sung Eden & the fall of man' (line 9); Eden is the biblical location of the 'beginning' of 'sinning' in *Genesis*. Milton, as a poet who is born like 'whores for sinning', is implied as the start of the downfall of poetry; or perhaps it signifies that even a poet of Milton's stature and reputation is as much a victim of material circumstance as any other. Milton is the poet of a lost paradise; that lost paradise is not only Eden, but also the paradise of his poetry. The sexual 'sinning' of Eden is mentioned at the beginning of Clare's poem (second stanza), but at the *very* beginning is that surprising distortion of the classical-sounding proverb which now adorns Clare's gravestone in St Botolph's churchyard in Helpston: from 'A poet is born, not made' Clare begins to quote it, cuts it off, and it becomes "'Poets are born' – and so are whores" (line 1). The whores are now '[f]alling so often they can fall no lower' (line 12); in other words, they are in 'Earth hells or b-gg-r sh-ps or what you please' (line 231). They are the daughters of Eve, the first woman, whose 'sinning' in the 'beginning' is the Bible's *cause célèbre*.

The suggested proverb that Clare begins his poem with was generally ascribed to Horace in Clare's time, but in fact it first appeared in a commentary on Horace, as William Ringler points out:

> ...the earliest appearance, in any recognizable form, of the expression *poeta nascitur non fit* is in a commentary on Horace which now goes under the name of Pseudo-Acro... the importance of natural talent for the poet began to be debated in England in the last quarter of the sixteenth century; but the idea did not gain a firm hold on the minds of the Elizabethans, for most of their references to it did not come to them independently but were suggested by Continental writings. In the next two hundred years the aphorism drops almost entirely out of currency; only one original publication of the saying in the seventeenth century has been listed, and none in the eighteenth. This of course only bears out what we know from other sources about the intellectual temper of the times. But with the flowering of Romanticism early in the nineteenth century the aphorism once more makes an appearance. As we should expect, Coleridge cited it when discussing the marks of "a natural poetic genius" in chap. xv of his *Biographia Literaria* (1817):
>
> > The sense of musical delight, with the power of producing it... together with the power of reducing multitude into unity of effect... may be cultivated and improved, but can never be learned. It is in these that *poeta nascitur non fit.*[273]

Byron quotes Horace as his motto: the enigmatic 'Difficile est proprie communia dicere'. Ben Jonson translates it as ''Tis hard, to speak things common, properly';[274] we might also translate it as 'It is difficult to communicate in one's own crowd'. Clare's poem begins with a quote so common as to be a proverb - but which in fact is not a quote from Horace, and which at its birth is utterly undermined, cut off - and rendered individual. If Clare picked up the phrase from Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria,* or from Ben Jonson, he is therefore interacting carefully with English poetry criticism, and with poets criticising one another. As Ringler points out, a reference to the proverb is made in Jonson's highly ambivalent dedicatory poem to Shakespeare:

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[273] William Ringler '*Poeta nascitur non fit:* Some notes on the History of an Aphorism', *Journal of the History of Ideas,* Vol. II, No. 1, January 1941 (College of the City of New York), p. 497-504. My thanks to Robert Cummings (University of Glasgow) for referring me to this article.

[274] Ben Jonson, *Horace, Of the Art of Poetry,* in *Ben Jonson: The Complete Poems,* ed. George Parfitt, (London: Penguin, 1988 [rev. ed.]) p. 358, line 183. Both Byron and Clare had read Jonson, but whether they could have had access to the prose work *Explorata: Or Discoveries,* is perhaps impossible to be certain. Jonson seriously engages with the idea of the naturally-born poet:

> Poetry, and picture, are arts of a like nature; and both are busy about imitation. It was excellently said of Plutarch, poetry was a speaking picture, and picture a mute poesy. For they both invent, feign, and devise many things, and accommodate all they invent to the use, and service of nature. Yet of the two, the pen is more noble than the pencil. For that can speak to the understanding; the other, but to the sense. They both behold pleasure, and profit, as their common object; but should abstain from all base pleasures, lest they should err from their end; and while they seek to better men's minds, destroy their manners. They both are born artificers, not made. Nature is more powerful in them than study. (*Complete Poems,* p. 419, lines 1866-1881, subtitled 'Poesis et pictura. Plutarch'.)

> Yet I must not give nature all: thy art,
> My gentle Shakespeare, must enjoy a part.
> For though the poet's matter, nature be,
> His art doth give the fashion. And, that he,
> Who casts to write a living line, must sweat,
> (Such as thine are) and strike the second heat
> Upon the muses' anvil: turn the same,
> (And himself with it) that he thinks to frame;
> Or for the laurel, he may gain a scorn,
> For a good poet's made, as well as born.
> And such wert thou.[275]

Jonson suggests that poetry was hard work for Shakespeare, but that in that labour is value. The apparent ambiguity of this poem, which introduced the first folio edition of Shakespeare's works in 1623, forms a close parallel to Clare's own ambiguity regarding his homage to Byron in *Don Juan A Poem.* It is worth noting also that in Jonson's poem, a poet who 'might pretend... praise' of another poet does him no service:

> ...crafty malice, might pretend this praise,
> And think to ruin, where it seemed to raise.
> These are, as some infamous bawd, or whore,
> Should praise a matron. What could hurt her more? (lines 11-14)

In Clare's poem, no one is exempt from being a 'bawd, or whore'; he extends Jonson's simile to implicate himself in the ruinous state of contemporary poetry.

The literary history of the aphorism 'A poet is born not made' is therefore vital in understanding how serious Clare's evocation of literary history is in this poem: Horace, the Bible, Jonson, Shakespeare (by association), Milton, Byron and Clare are implicated as a cascading multitude of texts and authors which are distorted and selected and reacted to by one another successively, referred to by a speaker who deliberately provokes intertextual confusion and multiple possibilities. The cheeky phrase '& if there is a meaning – you may guess it' (line 214) is an acknowledgement of the slippery indeterminacy not only of the speaker, but of this text itself, and all the others the reader might be pointed to along the way. This phrase also empowers the reader, and liberates the text and narrator from providing a solid, coherent

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[275] 'To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author Mr William Shakespeare: And What He Hath Left Us' (*Ben Jonson: The Complete Poems,* p. 263, lines 55-65). The poem was written for the First Folio edition of Shakespeare's plays, 1623.

meaning for his art. Even the narrator, referring to the text even as it is in the process of being written, has to ask 'where is it' (line 199).

The very act of cutting off the proverb 'Poets are born, not made' highlights this poem's opposition to Coleridge's idea of the natural genius. Clare was marketed in his early career as a natural genius. But Clare's poem repeatedly asserts the significance of material conditions upon the poet, who in this is no different from anyone else in society. That economic conditions and conditioning have such a profound effect upon poets, turning them into materialist and commercial negotiators, is presented as a terrible shame. The proverb which adorns Clare's grave is therefore refuted; perhaps if we were to find a replacement, Jonson's '...a good poet's made, as well as born' fits as well as any.

For Clare Byron was much more than just a mask to adopt while he attacked women, religion, capitalism, politicians, his quackish doctor, poetry, his own sexual profligacy and society at large. No doubt Byron's persona did allow the persona of Clare's poem to have the confidence to write with venom and acidic humour; but that is not to say that the adoption of the Byronic style is straightforward, or that the poet was delusional, or that he thought he was Byron. In an essay which concerns itself with the biography of the asylum period, Roy Porter significantly suggests that Clare might indeed have been playful, but that in the context of the asylum, such playfulness becomes madness:

> Clare's asylum doctors, and many of his later biographers invite us to contemplate a man suffering from the 'delusion' that he was Byron... Yet, was it a delusion, or rather a disguise? Perhaps a mask, a cover, somewhere ambiguously in-between (if the noble poet can be Don Juan, why cannot Clare be Byron?). Perhaps Clare thought he was Byron reborn; may it not be equally possible that his doctors were so literal-minded, so incapable of appreciating double-meanings and coping with double-lives, so resistant to the play of the literal and the figurative, that they failed to see the joke?... behaviour which, in the wider world, would be read as socially acceptable, becomes, in the context of the asylum, further confirmation of the psychosis.[276]

In *Don Juan A Poem* Clare extends the sexual romps of Byron's hero and of the poet himself, and conflates them with his own surreal underworld to portray a world utterly devoid of hope, truth or value. Instead despair, falsity and prices dominate life. Money and cant

[276] Roy Porter, "'All madness for writing': John Clare and the Asylum, *John Clare in Context,* p. 272.

encircle the poem making Clare's *Don Juan A Poem* a finished work - the conclusion reflecting the beginning - unlike Byron's. Yet it has an empty and embittered heart, because the world it portrays is so miserably despicable and ruinous.

Clare's precursor to *Don Juan A Poem,* was written in early 1841. The title-less poem is the first attack on Matthew Allen in verse, and also serves as a warm-up for the misogyny of the Byronic continuations:

Nigh leopards hill stand All-ns hells
The public know the same
Where lady sods and buggers dwell
To play the dirty game

A man there is a prisoner there
Locked up from week to week
He's very fond they do declare
To play at hide & seek

With sweethearts so they seem to say
& such like sort of stuff
Well - one did come the other day
With half a pound of snuff

The snuff went here the snuff went there
& is not that a bad house
To cheat a prisoner of his fare
In a well ordered madhouse

They'll cheat you of your money friend
By takeing too much care o't
& if your wives their cun-ys send
They're sure to have a share o't

Now where this snuff could chance to stop
Perhaps gifts hurded are up
Till Matt & steward open shop
& have a jolly flare up

Madhouses they must shut up shop
& tramp to fairs & races
Master & men as madmen stop
Life lives by changing places[277]

This is a hard poem to read, as it seems at first glance to have little artistic merit. But I think it serves well to illustrate the complex of material, physical and social frustrations which drive

[277] *LP* I, p. 37.

Don Juan A Poem. The first two stanzas set up the tensions between public and private spheres of life. Allen's 'hells' (Clare is playing with the word 'halls' perhaps) or gaming or gambling den is an institution which, the speaker claims, has an openly 'dirty' and nefarious existence. The 'public knows' of this duality, and forms the custom of the 'shop'. Colloquially 'shop' could signify a prison or a public house.[278] In the first stanza the implication is that the 'dirty game[s]' include gambling, fornication and sodomy. The 'lady sods' could be transsexual prostitutes, or perhaps more likely, homosexual aristocratic libertines.[279] These 'lady sods' and 'b-gg-r sh-ps' of *Don Juan A Poem,* (line 231) are the only explicit references to homosexuality in any of Clare's verse; for Clare it seems that rife homosexuality is an indicator of a ruinous society, as much as unbridled female sexuality. If women are the 'players', then 'man' is a 'prisoner', forcibly confined to a private space. That space is encroached upon by his 'play at hide & seek / With sweethearts'; or at least the confinement is broken by an apparent game of courtship. Although the innocence of this play has already been undermined by the sensuality of the first stanza, it is important that it is a game of 'hide and seek': it models the situation of the institution and the prisoner, who is both hidden from public view, and seen to be institutionalised by that same public. In his institutionalisation, the prisoner is openly humiliated because the 'public know the same'. It is a 'shop': a private place open to the custom of the public. The occurrence of the word 'shop' foreshadows the 'shopmen', 'salesmen' and 'b-gg-r sh-ps' (gay brothels, or 'molly houses') of *Don Juan A Poem* (lines 67, 189 and 231), and clearly reflects on Allen and his staff.

In the third stanza, the gift of snuff is confusing. Its significance is clarified by a reference in *Don Juan A Poem* to 'the queens snuff box where all fools are strumming' (line 87). (The verb 'to strum' was a current slang colloquialism for having intercourse.[280]) There is little doubt that the sweetheart who 'did come the other day / With half a pound of snuff' signifies a

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[278] Partridge, op. cit.. As a verb, 'shop' could also signify 'to imprison', 'to punish severely' or 'to bear witness against', all of which are redolent of some sort of subversive or criminal subculture.

[279] I have been unable to locate any occurrence of the term 'lady sod.' See for example Bruce Rodgers, *The Queen's Vernacular: A Gay Lexicon* (London: Blond and Briggs Ltd., 1972) or Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England, 1700-1830* (London: GMP Publishers, 1992).

[280] According to Partridge, op. cit., the meaning was available from 'ca. 1780... Semantically, to play a rough tune (on her). Possibly suggested by a pun on *strum,* [from] strumpet'.

prostitute, or at least a woman whose significance is only sexual.[281] In the fourth stanza the speaker bemoans being cheated out of his 'fare'; as the 'snuff' is endemic it seems unfair that he doesn't get his share. The last line of the fourth stanza contains perhaps the only half-decent joke in the poem - the ridiculous idea of a 'well ordered mad house', where each inhabitant would get his democratic share of what is available. The theme of being cheated out of a share of the prostitute strangely moves into a consideration of other ways 'they' - Allen's institution - will deceive a prisoner. They will offer to take care of the prisoner's finances and will cuckold the prisoner by fornicating with his wife; the polysyllabic rhyme pair of 'money friend' and 'cun-ys send' is central to understanding how value is placed upon female sexuality, as a material possession. The prisoner is impotent and deceived financially and sexually - the two seem to be co-determinant. This stanza adds to the initial themes of intrusion by the public 'they' into the private spaces - financial and marital. The image which has 'wives' sending 'their cun-ys' suggests that the female genitals are separable from the woman. In exactly the same manner as in *Don Juan A Poem,* the speaker links female sexuality with money - but here both can be exchanged; both 'money' and 'cun-y' participate in the denigrating exchange of public and private life, as the hidden becomes seen, and the personal becomes public. To skip to the last line of the poem, the destruction and madness lie in the 'changing places' of public with private. In the penultimate line the 'Master & men as madmen' are confused into an alliterative mass; roles and positions are turned on their head. Value is inherently unstable, and the conclusion is that such complete changes and capitalist exchanges are necessary if 'Life lives'.

The sexual promiscuity rife in the institution is a metaphor which develops in *Don Juan A Poem* into a critique of society at large; a society which allows such sexual freedoms is a society gone mad. The governing authorities - represented by 'they' in this poem - are as corrupt and venereally diseased as they are in *Don Juan A Poem,* and indeed in Byron's *Don*

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[281] Neither the *OED* nor Eric Partridge's *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* ascribe a sexual meaning to 'snuff' or any phrase variant containing 'snuff'. The 'snuff-box' could mean the nose, and 'to snuff it' still signifies 'to die'. Partridge has one meaning which might inform the context of Clare's madhouse as represented in this poem: 'In *give* (a person) *snuff,* to rebuke, reprimand, scold'. Still, it seems evident that both the snuff-box and its contents signifies the female genitalia in this poem. The *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* has it as a verb: 'snuff. To take snuff; to be offended.' (1811; Reprinted Adelaide, Aus.: Bibliophile Books, 1980).

Juan. If the madhouse is a metaphorical structure representing English society as having no more integrity than a brothel, then the poet-prisoner is imprisoned within that denigrated sexual, financial and moral corrupted state. Yet he is unable to participate fully - he is cheated out of his share of the 'fare' that such a society has to offer. Somehow the poet-prisoner is both deeply embedded within society - understanding its feminine corruption from Queen Victoria through to the 'lady sods' and whores from within - while being also alien to it, left out, locked up and not a participant in the 'jolly flare up' of decadent society. The implications in *Don Juan A Poem,* evident in attacks upon the sexual predilections of the ruling classes, is that the corruption begins at the top. As the new head of state in 1837 is Queen Victoria - her coronation year being the year of Clare's initial admittance to High Beech - Clare's figuring of corruption as feminine figures, could be indicative of a broader criticism of the nation state itself. The fragility, deceptiveness and liability of female sexuality as represented in *Don Juan A Poem* characterises the nation itself. In the matriarchy, the corrupt mother figure 'little Vicky' is implicated when the speaker asserts that the very word 'woman... implies a whore' and is 'mans ruin'. If the head of state is ruinous, and her politicians but 'withered stinking dead and rotten' (line 128), the only authority the speaker might pin his hopes on is God. But the narrator links the nobility ('noble bastards', line 96), the government, the Queen, Prince Albert, the devil and God in a way which implies they are all equally decrepit and culpable. Again, the hollow lines which begin 'I wish' are a parodic undermining of Byron's 'I want a hero'; the speaker of Clare's poem wants one too.

I wish prince Albert on his german journey
I wish the Whigs were out of office &
Pickled in law books of some good atorney
For ways & speeches few can understand
They'll bless ye when in power – in prison scorn ye
& make a man rent his own house & land –
I wish prince Alberts queen was undefiled
– & every man could get his *wife* with child

I wish the devil luck with all my heart
As I would any other honest body
His bad name passes bye me like a f – t
Stinking of brimstone – then like a whisky toddy
We swallow sin which seems to warm the heart
– There's no imputing any sin to God – he

Fills hell with work – & is'n't it a hard case
To leave old whigs & give to hell the carcass (lines 97-112)

Clare's narrator suggests that there isn't anyone who could be called a hero in contemporary 1840's England, as Byron's narrator implies of the 1820's. But Clare's narrator goes further to implicate the failure of God too. The politicians contrive a canting language which 'few can understand'; the implication is that they are criminals who could be punished by 'some good atorney'. They undermine personal property ('his own house') and personal liberties ('prison'). In abusing the nation, they have symbolically defiled the queen. In defiling the queen, they have cuckolded every man in the state – destroying the possession a man (by implication) should have over the procreation in his marriage. The rights of man – of masculinity – are worthless.

As the speaker turns to the devil and God, he uses the word 'honest' in a way which I previously associated with *Othello.* In calling the devil an 'honest body', he is surely asserting that there is nothing honest or true in the contemporary world; the word means its exact opposite, just as it does when Othello repeatedly calls Iago honest, and then questions the honesty of Desdemona.[282] The stanza drips in alcohol, as indeed does the whole poem – in 'drink', 'beer', 'whiskey', 'ale', 'gin', 'half & half', 'spirits', 'wine' and 'max' (lines 33, 59, 94 and 220), just as Byron's poem does.[283] Rhyming 'God - he' with 'toddy' (lines 108 and 110) in such a flagrantly ridiculous fashion, and later with 'nod' and 'odd' (lines 131 and 133) is akin to Shelley's lines 'Who dares these words:– the worm beneath the sod / May lift itself in homage of the God'. (Adding to the intertextual mêlée Shelley's lines conclude a 'Sonnet to

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[282] Cf. *Othello:* '...for I know thou'rt full of love and honesty' (III, iii, 118); 'This fellow's of exceeding honesty...' (III, iii, 258); 'O brave Iago, honest and just...' (V, I, 31); 'An honest man he is...' (V, ii, 149). The discussion between Othello and Iago in III, iii revolves substantially around the word honesty. The audience knows of course that Iago embodies the opposite of honesty, and every time the word is mentioned the dramatic tension increases. A similar effect is produced in *Don Juan A Poem.*

[283] See Byron's *Don Juan,* e.g.:

Man being reasonable must get drunk;
The best of life is but intoxication.
Glory, grape, love, gold, in these are sunk
The hopes of all men and of every nation;
Without their sap, how branchless were the trunk.
Of life's strange tree, so fruitful on occasion.
But to return. Get very drunk, and when
You wake with headache, you shall see what then. (II, clxxix)

Byron'.[284]) If Shelley is evoked in Clare's rhymes, perhaps Clare's faith is akin to his in some way? Certainly the functions of God in this poem are not reassuring in terms of the speaker's faith: he appears as the filler of hell (line 110-111), an oath (line 129), as the maker of ministers (line 124), and the defender of 'taste' (line 146). The speaker admits that he has 'long been sick of teazing God with prayers' (line 136). His faith in God is at an end.

Endemic corruptions undermine and make indeterminate the position of the speaker of these Byronic poems of 1841 to such an extent, that the poet's only recourse is to poetry. Poetry is cast as the only stable, measured and 'well ordered madhouse' which maintains value; not as we have seen, market price, but as a cathartic and spiritual *personal* experience. If the speaker is able to glean any meaning for his spiritual self, it is through the mechanics and freedom offered by poetry, destitute as it is, and for a clear indication that this is so we must turn to the poem written at the same time as *Don Juan A Poem,* Clare's *Child Harold:*

> Flow on my verse though barren thou mayest be
> Of thought - Yet sing & let thy fancys roll
> In Early days thou sweept a mighty sea
> All calm in troublous deeps & spurned controul
> Thou fire & iceberg to an aching soul
> & still an angel in my gloomy way
> Far better opiate then the draining bowl
> Still sing my muse to drive cares fiends away
> Nor heed what loitering listener hears the lay [285]

Thick with the imagery of Dante's *Inferno* and gesturing to the drugged psyche of De Quincey's *Confessions of An English Opium Eater,* this stanza points to the empty heart of its sister poem, *Don Juan A Poem.* The verse is 'barren' because society is diseased, but also because the world of poetry has been denigrated by being feminized. Far from being 'stamped with immortality',[286] a barren poet is emptied of the possibility of fame after death; he is mortal, and his book has none of the immutable hope provided by the 'close sealed volume of its mystery'.[287] Unsure of his gender like the castrated bullock (*Don Juan A Poem,* line 190),

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[284] First published in 1832, so Clare could possibly have read it. The poem is not included in Benbow's 1826 edition of Shelley, which Clare definitely did read.
[285] *Child Harold,* 21, lines 1204-1212.
[286] From Percy Shelley's letter to Mary Shelley, August 10, 1821: '[Byron] has read to me one of the unpublished cantos of Don Juan, which is astonishingly fine. It sets him not above but far above all the poets of the day: every word is stamped with immortality.' (*Perkins,* p. 1092.)
[287] 'The Instinct of Hope', *MC,* p. 442 and *MP* IV, p. 279, line 7.

the poet who can't (pro-)create is merely meat for the market; s/he is a poet-whore, and as such is just a gratifier of desire. Poetry becomes little more than an opiate anodyne, instead of an inspiration. This admission of meaninglessness is both a defence and an attack upon the speaker's circumstances - personal and social. The final line of this stanza suggests a deep despair with the public which is so virulently sent-up in *Don Juan A Poem,* but in that line there is also the possibility that the poet is equally 'barren' of meaning if he cannot communicate his thoughts to a 'listener'. Without an audience, the poet is just a solipsist. But as a 'barren' thinker, he does not have the fertile 'womb' of secrets and poetic immortality which I have shown to be so significant in Clare's representations of a poet's solitary contemplation. If he is 'barren' of ideas, and without an audience, he no longer functions as a poet. This poem parodies a poet explicitly seeking to foster interest from a buying public; as such it becomes a parody of poetry which is 'made' or determined by market forces. Like the prostitute, the poem's existence depends upon the purchasing interest of the public; in this sense the poet and whore are both 'made' or *un*-made by the attention or neglect of the consumer.

Byron makes it plain. The possibility of his continuing his poem is in the readership's hands:

> ...but whether
> I shall proceed with his adventure is
> Dependent on the public altogether.
> We'll see, however, what they say to this;
> Their favour in an author's cap's a feather,
> And no great mischief's done by their caprice,
> And if their approbation we experience,
> Perhaps they'll have some more about a year hence. (I, cic)

Byron is teasing his readership as if it were a child: be nice, and you can have more. Byron's admission that the power is really in the market, not with the author, is significant. In a marketplace glutted with female authors, the male poet is threatened by enormous competition from a gender previously excluded from authorial property. In representing women and poets as prostitutes, Clare is admitting that his gendered position as a male poet is not only under threat, but also that it has been disastrously compromised by market forces. The poem repeatedly forces the point that in such circumstances artistic endeavour can have no integrity.

In asserting a continual parallel between the state of poetry and the state of society, the poem goes further to suggest that without meaning and integrity in its art, society is itself a meaningless drudge of production and consumption. Catherine Gallagher outlines the historical background for this interpretation of Clare's text:

> The activities of authoring, or procuring illegitimate income, and of alienating one's self through prostitution seem particularly closely associated with one another in the Victorian period. Thackeray identifies two reasons for this historical conjuncture: the development of cheap serial publication (in which authors were often paid by the line) and the growth of a massive popular readership in the 1830s and 1840s. These conditions most directly affected what we now call popular literature, but the decreasing cost of publication, advances in education, and changes in copyright law made it impossible for any professional writer to claim to be independent of the marketplace. The author, moreover, does not go to market as a respectable producer with an alienable commodity, but with *himself* or *herself* as commodity. The last half of the eighteenth century is the period when the identity of text and self begins to be strongly asserted and when the legal basis for commodifying texts (as distinct from books) comes into being in copyright law. This combination puts writers in the marketplace in the position of selling themselves, like whores.[288]

Gallagher has unknowingly summed-up the core issues of *Don Juan A Poem.* It is a poem about the state of poetry, and indeed the poet offers himself as a purchasable commodity - a poet-whore. The repeated intertextual allusions to other poets and poems and the act of adoption of someone else's poem becomes a commentary on the state of the poetic product. The materiality of the poem - captured succinctly in the concluding call to 'fill [the] pocket' of the writer - is a construct designed to portray poetry at its lowest ebb.

To conclude this chapter, I will look at some stanzas of both Clare's and Byron's which offer clear substantiation of Gallagher's claims for the gendered authorial problems of the early nineteenth century. Firstly, in the following stanza Clare's narrator comments upon the practical and material needs of a writer, suggesting perhaps that they are very important to his ability to write:

> I wish I had a quire of foolscap paper
> Hot pressed – & crowpens – how I could endite
> A silver candlestick & green wax taper
> Lord bless me what fine poems I would write

[288]Catherine Gallagher, 'George Eliot and *Daniel Deronda:* The Prostitute and the Jewish Question' in *Sex, Politics, and Science in the Nineteenth-Century Novel,* ed. Ruth Bernard Yeazell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 43.

The very tailors they would read & caper
& mantua makers would be all delight
Though laurel wreaths my brows did ne'er environ
I think myself as great a bard as Byron

A poet discussing in verse the great poetry he *would* write if he had the right tools has to be an ironic commentary upon the significance of status and material wealth in allowing the poet to produce. (Clare's love poetry is also characterised by conditional tenses, as I have shown). Perhaps this irony is meant to undermine the mediocre writer, who thinks his muse will be stimulated by the finest writing equipment. Before discussing this stanza further, it is worth quoting the two stanzas in Byron's poem to which Clare's is possibly alluding:

Oh ye, who make the fortunes of all books,
  Benign ceruleans of the second sex!
Who advertise new poems by your looks,
  Your imprimatur will ye not annex?
What, must I go to the oblivious cooks.
  Those Cornish plunderers of Parnassian wrecks?
Ah, must I then the only minstrel be
Proscribed from tasting your Castalian tea?

What, can I prove a lion then no more?
  A ballroom bard, a foolscap, hot-press darling?
To bear the compliments of many a bore
  And sigh, 'I can't get out', like Yorick's starling.
Why then I'll swear, as poet Wordy swore
  (Because the world won't read him, always snarling),
That taste is gone, that fame is but a lottery,
Drawn by the bluecoat misses of a coterie. (IV, cviii and cix)

Byron's poem attacks the 'bluestockings' - middle-class literary women - in this stanza, and satirises their imagined clique just as he does thoroughly in the play *The Blues* of 1821, and at other points in *Don Juan.*[289] As they are portrayed here, the women are the arbiters of fortune and fame for a (male) writer. The power they have is exercised in their triple roles of audience, critic and writer. The male author's work becomes the wrapping for a Cornish pastie;[290] Parnassus is degraded by the presence of these women. They are infringing upon the classically male territory of the inspirational Mount; so in the next stanza the male 'lion' king of poetry feels his power, and his masculine authority, is undermined. The predominant

[289] See *Don Juan,* eds. T. G. Steffan, E. Steffan and W. W. Pratt (London: Penguin, 1982), note to I, 22, p. 573.
[290] Ibid., p. 632, note IV, 108, 5-6.

meaning of 'lion' at the time was celebrity; so it is celebrity, fame and success which is at risk here. Clare's stanza above expresses another 'wish' for 'foolscap paper / Hot pressed – & crowpens'; the speaker wants the decadent and expensive trappings of a middle-class writer in order to write. These trappings are of the vain world which Byron's stanzas parody: his narrator fears becoming a 'ballroom bard, a foolscap, hot-press darling'. In other words, Byron's narrator fears becoming the darling of the fashionable, and the female. Clare expresses the same concern, but by pretending to nurse a desire to court the same fashionable readership - he calls them 'tailors' (which could be a pun on John 'Taylor') and 'mantua makers'. The vanities of fashion (which as we have seen seem to have infected the manner of poetic production) can be flattered if the writer has the right equipment. In Clare's poem, it seems almost as if the writing equipment, or the paper on which the work is published, is more significant to the readership than the words written. This fear is expressed in Byron's stanza: 'taste is gone... fame is but a lottery'. In the couplet which ends Clare's stanza, his parodic poet also points to the whimsy of blind fame; after attributing the writing of great verse to the quality of the pen, the paper and the candle of the writer, the poet comically assumes Byron's wreath. And he is right to pick Byron; he was the most famous poet of the period. Clare's poem, in this stanza particularly, suggests that the deplorable state of contemporary poetry is represented in the vanity of believing that a good writing set will be enough; therefore the actual writing itself is of no importance. Byron writes that the blues 'advertise new poems by [their] looks'; vanity, display and fashion are seen to be the significant factors in the contemporary degradation of poetry. Both Clare and Byron had seen the enormously famous poet Wordsworth become embittered 'because the world won't read him'. Fashion turns away without any reason: 'fame is but a lottery'. If anyone does have control over the modern marketplace, it is the women both poets attack. The power of the new readership and authorship of women challenges, undermines and usurps both poets' sense of authorial masculinity.

In the penultimate stanza of Clare's *Don Juan A Poem* which follows immediately the one quoted above, his recourse is to a state of strange gender-swapping; this theme immediately

evokes Byron's protagonist Don Juan, who dresses as a slave-girl,[291] rendering his gender indeterminate:

> I have two wives & I should like to see them
> Both by my side before another hour
> If both are honest I should like to be them
> For both are fair & bonny as a flower
> & one o Lord – now do bring in the tea mem
> Were bards pens steamers each of ten horse power
> I could not bring her beautys fair to weather
> So I've towed both in harbour blest together (lines 287-294)

Positioning himself again as a Christ-figure, the speaker refers bigamously to the 'two wives' - the 'Mary & Martha' (line 197) pair, who occupy that nebulous overlapping space of literary and biblical falsities and biographical realities, in which Byron plays so frequently. In the conditional 'If' beginning the third line, the speaker again attests to his doubts concerning female fidelity, and then, most strangely of all expresses the desire 'to be them'. This desire becomes an excited aposiopesis after the exclaimed 'o Lord'. After this break, the speaker turns to the limitations of the 'power' of 'bards pens' in representing feminine beauty. This is an odd subject in a poem which has concerned itself in detailing luridly the moral ugliness of society, especially as represented in its women. The important aspect of its place here, is that the beauty of woman is another indicator of the limitations of the poet. His power - in the phallic 'pens' and preceding 'crowpens' it is a masculine power - is shown to be limited in comparison to female beauty. One of the two women is so beautiful that he has combined the two in his mind, so that he can imagine them, conceive of them. But he also expresses a desire not to be unified with them, but 'to be them'. Sexually, perhaps he could then achieve the unification with them, enter their private feminine space, not as a man, not as an outsider, but as a woman, and just like Byron's Juan/Juanna, would be in a better position to understand the threatening mysteries of femininity:

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[291] Juan becomes Juanna, literally to save his manhood and to prevent castration: in the following stanza Baba tries to coax Juan (who is not 'in a masquerading mood' V, lxxiii, line 5) to wear a female disguise:

> 'Then if I do,' said Juan, 'I'll be –' 'Hold!'
> Rejoined the Negro, 'pray not be provoking;
> The spirit's well, but it may wax too bold,
> And you will find us not too fond of joking.'
> 'What, sir,' said Juan, 'shall it e'er be told
> That I unsexed my dress?' But Baba, stroking
> The things down, said, 'Incense me and I call
> Those who will leave you of no sex at all. (V, lxxv).

...Dudù
With every kindness short of ostentation
  Showed Juan or Juanna through and through
This labyrinth of females, and each station
  Described – what's strange – in words extremely few.
I have but one simile, and that's a blunder,
For wordless woman, which is silent thunder. (VI, lvii)

The two *Don Juans* overtly display and consider the bitterness and promiscuity of the failed Romantic narrator. That failure is blamed on everything, but especially on the male poetic self and on the female other - who was, by 1841, no longer a 'wordless woman'. Masculine Romanticism's failed relationship with femininity is a symptom, or perhaps a cause, of its wider failure as a coherent ideology. Perhaps both *Don Juans* are embittered expressions of the acknowledgement of that failure.

Conclusion

As a contextualizing note to *Don Juan A Poem*, it is worth pointing out that William Hone published a highly successful attack on the recently-crowned George IV's attempts to divorce his Queen Caroline, called *The Queen's Matrimonial Ladder.*[292] Appended to the forty-third edition of this long doggerel squib is a shorter poem called *The Joss and His Folly,* which ridicules George's newly-erected Brighton Pavilion and his prodigality. The last few lines of the poem read:

It is said when he sleeps
on his state Eider-down,
And thinks on his Wife,
and about *half* a Crown;
That he wakes from these horrible dreams
in a stew;
And that, stretching his arms out,
he screams, Mrs. Q.!
He's cool'd on the M—ch——ss,
but I'm your debtor
For further particulars –
in a C letter.
You must know that he hates *his own* wife,
to a failing;–
And it's thought, it's to shun her,
he's now gone out
SAILING.

The appearance of the rhyme-pair 'debtor' and 'letter', and the saucy implications of that 'C letter' appear in the same combination in Clare's *Don Juan* (lines 65-72). And it is none other than Byron who Hone quotes for the motto to this poem.[293] This intertextual evidence suggests that Clare's poem of 1841 might best be read as a very late Regency poem, even though it makes itself explicitly Victorian. Perhaps we should therefore remember the speaker of Clare's

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[292] *The Queen's Matrimonial Ladder; A National Coy, with Fourteen Step Scenes and Illustrations in Verse,* (London: William Hone, 1820). Hone published a fair amount of Clare's work in his *Every-Day Book* throughout the mid-1820's; see *Letters,* pp. 270, 335, 339, 340, 341, 345 and 416. I am grateful to John Gardner (University of Glasgow) who first noted the similarities between Hone's poem and Clare's. The rhyme-pair also appears in the following stanza from 'Loves Story':

I cannot hate thee
Yet my love seems debtor
To love thee more
So hating, love thee better (*LP* I, p. 501, stanza 6).

[293] The motto to *The Joss and His Folly* reads: 'I stare at it from out my casement, / And ask for what is such a place meant.'

poem not as an inmate of an asylum, but as a cynical Regency dandy, openly way past his prime; rather like the image of an obese, drunk, semi-conscious George IV in the opening illustration to *The Queen's Matrimonial Ladder,* by George Cruikshank, which sits above the following 'Qualification':

> In love, and in drink, and o'ertoppled by debt;
> With women, with wine, and with duns on the fret.

But Hone's work is a defence of marriage, or at least an attack on a negligent husband. Clare's narrator takes the role of an embittered cynic, who casts the frequent creation of deceived husbands as a natural, ordinary sound: 'With cuckoo cuckold cuckoo year by year' (*Don Juan A Poem,* line 90).

The grating sound of the cuckoo returns us to the legacy of song of 'The Nightingales Nest', where the speaker crept in to watch and to listen, threatening the nest's bounded female secrecy by his very presence. The unity he cannot achieve with the bird is the same problem he repeatedly constructs in his love poetry. The speakers construct a conditional past, or a conditional future. Consummations are repeatedly conditional upon metaphorical impossibilities, upon the transformation of the speaker into a gazing flower for instance, or into a penetrative bee. Physical union is only plausible when the female is neither a creating subject, nor a singing source of communication, but instead when she is a vacant object; a passive set of physical delights, territorially parcelled by Clare's attentive male eye. When that territorially divisive power is denied to the poet, woman becomes 'an incumberance on the rights of man' (*Don Juan A Poem,* line 40), and she is dismissed as a whore. But in the same breath the poet condemns his trade and himself for his failure to understand femininity.

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