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JOHN CLARE:

The Theme of Isolation in his Poetry

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by

John Vaughan Gordon

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1983



27 APR 1984

Abstract

John Clare : The Theme of Isolation in his Poetry

by

John Vaughan Gordon

The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate the importance of the theme of isolation in the poetry of John Clare, showing its relationship to his biography and to other major themes in his verse. The connection between his life, seen most clearly in his precarious status as a "peasant-poet", and his sense of isolation, is analysed. Moreover, the treatment of the ideas of solitude and isolation by Clare's Augustan forebears and his Romantic contemporaries is examined for its bearing upon Clare's own articulation of these themes. The development of his sense of isolation, from his earliest verse to the final poems written at Northampton Asylum, is then traced chronologically. At the same time, the relationship between this and other ideas, including love, nature, poetry, the past, and the search for spiritual fulfilment is given due treatment. Clare's sense of isolation is seen as a complex phenomenon which took various forms and derived from physical, topographical and spiritual factors as his career progressed. Finally, it is shown that Clare's expression of his sense of isolation reveals a poet of diverse talents who is of great relevance to the modern sensibility.

John Clare

Well, honest John, how fare you now?
A century drifts by and critics cross their swords
Above your epitaph -
Shove you in their pigeonholes and brush aside
Those throbbing pages as mere postscripts
To the Lakeland seers -
 Such is your bequest:
Your noble patrons
Tossed you richer crumbs than these.

No latter-day ovation can expunge our debts:
Only the fenland quail croak your orison -
For Swordy Well's a rubbish tip - Yardley Oak
Props up those semis on the new estate.
But all's not lost: Hodge courts Dolly
On his motor bike. The Helpston kids
Play hide-and-seek down your old lane,
And in "The Bluebell" hairy fiddlers
Lilt the gypsy tunes.

But maybe you would not approve:
You who clung to nature as a ~~second~~ skin,
Breathed the violet's joy, read
The Wryneck's seasons and the fowler's wiles.
To you - the shabbiest weeds shed emeralds.
Ants wore crowns,
Bleak fens were naves, woods the transepts
And pale anemones your sabbath choir.
For, who else could conjure words from clods -
Claim Eden from the wilderness - then churn up
Crooked rhythms, earthy phrases with a thresher's hand.

And in the madhouse still you grappled
With those hydras in your heart -
Ransacked stale illusions, routed hidden ghouls,
Shored up your sanity like Samson's pillars -
Till step by gouty step you mounted Jacob's ladder
Groping far beyond your reach - for nature's self,
The mystic light and Mary Madonna.

At last you won that crazy wish;
Felt the tang of infinity's cup,
And laughed at riddles
That would curl the sceptic's beard.
With one big leap across the void
You stunned the angels, straddled constellations
And turned the wheel of maya by yourself.

Just another drunken mage, we'd say -
Freud's dirty tricks and Einstein's crystal ball
Have pricked your vision's flat -
Victim of enclosure and your age,
The liberal state would patch your britches,
Feed your kin, and clamp
An anaesthetic on your rowdy muse.

But tell me now, my friend - who secured
So deep that chasm where the soul once was -
Rescued homely empires from apocalypse,
And shared man, beast and meadow
In chords more plangent than the Glinton bells?
Myth or madness - this your legacy
For jades urban ears.

So look at his portrait again -
Huge eyes, brimful of rarest hopes -
Tall forehead, steeped in dreams
We must rebuild -
And to the end -
 he wore his own uniqueness
 like a cross of wood.

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Textual Notes and Abbreviations

There is at present no complete edition of Clare's poetry and it is unlikely that one will appear for some years to come. Therefore, it has been necessary to consult the variety of selections which are available. Wherever possible, I have followed the readings of Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield in their editions of The Later Poems of John Clare, Selected Poems and Prose of John Clare, and The Shepherd's Calendar. These are by far the most reliable editions of Clare's poetry available. The largest selection of Clare's verse appears in J.W. and Anne Tibble's two-volume edition of The Poems of John Clare. This edition subjects many poems to emendations in terms of spelling and punctuation, and some of the readings are inaccurate, but it is still a valuable selection. Modern editions of the poems by the Tibbles are more accurate: John Clare: Selected Poems and the recent edition of The Midsummer Cushion show that the Tibbles have responded to criticisms of their earlier editings. Other editions have been consulted in cases where the poems are not otherwise available in published form; these editions include Geoffrey Grigson's Poems of John Clare's Madness, Elaine Feinstein's The Selected Poems of John Clare, and C. Xenophonos's private edition, The Life and Works of John Clare. Occasionally, original manuscripts from Peterborough and Northampton were consulted, since a large body of Clare's work is still unpublished.

For extracts from Clare's prose and letters, I have relied mainly upon the editions by the Tibbles, together with Sketches in The Life of John Clare, by Himself.

All quotations are taken verbatim from the works listed below and no attempt has been made to standardise Clare's spelling and punctuation. In order to reduce the number of endnotes to the minimum, references for quotations for most of Clare's work are included within the text itself. Since none of the published editions of Clare's work bears line numberings, page references are given in the following manner, after the relevant quotations:

LPJC, 113 (The Later Poems of John Clare, page 113)

Poems

- LPJC The Later Poems of John Clare, ed. Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield, Manchester, 1964
- MC The Midsummer Cushion, ed. Anne Tibble and R.K.R. Thornton, Northumberland/Manchester, 1979
- Poems 1 and 2 The Poems of John Clare, ed. J.W. and Anne Tibble, London, 1935
- PJCM Poems of John Clare's Madness, ed. Geoffrey Grigson, London, 1949
- SC The Shepherd's Calendar, ed. E. Robinson and G. Summerfield, London, 1964
- SPJC John Clare: Selected Poems, ed. J.W. and Anne Tibble, London, 1965
- SPPJC Selected Poems and Prose of John Clare, ed. E. Robinson and G. Summerfield, Oxford, 1967

Prose and Letters

- Prose The Prose of John Clare, ed. J.W. and Anne Tibble, London, 1951, (reprinted 1970)
- Sketches Sketches in the Life of John Clare by Himself, ed. Edmund Blunden, London, 1931
- Letters The Letters of John Clare, ed. J.W. and Anne Tibble, London, 1951 (reprinted 1970)

Biographies

Life John Clare: A Life, ed. J.W. and Anne Tibble
London, 1932 (reprinted 1972)

Life and Poetry John Clare: His Life and Poetry, ed. J.W. and Anne Tibble,
London, 1956

Manuscripts

N.Ms. Northampton Manuscripts from the John Clare Collection
of Northampton Public Library

PREFACE

The poetry of John Clare has received increasing critical attention over the past two decades. No longer is he being dismissed as a mere nature poet or as a minor postscript to the work of Coleridge and Wordsworth. Critics have come to realise that there is a uniqueness, a robustness and a fascinating variety in his poetic corpus, some of which still remains unpublished. My interest in the theme of isolation in Clare's verse stems from my own reading of his work and from the perceptive comments of a number of critics. It is now recognised that the theme of isolation is an important aspect of his work, but, as yet, nobody has attempted to examine the fuller implications of this theme for an understanding of his sensibility, or even realised the extent to which it permeates his verse.

My study will attempt to demonstrate the importance of this theme by focusing on a selection of poems where it is most in evidence. Some biographical details, together with the influence of the eighteenth-century and Romantic poets, will be introduced in order to put the theme into its context. It must be emphasized at the outset that this approach cannot claim to provide the key for a complete understanding of Clare's verse, but it can at least help us towards a fuller assessment of the qualities which lend uniqueness to his poetry, and are causing critics to re-appraise his merits in relation to those of the other Romantic poets. Hence, my approach does not claim to be comprehensive since much work remains to be done in this area. However, it is hoped that some justice will be given to the complexity of the sense of isolation in Clare's verse and the way in which it relates to his other

preoccupations as a poet.

In view of the fact that Clare's sense of isolation is closely related to other major themes in his verse, some mention of these themes must be made. Moreover, since certain critics have provided trenchant analyses of these areas and opened the way for a more intensive study of Clare's isolation, their contributions must be acknowledged. James Reeves has rightly pointed to love, nature and poetry as "the triple constellation" of themes around which Clare's poetry revolves. ⁽¹⁾ The idea of Eden and the sense of a paradise that has been lost, embracing such concepts as childhood, the joys of young love and the pre-enclosure landscape in Helpston, has been explored by Robinson and Summerfield, ⁽²⁾ Janet Todd, ⁽³⁾ and E. J. Bush. ⁽⁴⁾ The sense of localness and the significance of enclosure in Clare's work have been admirably demonstrated by John Barrell. ⁽⁵⁾ More recently, Greg Crossan, ⁽⁶⁾ in one of the best studies of Clare's work yet to appear, has pointed to a "relish for eternity" - an underlying spiritual quest in Clare's work - as linking several major themes. Two recent British theses, those of C.V. Fletcher ⁽⁷⁾ and S.D. Al-Wasiti ⁽⁸⁾ have been especially helpful in shedding light upon Clare's sense of isolation, particularly in the later poetry, while Mark Storey devotes some discussion to it in his The Poetry of John Clare: A Critical Introduction.

This study will attempt to show how isolation reveals itself in a number of ways in Clare's work. Particular attention will be devoted to the idea of solitude in relation to nature, and the benefits and drawbacks associated with his long walks in the country.

His sense of existential isolation—stemming from his own sense of insecurity and failure at various points in his career — is another facet to be discussed. Another important aspect of his isolation centres on the anomalous position in which Clare found himself as a sensitive peasant poet in a largely illiterate rural community. It is noteworthy that when Clare speaks of "Solitude", whether in his verse or in his prose writings, it is usually in a highly positive and enthusiastic manner, as such poems as "Solitude" (PJCM, 159) reveal. However, when speaking of isolation, he uses the term "lonely" and this is often, though not invariably, used with unhappy connotations, such as the neglect being shown to him by friends, acquaintances or his family (See Letters, 293). The relationship between these ideas, together with other key concepts, will be examined at some length. Furthermore, the fresh dimensions added to Clare's sense of isolation during his confinement at High Beech and Northampton asylums are given special prominence.

As stated, Clare's sense of isolation was a most complex series of emotions, with its roots in a matrix of psychological, social and imaginative considerations. It can certainly provide a useful key to a greater understanding of his difficulties as a poet and to a richer assessment of some of his finest works. It is hoped that the present study will contribute towards both of these areas and assist in the re-appraisal of Clare's stature in the canon of English poetry.

Endnotes

- (1) James Reeves ed. Selected Poems of John Clare,
London, 1954, p. XX
- (2) Robinson E. and Summerfield G. ed. Selected Poems and Prose of John Clare,
Oxford, 1967, pp. XVI - XIX
- (3) Janet Todd, In Adam's Garden: A Study of John Clare's
Pre-Asylum Poetry, Florida, 1973
- (4) E. J. Bush The Poetry of John Clare,
Wisconsin, 1973
- (5) John Barrell, The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place
1730 - 1840: An Approach to the Poetry of
John Clare, Cambridge, 1972
- (6) Greg Crossan, A Relish for Eternity: The Process of
Divinization in the Poetry of John Clare,
Salzburg, 1976
- (7) Charles V. Fletcher, "The Poetry of John Clare with particular
reference to poems written between 1837
and 1864", Nottingham, 1973
- (8) Salman D. Al-Wasiti, "English Romantic Poetry with special
reference to the poems of John Clare",
Leicester, 1976

CHAPTER ONE : "The Solitary Disposition"-

An Introduction to the Theme of Isolation

During the past century, the theme of isolation has been a prominent one in the writings of philosophers, poets and novelists. Undoubtedly, the rise of existentialist philosophy and its pervasive influence in many branches of learning has had much to do with the highlighting of this theme. The novels of Dostolevsky, Conrad, Sartre and Camus have all pointed to the essential loneliness of the human condition. These writers have recognised that in spite of his intercourse with others, man is fundamentally a lonely being: he is born alone, he must make his most important decisions alone and, ultimately, he must die alone. It is indeed noteworthy that two famous exponents of existentialist literature, Malraux and Sartre, have felt strongly the attraction of Marxism, yet neither has been entirely at home with a philosophy which stresses so much the corporate dimension of existence over that of the individual's experience.

Yet even from the mid nineteenth-century, the effects of scientific discoveries upon the Victorian consciousness created a deep sense of spiritual malaise and isolation, which manifested itself in the verse of Tennyson and Arnold. This sense of isolation is poignantly articulated in In Memoriam and Empedocles on Etna. Moreover, the alienation of the poet from the society which he feels to be hostile to his vocation, is movingly conveyed in "The Two Voices" and "The Scholar Gypsy". Tennyson moves towards a resolution of these problems in In Memoriam but in Arnold's Empedocles on Etna, Empedocles remains the type of the intellectual who is alienated from both society and life

itself, as he plunges to his death in the volcano. For Arnold, alienation and isolation were grim facts of life; he found it well-nigh impossible to gain either Wordsworth's "sweet calm" or Goethe's "wide/And luminous view".⁽¹⁾ In the "The Scholar Gypsy", he leaves us with the image of a gypsy who continually wanders but never reaches his goal. This pessimistic picture of the fate of the alienated individual has, of course, penetrated many aspects of twentieth-century literature.

If Arnold was the most notable exponent of the themes of isolation and alienation in nineteenth-century verse, he was not alone. Like other Victorian intellectuals, he was preoccupied with the changes wrought by new discoveries in geology, biology and theology upon the consciousness of society. These are indeed wide-reaching issues and when one turns to the verse of John Clare, whose status in the canon of English verse is as yet undecided, it may appear that the problem of isolation is reduced to a much smaller and more parochial scale. However, this is far from being the case; for this theme is present in a number of important ways in Clare's work and his treatment of it merits serious consideration. True, Clare was unaffected by the acute problems of scientific advances in the Victorian era since he was confined in two different asylums between 1837 and his death in 1864. Further, it may be argued that the world-view of one who was essentially a peasant poet must perforce be highly restricted. But Clare was concerned with perennial poetic ideas and values: love, nature, childhood, poesy and isolation figure prominently in his verse; and, while his unfavourable background naturally imposed some limitations upon his verse, there is nonetheless a universality and a breadth of appeal which critics are increasingly coming to recognise.

Moreover, the complexity of Clare's sense of isolation has not yet been sufficiently realised. Clearly, his status as a peasant poet - a cliché which still retains its usefulness - placed him in an anomalous position vis-à-vis his fellow villagers and literary associates. A man who was largely self-taught, and who had fought against the adverse circumstances of his upbringing to become a poet, could never be entirely at home amid the gentry and the literary luminaries with whom fate brought him into contact. Furthermore, in the eyes of his peasant fellow-villagers, a poet could only appear as an oddity and as one who was aspiring above his proper station. Clare always had the misfortune to exist uneasily in this position; and, as his erstwhile literary acquaintances began to lose contact with him during the late 1820s, he increasingly felt the burden of his situation. Indeed, it was a situation which declined to a state of almost total seclusion following his descent into madness in 1836, and his confinement first at High Beech Asylum, Epping, from 1837 to 1841, and then at Northampton General Lunatic Asylum, until his death in 1864. In his later years, Clare knew an isolation such as Tennyson or Arnold could never have experienced. Yet, from the depths of this isolation came some of his finest lyrics, which reflect a profound sense of existential anguish - an anguish only too familiar to ourselves in the twentieth-century.

However, there was also a sense in which Clare brought isolation upon himself. From an early age, he loved to roam the fields and woods around his native village, Helpston, and explore the mysteries and joys of nature; in his verse, he invariably associates the word "solitude" with these lone ramblings. This solitude provided a haven

from life's problems, an endless source of delight and a stimulus for poetic creativity, for a man who was, in the profoundest sense, a nature lover. Thus, in one way, solitude was highly beneficial and necessary for Clare. Unfortunately, as the 1820s progressed, he increasingly relied upon solitude to sustain him, and for reasons which will be studied in depth, he turned away from the world of men. Thus, the very source of Clare's inspiration as a poet became responsible, in part, for his alienation from the common run of humanity. Admittedly, the process began early in his life, but, during the mid-1820s, it accelerated. Finally, a whole cluster of interwoven factors drove Clare into the ultimate isolation of madness.

The tragic details of Clare's biography have become familiar enough in recent years; nevertheless, certain aspects are crucial to any consideration of his sense of isolation, and to these, attention must be given. Clare's solitary disposition, his early love of poetry, his lack of success at manual work, his teenage disappointment in love and his personal instability all contributed strongly towards his isolation.

Firstly, it is vital to note that Clare, even from his early childhood, was less sociable than his peers by virtue of his keen intellect, his sensitivity and his love of nature. It must be remembered that, like his predecessors Stephen Duck and Robert Bloomfield, Clare emerged from a background of poverty and illiteracy. His father, Parker Clare, could barely read or write, while his mother was totally illiterate. The parents were, however, ambitious for their son and they made considerable sacrifices to enable him to

attend both Helpston Dame School and, later, Glington School until the age of twelve. In spite of this, Clare was forced to work from his earliest years, either threshing in the fields with his father or birdscairing and cow-tending for local farmers. By the time he was twelve, the exigencies of poverty forced his parents to forget their grand ambitions for an academic career for their son and to find a regular job for him. From this point onwards, until he achieved success as a poet, Clare moved from one labouring job to another; he became in turn a horseboy, ploughboy, gardener, militiaman, general labourer and limeburner. His small stature and his sensitive nature rendered him highly unsuitable for manual toil but he managed as best he could. Speaking of his inaptitude for heavy labour, Clare affirmed:

I resigned myself willingly to the hardest toils, and tho' one of the weakest, was stubborn and stomachful, and never flinched from the roughest labour ... my character was always "weak but willing"

(Sketches, 48)

After 1814, Clare's father was so crippled by rheumatism that he could no longer work and in order to save the family from the poorhouse, Clare had to support them. It was indeed miraculous that Clare, quite by chance, came to the notice of the bookseller, Edward Drury, and, through him, the London publisher John Taylor in 1819 - and thus his poetry came into the public eye. For, at this time, Clare's limeburning work had suffered a seasonal decline and his family was in danger of being committed to the poorhouse. Since his early teens, Clare had written verse compulsively and harboured ambitions of publishing it. Just prior to the discovery of his verse by Drury, Clare had been shamelessly deceived by an unscrupulous

bookseller, J.B. Henson, who had promised to assist him in publishing his work but who had, in fact, left him in considerable financial embarrassment. Thus, before meeting Drury, Clare was in debt and at the end of his tether - a lone, forlorn failure and a laughing-stock:

... I hardly knew what course to take I had got no work to go to & I hardly dare show my face to seek for any everybody seemed to jeer me at my foolish pretensions & seemd shoy at my fallen hopes ...

(Prose, 60)

Even after the publication of his first volume in 1820, Clare was still forced to supplement his income periodically by seasonal farmwork. Although a number of benefactors, including Lord Radstock, Lord Milton and John Taylor, set up a fund to assist him, this proved to be inadequate. The burden of a growing family and the mismanagement of his financial affairs by Taylor, his publisher, contributed to his difficulties. Hence, Clare's battle to establish himself as a poet, and to sever himself from a reliance upon purely manual work, was a hard and lonely one.

Clare's solitary disposition, even from his early childhood, is another crucial factor which led to his isolation. His love of books and his attraction towards poetry, which he began to write from the age of twelve onwards, made him an oddity amidst a village of unsophisticated labourers, who found his interests and ambitions incomprehensible if not absurd. In his Sketches in the Life of John Clare by Himself, Clare expressed his early estrangement as follows:

... I began to wean off from my companions, and stroll about the woods and fields on Sundays alone: conjectures filled the village about my future destination on the stage of life, some fancying it symptoms of lunacy,... and that my reading of books (they would jeeringly say) was for no other improvement than qualifying an idiot for a workhouse....

(Sketches, 50)

Thus estranged from his fellow-villagers, Clare began to associate with those who were more in tune with nature's ways. He started to frequent the company of gypsies and was strongly attracted to their free and easy way of life, as indicated by such poems as "The Gipsy's Song" (SPJC, 208). He had few close friends: one, Richard Turnill, died at an early age, and Richard's brother John moved out of the area. During his late teens, he began to associate with the Billings brothers, a pair of local bachelors whose home was the scene of notorious carousing sessions. Certainly, Clare became more sociable during his later teens and began to court a number of local lasses. However, the general view of the villagers towards Clare remained unfavourable:

... my odd habits did not escape notice they fancyd I kept aloof for some sort of study others believd me crazd & some put more criminal interpretations to my rambles & said I was night-walking associating with the gipseys ...

(Prose, 32-3)

After Clare's rise to fame, he was accused of social-climbing, against which charge he defends himself most vigorously in his prose writings (See Prose, 66). On the other hand, he found that he and his family became the focus of attention from curious gentlefolk, immediately after the publication of his first volume. Frequently,

these visitors were repelled by Clare's forthright country manner:

... on finding me a vulgar fellow that mimickd
at no pretensions but spoke in the rough way
of a thoroughbred clown they soon turnd to the
door ... - I was often annoyed by such visits &
got out of the way whenever I could ...

(Prose, 69)

There can be no doubt that Clare's contact with the London literary circle, which emerged from his rise to fame, was beneficial for him both as a man and a writer. The publication of Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery in 1820 brought him patronage from several members of the nobility; more importantly, from the point of view of his career as a poet, he was introduced to a whole host of literary celebrities at the prestigious dinners held by his publisher, John Taylor. Amongst these were artists, poets and authors of the calibre of Coleridge, Lamb, De Quincey, Reynolds, Cary and Ripplingille. Clare visited London four times: in 1820, 1822, 1824 and finally in 1828, the last visit being made partly on medical grounds. These visits broadened his intellectual horizons, introduced him to some of the liveliest minds of his day and provided a vital stimulus to improve his verse. The visits did not mitigate the tensions in his marriage, however; for Clare embarked upon an ill-advised affair with an unknown woman in 1825 and this was to cause him distress for several years afterwards. Moreover, he recognised that he could never be fully accepted as one of the circle of literary celebrities; he was, after all, an outsider from a humble background and one for whom the city life could never hold more than a temporary appeal. Indeed, J.H. Reynolds gave an interesting and wholly accurate assessment of Clare as:

... a quiet and worthy yet enthusiastic man ... a true observer of nature in her generous earth-work and water-work, but a man alive to more ... than town apprehensions ...

(Life and Poetry, 97-8)

Of Clare's London acquaintances, the one who remained in contact with him most faithfully was Mrs. Eliza Emerson, the wife of a London picture dealer, who met Clare in 1820 and initially took a fancy to him. Clare was flattered by her generous attentions and, indeed, she was to prove a faithful source of financial assistance and emotional support through her correspondence with him. Her admiration for Clare's verse was excessive and often injudicious, but her voluminous correspondence certainly provided Clare with much needed intellectual stimulus: something which he could not receive from his illiterate wife Patty.

Nevertheless, in spite of the faithfulness of Mrs. Emerson until she became an invalid in 1837, and the continued friendship of John Taylor, Clare found that, as the eighteen-twenties were on, former London acquaintances ceased to correspond with him. This was particularly galling for the sensitive Clare, who expressed his views on friendship in the following terms:

Every friendship I made grew into a warm attachment. I was in earnest or I was nothing, and I believed everything that was uttered came from the heart, as mine did

(Life, 377)

In addition to this isolation, Clare suffered from a worsening financial plight during the later 1820s. Because of Taylor's inefficient business methods, Clare never saw the profits from his

first two volumes of verse; his subsequent verse became unfashionable and would not sell; the burdens of a growing family and periodic ill-health took their toll. His friend, the sculptor Behnes Burlowe, visited Clare in 1828 and was shocked to see the straits to which Clare and his family were reduced. He advised Clare to seek help urgently:

But yet Rank and Beauty and in short the world
as it goes imagines that Poets live immediately
upon the conjurations of their own wonder - working
imaginations - you can and must undeceive it....

(2)

Not even a move to a new cottage at Northborough and the possibility of becoming an independent farmer could help Clare to survive financially. However, even in the face of these adversities and amid self-doubts about his own vocation, he persevered as a poet. In 1832, he wrote to H.F. Cary, announcing his intention to continue writing, despite the apparent futility of such a course. He hoped that, notwithstanding the contemporary public neglect of his work, future generations would view it in a more favourable light:

... I sit sometimes & wonder over the little noise I
have made in the world untill I think I have
written nothing as yet to deserve any praise at all
so the spirit of fame of living a little after life
like a name on a conspicuous place urges my blood
upward into unconscious melodys ... so in spite
of myself I ryhme on ...

(Letters, 268)

Another source of abiding regret in Clare's life was his brief but remarkably intense relationship with his first sweetheart, Mary Joyce, whose name and person became the inspiration for some of his finest love poetry. Mary was the daughter of a farmer at Glington and Clare met her whilst attending classes at Glington School.

After a short but intense friendship, the two parted as a result of a misunderstanding, the precise nature of which is not clear. Clare alleges that she felt her station to be above his (Prose, 44). Whatever the truth of the matter, this sad ending to his first love made a deep and lifelong impact upon him. Even as a limeburner, years later, Clare still hoped that success as a poet might help him to "renew the acquaintance & disclose the smothered passion" (Prose, 44). In fact, Mary never married and died in 1838. To Clare, however, she became more than just a childhood sweetheart; she not only furnished the inspiration for much of his love poetry but, as the years passed, her image was elevated in Clare's mind to a higher plane. She became transformed into the Eve of his childhood Eden, his muse and spiritual guide, a Madonna figure who symbolised his deepest and fondest longings in life. By the time Clare came to write "Child Harold" in 1841, she had faded as a distinct individual and had become a wholly idealised figure. Clare's autobiographical prose contains the following portrait of her:

she was a beautiful girl & as the dream never
awoke into reality her beauty was always fresh
in my memory she is still unmarried I cannot
forget her little playful fairy form & witching
smile even now..

(Prose, 44)

Subsequent to his relationship with Mary, Clare courted several lasses. These included Elizabeth Newbon, a maid from Southorpe named Betty Sell, and perhaps a number of gypsy lasses. Finally, however, he became attracted to Martha Turner of Walkherd, whom he made pregnant and married during 1820, following the publication of his first volume. His love for Martha, or "Patty" as she was more commonly known, never reached the same depths as did his passion for

Mary. Moreover, their marriage proved to be a somewhat stormy one; Patty was reputedly sharp-tongued and temperamental and, in view of her illiteracy, she could hardly be expected to appreciate Clare's obsessive love of verse, or to relish the financial position in which his dedication to verse placed their family. Clare's affair during the mid eighteen-twenties testifies to strains which were imposed upon their marriage during that decade. Thus, unable to find the emotional and spiritual satisfaction that he desired in his marriage, Clare looked back to his love for Mary as the symbol of his youthful innocence and happiness. In 1821, Clare wrote to Taylor claiming that he had written "the last doggerel" that would ever speak of Mary, after he had seen her unexpectedly in that year (Letters, 123). Yet, this was not to be the case. Clare dreamed of a beautiful woman during the 1820s, whom he came to identify with his memory of Mary (Prose, 226 and 231). From 1836 onwards, Clare became fixed in the delusion that Mary was in fact his first wife and Patty his second: thus, the Mary who had so long been nursed secretly in his heart as his first lover now became his true wife. Many of Clare's lyrics during the Northampton period are addressed to girls named Mary, though none refer to the surname Joyce. It seems that Mary served as an archetype for these courtship lyrics, even though she does not appear as an individual. In a letter written to Dr. Matthew Allen of High Beech asylum, following his return to Northborough, Clare confessed that "almost every song I write has some sighs or wishes in ink about Mary" (Letters, 295). Overall then, Mary came to epitomize Clare's highest aspirations, and the loss of his first love became part of a more generalised yearning for the past and its happiness.

Another aspect of Clare's personality which is central to our understanding of his isolation is his personal instability. Clare comments in his prose writings that, even as a toddler, he was of a "waukly constitution" (Sketches, 46). Even before his removal to High Beech, Clare was intermittently troubled by various physical and mental disabilities. We have already noted his inaptitude for manual work, which he found extremely burdensome because of his small size and build. During his adolescence, Clare witnessed the death of a loader, Thomas Drake, who fell from a wagon during haytime. So dreadful was the effect of this incident that it induced epileptiform fits in Clare; these were not fully cured until 1824. Furthermore, Clare would sometimes impose huge strains upon himself by overworking; when he was under the influence of his poetic muse, his spells of composition might last as long as three days and three nights, after which he would suffer from depression and severe fatigue. He confided to John Taylor that:

...when I am in the fit I write as much in one week
as would knock ye up a fair size vol = ...

(Letters, 50)

Indeed, as early as 1820, Edward Drury, the rather unscrupulous bookseller who first brought Clare to Taylor's notice, wrote of Clare's exertions to the effect that he would be "afflicted with insanity if his talent continues to be forced as it has been these 4 months past" (3). Moreover, this astonishing comment was made about sixteen years before Clare did go insane and gives a grim hint as to what was to follow.

Clare himself gives evidence of a rather morbid side to his nature. In his "The Autobiography", he recalls a morbid fear of darkness and ghosts (Prose, 40) and how, as a child, he would sometimes lose all track of his whereabouts when walking on errands to the village of Maxey, because he became so absorbed in imagining stories and adventures. The financial and family pressures of the 1820s led to various mental and physical complaints. During 1821, Clare reported that he suffered from "nervous fears" and "phantasies of the brain" (Life, 161). During 1822, he suffered from depression and horrifying dreams which inspired his poems "The Dream" and "The Nightmare". Events took a more serious turn in 1824: for most of the year, Clare experienced acute depression and several physical symptoms. So severe was his distress that he ~~even~~ contemplated suicide. During his visit to London in that year, he was afraid to wander in the Chancery Lane area at night because he imagined that "Thin death-like shadows & goblins with saucer eyes" (Life and Poetry, 110) were haunting him. His fourth visit to London in 1828 was necessitated by illness, for which Clare consulted the illustrious physician Dr. Darling. In 1830, however, the situation deteriorated alarmingly, for, during a visit to the theatre in Peterborough, Clare complained to his companions, Bishop Marsh and his wife, that ugly fiends were haunting the auditorium. At one point during the play, which was The Merchant of Venice, Clare stood up and cursed the actor who was playing the role of Shylock. Thereafter, Clare seems to have suffered from various delusions and psychosomatic symptoms with growing frequency. Letters written after 1830 give a frightening picture of some of the ailments from which he suffered:

... I awoke in dreadful irritation thinking that the Italian liberators were kicking my head about for a foot ball - my future prospects seem to be no sleep - a general debility - a stupid & stunning apathy or lingering madness & death - ...

(Letters, 253)

Clare was visited in December 1836 by Taylor, who found him "sadly enfeebled" (Life, 374) and languishing from symptoms such as those described above. Patty's efforts to nurse him back to health were in vain; though almost incoherent in his speech, and fixed in the belief that Mary was his first wife, Clare found the strength to wander the fields and to write verse. Therefore, in June 1837, he was committed to High Beech asylum at Epping. Under the enlightened supervision of Dr. Matthew Allen, Clare recovered his physical health, though not his sanity. Such were his loneliness and misery in the asylum that he eventually escaped in 1841 and made the long journey back to Northborough on foot. The account of this grim trek is to be found in his 'The Journey from Essex'. Clare had hoped to return to the bosom of his imagined wife Mary, but the end of the account reveals the stark reality:

Returned home out of Essex and found no Mary.
She and her family are nothing to me now, though
she herself was once the dearest of all; and
how can I forget?

(Life, 405)

Towards the end of 1841, Clare was committed to the Lunatic Asylum in Northampton, and this time there was to be no escape. Visits from his children and friends were few; Clare achieved a form of solitude for which he could have had little liking.

The nature of Clare's mental illness has been discussed at great length by critics but it is doubtful whether a final verdict as to its exact nature will ever be reached. The most that can be said is that it was a severe psychosis. The Tibbles have argued that Clare was a manic depressive and claim that his ability to continue writing well into the 1850s confirms this (Life and Poetry, 201). They also point to the alternation of tremendous upsurges of poetic activity with bouts of depression as further proof of this interpretation. On the other hand, an impressive body of opinion has drawn attention to Clare's confusion about his identity and his hallucinations in order to substantiate a case for schizophrenia. Geoffrey Grigson (PJCM, 23-7) and, more recently, Eleanor Nicholes, ⁽⁴⁾ have argued persuasively on this count. Certainly, Clare suffered from acute identity problems: at High Beech, he would commonly identify himself with Byron, and at Northampton he added several other delusional personae, including Burns, Shakespeare, Admiral Nelson, and several prize-fighters. It would appear that Clare was partially able to mitigate his loneliness by imagining himself as a hero in some field of life, and as a man who possessed immense poetic, military or physical prowess. The most recent suggestion, made by C.V. Fletcher, is that Clare contracted syphilis during a visit to London in 1824. ⁽⁵⁾ However, the evidence for this is too slight to admit of any certainty, and, at present, it is impossible to make any definite pronouncement on the nature of Clare's psychosis.

.....

If the external events of Clare's life were important in leading to his sense of isolation, so too were a number of attitudes and values which he cherished, and these merit further attention. The first of these factors is his impassioned devotion to the writing of verse. Clare had begun writing by his early teens and continued to do so even into the 1860s, when age and enfeeblement finally prevented him. As has been indicated already, he faced enormous problems from the very start of his career: he lacked a thorough formal education, and was compelled to improve himself by his own voracious reading. By his late twenties, he had amassed an impressive library which ranged from literature to scientific topics. Even so, difficulties with spelling and punctuation dogged him throughout his career. The early inspiration for Clare's versifying was provided by his listening to the recitation of ballads by his father, by the oral folk tradition of Helpston, and by the reading of penny broadsides. Not until the age of thirteen did Clare acquire his first book of verse, Thompson's The Seasons. Naturally, Clare faced opposition and even ridicule from his own family and from fellow villagers. A poet in the midst of a peasant community could hardly expect a sympathetic response towards his vocation, as he indicates in his Sketches:

The laughs and jeers of those around me, when they found out I was a poet, was present death to my ambitious apprehensions; ... the labouring classes remain as blind in such matters as the Slaves in Africa

(Sketches, 69)

But Clare's passion for writing verse became compulsive and

no amount of scorn from others could prevent him from scribbling down his ideas, so that he would often pause from his manual work to jot down thoughts on scraps of paper or even on the crown of his hat. His desire to wander amid the solitudes of nature to find inspiration for his compositions even led him to forsake churchgoing:

Poetry was a troublesomely pleasant companion annoying & cheering me at my toils I could not stop my thoughts & often failed to keep them till night so when I fancied I had hit upon a good image or natural description I used to steal into a corner of the garden & clap it down but the appearance of my employers often put my fancies to flight ... thus I went on writing my thoughts down & correcting them at leisure spending my Sundays in the woods or heaths to be alone for that purpose & I got a bad name among the weekly churchgoers forsaking the churchgoing bell & seeking the religion of the fields ... I felt uncomfortable very often but my heart burnt over the pleasures of solitude & the restless revels of rhyme ...

(Prose, 32)

These passages clearly reveal why Clare's obsession with verse made him an outsider in the eyes of the villagers. Ironically, however, after Clare's rise to fame in 1820, his dedication to descriptive nature poetry sowed the seeds of his downfall in the literary market. His first two volumes, Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery and The Village Minstrel sold well, though, because of John Taylor's mishandling of the profit from these, Clare reaped little fruit from them. The next volume, The Shepherd's Calendar, was not published until 1827, as a result of delays by Taylor. There was by now little market for Clare's verse: The Shepherd's Calendar was a financial disaster. In 1825, the publishing firm of

Taylor and Hessey was wound up and Clare was forced to publish his next volume, The Rural Muse, by subscription, largely through the help of the energetic Mrs. Emerson in 1835. This volume sold little better, though by this stage, Clare's health had degenerated to the point where its failure could hardly bother him. Even by 1824, Clare realised how hard it would be to make his living as a poet. His reasons for continuing to write were largely unconnected with the financial viability of his vocation.

Paradoxically, the kind of verse which the public neglected was to provide him with deep aesthetic and spiritual satisfaction in the midst of his artistic isolation. Throughout his career, and even during the asylum years, when his speech was sometimes disordered and incoherent, Clare continued to achieve his supreme self-expression in verse. The intense concentration involved in composition and the release of his creative energies provided a bastion against poverty, ill-health, and, later, insanity and the loneliness of confinement. Clare succinctly expressed the value of the poetic imagination in "The Progress of Rhyme":

O SOUL enchanting poesy
Thou'st long been all the world with me ...

(SPPJC, 116)

Another vital factor which enhanced Clare's sense of isolation was his extraordinary sensitivity to change in various forms. This manifested itself most strongly in his reaction to enclosure in Helpston and in his move from Helpston to Northborough in 1832. Enclosure had been the theme of a tradition of rural protest

stretching back to the sixteenth-century, and amongst its strongest critics were Cobbett and Goldsmith (whose The Deserted Village soon became a locus classicus). Though enclosure was designed to make more economic use of the land, its critics claimed that it deprived the poor of much needed grazing land and placed them at the mercy of callous, materialistic farmers. Clare's own village of Helpston was enclosed between 1813 and 1816 and it would seem from his verse that he associated enclosure with various economic ills which befell the poor. In The Village Minstrel (SPJC, 27) and "The Fallen Elm" (MC, 192), Clare seems to associate it with the widening gulf between landowners and the peasantry and the plight of the rural poor. John Barrell has done much to clear away misconceptions about the true effects of enclosure in Helpston, but he too stresses the loss of grazing land and the right to collect gleanings, caused by enclosure. (6) In some ways, however, Clare's criticism of the socio-economic effects of enclosure was secondary to his outrage at the changes wrought upon the environment. To Clare, the worst crime of the enclosers had been to alter the old open-field system, with its expansive sense of space and village green, into a highly regular grid-like system. In the process, many local landmarks - trees, bushes and animal-habitats-were uprooted completely. To Clare, the landscape in its wild, pristine condition possessed a virginal purity and sanctity, which reflected the providential care of God. Hence, to alter nature's contours in this way and to disturb her creatures was little short of sacrilege.

Clare bore a deep love for and felt an almost organic sense of kinship with the most humble manifestations of wildlife. His

tremendous sense of shock at the changes wrought by enclosure is expressed in "The Mores" (SPPJC, 169), where he describes the grim scene left in its wake. Indeed, such was Clare's love of nature in its wild state that he once wrote a remarkable letter to John Taylor, which laments the destruction of two favourite elm trees:

Had I one hundred pounds to spare I would buy them reprieves - but they must die A second thought tells me I am a fool: were people all to feel as I do, the world could not be carried on - a green would not be ploughed - a tree or bush would not be cut for firing or furniture, and everything they found when boys would remain in that state till they died. This is my indisposition, and you will laugh at it....

(Life, 164-5)

Not only was nature itself endowed with a beauty and sanctity which were redolent of paradise, but Helpston also retained a similar, powerful mystique in the eyes of Clare. So dear were the village and its environs to him that he regarded them almost as an extension of his own being. His prose writings speak of a number of occasions during his teens when he journeyed away from Helpston and was left with a sense of profound disorientation. A visit to nearby Wisbech revealed a "foreign land" to him (Prose, 20) and a trip to distant Newark in search of work left him feeling "quite lost" and even imagining that the sun was setting in a different part of the sky (Prose, 28). Small wonder that Clare wrote to Taylor in 1820, expressing the wish that London would "creep within 20 miles of Helpstone" (Letters, 132). Thus, Clare's move in 1832 to Northborough, some three miles distant, disturbed him to such a degree that he composed a fine poem bemoaning the event - "The Flitting" - (SPPJC, 176) which outlines his grief in the

face of a new topography.

The sensitivity which made Clare feel ill at ease amid unfamiliar surroundings, whether at Northborough or in the asylums, also influenced his attitude towards the past. A criticism which can justly be levelled at Clare is that he was too preoccupied with the lost innocence and joy which he felt had been his in the past; this is, of course, a commonplace theme, particularly amongst the Romantic poets, but, for Clare, the loss of the past and the innocence and freedom of childhood and young love was felt with a singular poignancy. As his career progressed, he came more and more to idealise the past, to bemoan its loss and to feel that its joys could never be recovered, except in the feeble guise of memory and the expression of this in verse. Such a retrospective mode of vision could not but have its unhealthy aspects yet it is typical of Clare's sensitivity to change. His adult life was so beset by troubles of various kinds that it was difficult for him to develop an optimistic attitude towards the future. Hence, several fine poems deal with childhood, including "Childhood" (MC, 96) and "Remembrances" (SPPJC, 174), which remember the carefree pleasures of childhood before the onset of adult reason and its concomitant cares. Here, of course, Clare is very much in line with Wordsworth and other Romantics in regretting the departure of the fresh perception and happiness of childhood. In a notable prose passage, Clare concisely summarized his feelings on the joys of childhood:

There is nothing but poetry about the existance of
childhood real simple soul moving poetry the laughter
and joy of poetry and not its philosophy and there
is nothing of poetry about manhood but the reflection and
the remembrance of what has been nothing more ...

(SPPJC, 18)

If the sense of the departed joys of the past added to Clare's sense of isolation, so too did his views about religion and his personal values. His inclination to forsake churchgoing in favour of nature's pleasures has already been noted; nature was able to supply him with more spiritual sustenance than the orthodox Anglican services. In spite of the fact that he befriended a number of clergyman, including the Rev. Isaiah Holland and Bishop Herbert Marsh of Peterborough, Clare turned away from the Church of England early during his life. While he always held the Christian values of humility and charity in high esteem, Clare, in keeping with other Romantic artists, was suspicious of the established church and was a vigorous critic of religious abuses. His satire, "The Parish", was bitterly critical of lethargic Anglican priests who neglected their duties or actively oppressed the poor, and of religious extremists in the Protestant sects who showed deceit and hypocrisy beneath their veneer of piety (SPJC, 147-8). In a recent article, M.G. Minor has drawn attention to Clare's contact with Wesleyan and, later, Primitive Methodist groups in Helpston.⁽⁷⁾ By 1824, however, Clare's contact with these groups had lapsed completely. It seems likely that the rigid, doctrinaire beliefs of these sects, combined with their strong emotionalism, eventually drove him to rely upon his own reading of the Scriptures for spiritual solace, and away from organised religion. Nonetheless, the influence of the fiery Methodist preaching and its grim threats of judgement upon humanity emerges surprisingly in the Biblical paraphrases which Clare wrote in 1841. Some of these paraphrases reflect a belief in an elect community who will be preserved by God's grace following the destruction of the bulk of sinful humanity: ideas which are firmly rooted in Methodist theology.

For the most part, however, Clare shunned what he saw as the excesses of extremist doctrines and proclaimed a tolerant, undogmatic faith which recognised sincerity and charity as the prerequisites of any established religion. Such open-mindedness, coupled with a suspicion of the established churches was, of course, typical of other Romantic poets. However, Clare's refusal to commit himself fully to any sect deprived him of the fellowship of other religious persons and left him to grapple single-handedly with his spiritual uncertainties. Clare summarised his views about religion in a number of prose fragments, one of which reads:

A religion that teaches us to act justly to
speak truth & love mercy ought to be held sacred
in every country & whatever the differences of
creeds may be in lighter matters they ought to
be overturned & the grand principles respected

(Prose, 227)

Clare's robust independence of mind, seen in his refusal to embrace wholeheartedly any form of institutionalised religion, was displayed in a number of ways during his career. His decision to continue writing, when he knew that he stood little immediate prospect of financial profit, his refusal to conform to the demands of the reading public, and his desire, during the early 1830s, to establish himself as an independent farmer at Northborough, all confirm his self-determination. Even his pathetic escape from High Beech reveals that his tenacity never deserted him. Indeed, a number of prose fragments indicate his lifelong desire to preserve his own character in the face of flattery, betrayal and mental strife:

Fix your character & keep it wether alone
or in company is the maxim of an ancient
philosopher & there is nothing more injurious
to a persons' success in life as a wavering
disposition as to how he shall act ...

(Prose, 229)

The prose fragment "Self-Identity", written in 1841, gives evidence of his attempts to hold onto his identity, in spite of the indifference and hostility of men and the tremendous internal strains imposed by his psychosis. He knew that he had to battle to the last against despair and the debilitating effects of his illness upon his creative powers:

A **VERY** good commonplace counsel is Self-Identity to bid our own hearts not to forget our own selves & always to keep self in the first place lest all the world who always keeps us behind it should forget us altogether - forget not thyself & the world will not forget thee - forget thyself & the world will willingly forget thee till thou art nothing but a living - dead man dwelling among shadows & falsehood ...

(Prose, 239)

While much evidence has been accumulated to show how Clare was prepared to endure isolation because of his dedication to verse and his strong personal beliefs, it must never be thought that he was a complete misanthropist. During his teens, Clare loved dancing and carousing; he was always deeply devoted to his family. From 1815 onwards, he supported his family when his father was too enfeebled to work and, after his marriage, such was his concern for his children that he would sometimes miss meals in order that they should not go hungry. Similarly, Clare was invariably loyal to his friends; in spite of a number of very strained periods with John Taylor, especially as a

result of delays over The Shepherd's Calendar and Taylor's subsequent mishandling of his finances, Clare remained friendly with him even into the asylum years. It is true that Clare did begin to lose faith in his fellow men during the mid-1820s, after various setbacks, and that from then onwards his poems reveal a darkening vision of human nature. But Clare never lost sight of the ideals of human love and fellowship, as can be seen in the love poetry which he continued to write in the asylum years.

.....

The literary background to Clare's handling of the theme of isolation is important if we are to see it in context. Studies of the influences on Clare's verse have already been made in depth by R. Protherough⁽⁸⁾ and M. Grainger⁽⁹⁾; indeed, it is possible to detect the influence of at least sixty other writers in his work. From our point of view, however, certain ideas are of key importance. These fall into two different categories: firstly, the influence of the eighteenth-century nature poets, with their emphasis on solitude and retirement, and, secondly, a number of Romantic motifs, including those of Eden, the Solitary and isolation itself. A host of eighteenth-century poets had celebrated the virtues of solitude amid nature's charms and Clare was well aware of the precedents established by Thomson, Cowper, the Wartons, Akenside and others. Clare's early verse, in particular, reflects the influence of such poets. On the other hand, his development as a poet led him to see certain issues from the perspective of the Romantics; and, through his reading of Wordsworth and Coleridge, he began to formulate ideas about the significance of solitude in a more philosophical way. However, it is

important to bear in mind that, in spite of all these influences, Clare's sense of isolation was a most individual one and in no way may his handling of this theme be dismissed as derivative.

In turning to the eighteenth-century tradition of retirement poetry, we immediately become conscious of the great difference in background between these poets and Clare. Many were affluent, cultured town-dwellers, for whom nature represented a temporary retreat from the hurly-burly of city life, and a source of creative inspiration. Their perspective was that of outsiders and they lacked the intimate knowledge of nature's more secluded regions, which Clare, as a countryman and rural labourer, possessed. To them, moreover, retreat signified a withdrawal with a few choice companions to a country seat for a leisurely sojourn, whereas, for Clare, daily ramblings amid sequestered places enabled him to observe nature's humbler and rarer species undisturbed. The attitude of the retirement poets is summarised aptly by Cowper in The Task:

The statesman, lawyer, merchant, man of trade,
Pants for the refuge of some rural shade,
Where, all his long anxieties forgot
Amid the charms of a sequestered spot,
Or recollected only to gild o'er, ...
He may possess the joys he thinks he sees, ...

(10)

There is not, however, the same stress on the solitary enjoyment of nature in The Task as is found in Clare's work. Thus, Cowper emphasises:

Fireside enjoyments, homeborn happiness,
And all the comforts that the lowly roof
Of undisturbed retirement, and the hours
Of long uninterrupted evening know

(11)

Though his perspective differed from theirs, Clare nevertheless admired the retirement poets greatly. Thomson's The Seasons was a favourite of Clare's from the age of thirteen onwards, and there are some close verbal echoes of this great work in several of Clare's earlier poems. However, his early verse inevitably lacked the carefully wrought moral and intellectual framework of Thomson's work, which ranges far beyond natural description in its scope, and never stoops to the minuteness of detail common in Clare's poems. Even so, Thomson succinctly pointed out the reasons why the retirement poets were attracted towards nature:

... the best, both ancient, and modern, Poets
have been passionately fond of retirement, and
solitude. The wild romantic country was their
delight. And they seem never to have been more
happy, than when, lost in unfrequented fields,
far from the little busy world, they were at
leisure, to meditate, and sing the Works of
Nature

(12)

Clare's debt to this tradition is acknowledged in a late asylum poem, "Cowper", in which he praises those features of Cowper's verse which he most admired:

The lonely house, the rural walk
He sang so musically true,
E'en now they share the people's talk
Who love the poet Cowper too.

(SPJC, 308)

Clare's admiration for his Augustan and Pre-Romantic forebears is mentioned in a detailed letter (Prose, 175), where he cites Dyer, Thomas Warton, Collins and Gray with admiration. Indeed, the poetry of rural contentment had a long heritage, stretching as far back as

Shakespeare's "Under the Greenwood Tree" and Dekker's "Sweet Content" in English literature and, ultimately, back to Vergil and Horace in Latin. During the eighteenth-century, the speculations of the empiricist philosophers, with their focus on perception and sensory experience, gave incentive to their contemporaries to discover the delights of nature at first hand. A number of Clare's early lyrics reflect the mood of this tradition, and the lyric below finds him courting solitude at eventide in a manner typical of his forebears:

NOW glaring daylight's usher'd to a close;
And nursing eve her soothing care renews,
To welcome weary labour to repose,
And cherish nature with reviving dews.
Hail, cooling sweets! that breathe so sweetly here;
Hail, lovely Eve! whose hours so lovely prove;
Thy silent calm! to solitude so dear;...

(Poems 1,122)

The mood echoes that of Collins's "Ode to Evening":

Then lead, calm Vot'ress, where some sheety Lake,
Cheers the lone Heath, or some time-hallow'd Pile,
Or up-land Fallows grey
Reflect it's last cool Gleam,

(13)

Clare was well aware that he was not the first peasant poet to appear on the literary scene. His contemporary, Robert Bloomfield, made a large impact earlier during the century and Clare held Bloomfield in the highest esteem for his close, detailed descriptions of nature and hailed him as "the English Theocritus" (Letters, 167). Burns was another recent example of one who had risen from a humble rural background to literary success; his love of nature and the flamboyant image of a hard drinker and lover which he projected,

appealed greatly to Clare. Clare's early "Address to a Lark" (Poems 1,25) is highly Burnsian in its humour and self-pity. The influence of Burns faded after Clare's rise to fame, as he began to seek new models; however, at Northampton asylum, Burns became Clare's dominant delusional persona, probably because of Clare's desire to identify with a successful peasant poet. The fine lyrics "O wert thou in the storm" (SPJC, 291) and "Song: Oh, haud yer tongue", (Poems 2, 509) are derived from "Oh, Wert Thou in the Could Blast" and the famous "The Banks o' Doon" respectively. Other examples of the peasant poet phenomenon included Stephen Duck and James Hogg. Indeed, Clare was greatly aware of the vulnerability of peasant poets and the anomalies inherent in their situation; the early death of Bloomfield disturbed him deeply and caused him much well-founded concern about his own future as a poet.

In turning to consider the influence of the Romantic poets upon Clare, the idea of isolation becomes especially significant. For, a number of these men felt alienated from their peers on account of their radical political sentiments and antipathy towards accepted social mores: Blake, Byron and Shelley stand out as obvious examples. Expressions of this isolation can be found in the myths of Eden (or Paradise Lost) and the Solitary. The myth of the Fall has been seen by such critics as Abrams as the central experience of the Romantic consciousness, with its progression from unity to fragmentation and, ultimately, to a higher unity. ⁽¹⁴⁾

Thus, according to Abrams, Romantic poetry seeks a return from existential estrangement towards wholeness and re-integration by means

of poetic creativity, myth, mysticism or a combination of these. This cycle is most clearly seen in Blake's Songs of Innocence and of Experience, where there is a fall from an initial purity of vision and harmony with nature to the world of adulthood, which is dominated by the oppressive forces of reason. Finally, there is a mystical re-entry to a higher plane of consciousness. For Clare, the loss of childhood's innocence, the waning of adolescent love and the depravity of human nature assumed great importance, from the The Village Minstrel onwards. In a few asylum lyrics, re-integration with eternity is achieved briefly, while the 1841 metrical paraphrases suggest a communal vision of paradise regained; for the most part, however, Clare's emphasis falls on the loss of the past and the iniquity of humankind, seen in contrast to the primal innocence and Edenic beauty of nature.

Closely linked with this myth is the idea of the Solitary, an expression of the heightened Romantic consciousness. G. Hartman sees the Solitary as the first stage in a process whereby the world is seen as a prison, followed by a state of heightened self-consciousness and, finally, by solipsism itself; thus, the shackles of man's own restricting intellect can only be broken by the liberating power of the poetic imagination. (15) Hartman feels that the process is fundamental to Romanticism and that the greatest Romantics all escaped isolation through a vision of unitary consciousness with eternity. The Solitary can most clearly be seen in Byron's verse, notably in his lonely protagonists the Giaour, Don Juan and Childe Harold. Such protagonists illustrate this archetype as they roam far and wide, estranged from society. Ironically, Byron himself came

to live out this myth, following his final departure from England. Separated from his wife, he wandered restlessly through Europe, spurred on by a vision of love which could never be fulfilled. Other Solitaries include Shelley's Alastor, Coleridge's Ancient Mariner and Wordsworth's Solitary. In Clare's work, the most striking manifestations of this myth are found in "A Vision" (SPPJC, 198) and in "Sonnet: I am" (SPPJC, 196), where the poet feels himself to be a lone, almost superhuman figure, elevated far above the mortal worldlings around him.

Once we have recognised the importance of these Romantic ideas as a backcloth to Clare's work, it is nonetheless vital that the difference in emphasis between the six great Romantics and Clare should be considered. For, all of them were better educated and in a more favourable position to establish themselves in the literary world. Blake, Shelley, Keats and Byron were all at home in an urban setting and even Wordsworth spent many of his years as a young man away from the Lake District, and only returned to settle there in 1799. Once more, only Wordsworth's acquaintance with nature is comparable in its intimacy with that of Clare; the other Romantics tended to look upon nature from a more distant perspective, almost as their Augustan forebears had done.

Moreover, it is true that most of the great Romantics suffered from isolation and social disapproval. Blake, though by no means the pious hermit that some critics have seen him as, was certainly a lonely, largely unappreciated genius at the turn of the eighteenth-century; like Clare, he loathed political and religious oppression. Coleridge lived to see a number of cherished visions, including that of

pantisocracy, die stillborn. He suffered from marital stresses, as did Clare, and even became estranged from Wordsworth, at one point. Unlike Clare, he turned to opium as a solace for his problems. Keats, like Clare, was to some extent self-taught and was originally apprenticed in the medical profession before establishing himself as a poet. Like Clare, he underwent the trials of ill-starred love, in this case with Fanny Brawne, and suffered severely from illness before his premature death. Clare's experiences of sudden fame, followed by gradual neglect by old friends and patrons, and a growing realisation of man's cruelty towards nature, combined to damage his faith in humanity. Not that Clare lost sympathy completely with his fellow men; even the poems of the 1830s show sympathy for social outcasts, and his compassion for the poor is amply demonstrated in "The Parish". But the fact remains that too much separation from others progressively distanced him from his peers and only in his asylum experience did Clare come to realise how severe could be the effects of confinement from the outside world.

Apart from Wordsworth, Byron was the Romantic poet whose charisma most strongly influenced Clare. The cult of Byron, which mushroomed during the 1820s, manifested itself as an important literary phenomenon, especially on the Continent. It is clear why Clare was so powerfully swayed by the mystique of Byron: for Byron was a successful poet, a celebrated lover, a political Radical, a popular figure amongst the common people and a scorner of contemporary poetic fashions. Above all, he was a man of action—in spite of his physical deformity—and he scorned academics, dismissing writers as "a worthless, idle brood".⁽¹⁶⁾ Eventually, he gave his life in the

cause of Greek independence. The irony of Byron's position, as he began to live out the kind of exile experienced by his own characters, has already been mentioned; hence, Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, whose first two Cantos were published in 1812 after Byron's travels in Europe, contains a strange admixture of life and art; in the fourth Canto, published in 1818, the mask of the Childe is lowered and we are confronted by Byron's own remorse and self-doubts.

However, in spite of these superficial biographical similarities in terms of isolation, it is the name of Wordsworth which is most commonly associated with that of Clare, and this merits further attention. Their mutual love of nature, childhood and solitude is certainly a strong point in common. Clare had not read Wordsworth's verse until at least 1820 and it took him a while to appreciate the Lakeland poet's style. However, as the asylum sonnet "To Wordsworth" (PJCM, 60) indicates, Clare came to revere Wordsworth greatly once his initial doubts had been removed. Both poets shared the conviction that childhood was the "seedtime" of the soul and that prolonged contact with the unsympathetic world of men could bring weariness and disillusionment:

OH, take this world away from me!
Its strife I cannot bear to see,
Its very praises hurt me more
Than e'en its coldness did before...

(Poems, 2, 263)

THE world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours ;...

(17)

Similarly, Wordsworth shared Clare's desire for solitude and believed in its therapeutic powers. In The Prelude, published in 1850, he made an affirmation about solitude which Clare would have approved of:

When from our better selves we have too long
Been parted by the hurrying world, and droop,
Sick of its business, of its pleasures tired,
How gracious, how benign, is Solitude ;...

(18)

Significantly, several of Wordsworth's protagonists are isolated rural figures. The Leech-Gatherer, ~~the~~ Cumberland Beggar and Michael are men well acquainted with the ways of nature, as are the mole-catchers, gypsies and herd boys of whom Clare sometimes writes. However, there are differences in the attitudes of the two poets towards solitude: Wordsworth often depicts the landscape on a much grander scale than Clare, while Clare often focuses on the smaller plants and creatures of nature. In view of the differences between the hilly Lakeland landscapes and the flat expanses of the fenlands, this is not surprising. For Wordsworth, the solitary contemplation of nature could lead to mystical experiences which he described as "spots of time". One such experience is highlighted in "I wandered lonely as a cloud"...

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

(19)

In Clare's case, he often seems to enjoy nature's beauty for

its own sake, rather than for its deeper significance. Yet this is not always so: during the 1820s, Clare began to formulate a more philosophical perspective upon nature and to endow it with religious significance. "The Voice of Nature" (SPJC, 184) and "Shadows of Taste" (SPPJC, 112) show that nature, even in its tiniest manifestations, may reveal the glory of an omnipotent creator. This theory of divine immanence is consonant with some of Wordsworth's insights in The Prelude; and, though it is highly probable that Clare's thinking on this issue reflects Wordsworth's influence, it is certainly true that his own experience could have led him to formulate such ideas. That Clare had experiences of a mystical character amid the solitudes of nature is undeniable: the remarkable lyric, "Sabbath Bells", indicates such an experience, triggered by the sound of bells in a beautiful rural setting:

& I have listened till I felt
A feeling not in words
A love that rudest moods would melt
When those sweet sounds was heard
A melancholly joy at rest
A pleasurable pain
A love a rapture of the breast
That nothing will explain

(MC, 284)

Furthermore, there is another crucial difference in Wordsworth's and Clare's attitudes towards solitude. While Wordsworth knew the therapeutic value of solitude, he could also clearly see its limitations and dangers: he stressed the precarious existence of such **outcasts** as **the old Cumberland Beggar** and the **Leech-Gatherer**. One of the central tenets of his philosophy is "**Love of Nature** leading to **Love of Man**". Not even the harrowing experiences of the French

Revolution altered his estimation of man's potentialities. Both "Michael" and the "Ode to Duty" reveal a strong moral concern and compassion for his fellow men. As we have seen, however, Clare found it far more difficult to take an optimistic view of his fellow men.

It was chiefly during the High Beech confinement of 1837 - 41 that Clare, in his delusions, came to identify himself with Byron. Clare's sexual tensions and his fury at the fickleness of women are expressed in "Don Juan", a poem far coarser and more savage than the Byronic original. However, the more tender attitude towards women seen in Childe Harold's Pilgrimage is also reverberated in Clare's own "Child Harold". Yet, Clare's admiration for Byron existed long before this period; he witnessed Byron's funeral cortège in London in 1824 and wrote a sonnet "Lord Byron" (MC, 389) in Byron's honour.

In Byron's long poems the theme of isolation is given some prominence. In Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Byron shows his scorn for his small-minded contemporaries, from whom he sometimes felt the need of separation. With Byron, however, there is a rebellious attitude towards prevailing social mores and repression, which exceeds that of Clare, as can be seen from the two extracts below:

But soon he knew himself the most unfit
Of men to herd with Man; with whom he held
Little in common; untaught to submit
His thoughts to others, though his soul was quell'd
In youth by his own thoughts; still uncompell'd,
He would not yield dominion of his mind
To spirits against whom his own rebell'd;
Proud though in desolation; which could find
A life within itself, to breathe without mankind.

(20)

Hail Solitude still Peace and Lonely good
Thou spirit of all joys to be alone
My best of friends these glades and this green wood
Where nature is herself and loves her own
The hearts hid anguish here I make it known
And tell my troubles to the gentle wind
Friends cold neglects have froze my heart to stone
And wrecked the voyage of a quiet mind
With wives and friends and every hope disjoined

(LPJC, 79)

However, there is an essential difference between the attitudes of the two poets in their approaches to nature. For Clare, nature is often seen as a substitute for human company and provides him with a form of solace that he cannot find in society; for Byron, however, nature provides a welcome temporary respite from the tumult of life, and not a permanent refuge. Byron, with his vigorous approach to life and his flamboyant personality, could not retreat from society for long and hide his light beneath a bushel. Once he had been comforted by nature, he felt the need to return to society with renewed energy:

There is society, where none intrudes,
By the deep Sea and Music in its roar:
I love not Man the less, but Nature more ,...

(21)

From even so brief a survey of Clare's literary forebears and contemporaries, it becomes clear that, in spite of his ability to absorb beneficial influences, he succeeded in conveying a peculiarly personal sense of isolation. True, he shared the love of his Augustan and pre-Romantic predecessors for the solitudes of nature and his early verse shows the impact of the retirement tradition upon him. Yet, his knowledge of nature was far more detailed and intimate

than that of both the retirement poets and his Romantic peers. Only Wordsworth could rival Clare in his knowledge of wildlife, but his poetic landscapes are depicted on a much larger scale than those of Clare. It must be said, however, that Clare took his love of solitude to extremes, a danger which Wordsworth recognised and avoided. Unfortunately, Clare was caught in a vicious circle; his love of solitude caused him to withdraw himself from company during his long nature rambles, and he found that, when he did mix in society and make his mark in the world, he increasingly met neglect and hostility, which threw him more and more upon the resources of nature. Similarly, Clare experienced neglect and isolation to a much greater extent than any of his Romantic contemporaries because of his humble background and his inevitable failure to establish himself as a permanent luminary in the London literary scene. To understand the full extent of the reasons for Clare's isolation, we must now consider the theme as it developed in his verse.

Endnotes to Chapter One

- (1) Matthew Arnold, "Stanzas in Memory of the Author of Obermann", ll. 79-80, The Poems of Matthew Arnold, ed. K. Allott, London, p. 133
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- (6) John Barrell, The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730 - 1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare, Cambridge, 1972, p. 215
- (7) Mark Minor, "John Clare and the Methodists: A Reconsideration", Studies in Romanticism, Vol. 19 No. 1, Boston, 1980, pp. 31-50
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- (12) James Thomson, Notes to "Winter", The Seasons, from The Poetical Works, ed. J.L. Robertson, London, 1965, p. 241

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- (17) William Wordsworth, Sonnet 111, ll. 1-3, The Poetical Works of Wordsworth, ed. T. Hutchinson, London, 1969, p. 206
- (18) William Wordsworth, The Prelude, Bk. 4, ll. 354-7, The Poetical Works.... p. 519
- (19) William Wordsworth, "I wandered lonely as a cloud"..., ll. 19-24, The Poetical Works.... p. 149
- (20) Lord George Gordon Byron, Childe Harold, Canto III, XII, Byron: Poetical Works, ed. F. Page, London, 1970, p. 211
- (21) Lord George Gordon Byron, Childe Harold, Canto IV, CLXXVIII, Byron: Poetical Works, pp. 250-1

CHAPTER TWO: "Solitude Should Be My Choice"-
 The Early Poems: 1806 - 24

Taking into consideration the unusual circumstances of Clare's background and the importance of the literary genres which influenced him, it is easier to appreciate how a sense of isolation became one of the main keynotes of his verse. The aim of this and subsequent chapters is to show how this process is manifested at various stages of his career; the dates separating different periods in his career are chosen for the sake of convenience rather than because they represent rigid lines of demarcation in the development of his verse. By 1824, it is true, Clare was coming to maturity as a poet and the verse written between this date and 1832 shows far greater concision and lucidity than his early verse; similarly, the verse written between 1832 and 1836 reveals a distinctive sense of pessimism and a move towards shorter verse forms; the large body of verse composed in the two asylums also has some unusual distinguishing features. Yet, in spite of the differences between the kinds of verse which date from various periods of Clare's career, there is an astonishing continuity in the themes and attitudes, stretching from the earliest verse to the final Northampton lyrics.

Not surprisingly, most of the verse written before 1821 tends to be derivative, diffuse and sententious; the first volume, Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery, is the work of a young poet learning his craft and attempting to forge his own style. The second volume, The Village Minstrel, dates from a year later, in 1821.

It shows evidence of greater originality and experimentation with new verse forms. The third volume, The Shepherd's Calendar, was begun before 1824 but not published until 1827; it represents Clare's first undisputed masterpiece. Overall, the verse from the early part of Clare's development is marred by excessive moralising, prolixity and clumsy construction. However, many poems still possess redeeming virtues, while others give promise of great things to come. Above all, several of them clearly reveal Clare's growing sense of isolation.

In fact, some poems deal specifically with the qualities which Clare believed to be responsible for isolating him from his fellow men and directing him towards his poetic vocation. Basically, Clare felt that he had been endowed by Providence with a superior sensitivity towards the beauty of nature and the desire to encapsulate this in the form of verse. In the early sonnet, "On Taste", Clare singles out the quality which elevates him above his peers. "Taste" is not to be understood in its eighteenth-century sense in terms of literary discrimination, nor even as a product of nature which influences the mind; rather, it is a divine gift which informs nature herself and opens the eyes of privileged men to its workings. To the unenlightened "gross clown" - that is, the average unthinking rustic - taste is alien. Indeed, taste might almost be compared to the gift of salvation in Calvinistic theology, for it enables the believer to gain a new perspective on the world around him, while, to the uninitiated, the world appears to be a humdrum place:

TASTE is from heaven,
 An inspiration nature can't bestow;
 Though nature's beauties, where a taste is given,
 Warm the ideas of the soul to flow
 With that intense, enthusiastic glow
 That throbs the bosom, when the curious eye
 Glances on beauteous things that give delight,
 Objects of earth, or air, or sea, or sky,
 That bring the very senses in the sight
 To relish what we see: but all is night
 To the gross clown - nature's unfolded book,
 As on he blunders, never strikes his eye;
 Pages of landscape, tree, and flower, and brook,
 Like bare blank leaves, he turns unheeded by.

(Poems 1, 279)

In the slightly later "Shadows of Taste", a poem written in the eighteenth-century form of pentameter couplets, Clare expands on this idea. Here, Clare points out the connection between nature and the mind of a sensitive onlooker: it is taste which imparts the beauty and distinctiveness to nature's features:

Taste with as many hues doth hearts engage
 As leaves and flowers do upon nature's page
 Not mind alone the instinctive mood declares
 But birds and flowers and insects are its heirs...

(SPPJC, 112)

Some humble rustics do see these workings of taste in nature but are unable to articulate verbally what they have experienced: he cites a shepherd with "unlearned ken". But the vast majority of mankind are "mere savages", totally blind to natural beauty and they:

Pass over sweetest scenes a careless eye...

(SPPJC, 113)

To counterbalance this picture of the insensitivity of worldlings, Clare gives us a picture of "the man of science" - a man

who is able to appreciate nature's mysteries and who discerns beauty in the most unpromising spots:

But he the man of science and of taste
Sees wealth far richer in the worthless waste
Where bits of lichen and a sprig of moss
Will all the raptures of his mind engross...

(SPPJC, 115)

Furthermore, one of Clare's most firmly rooted convictions was that nature should be allowed to grow unhindered by human alterations or artifice. Left thus, she retains her innate spontaneity, disorder and integrity; the qualities which the creator intended her to have. But humans motivated by "self interest" (SPPJC, 115) and not by love of nature, would hew down vegetation and alter nature's contours to gratify their own ends, thus mutilating her. By herself, nature is a "wild eden" and only men such as the enclosers, spurred on by base economic ends, would desecrate her.

In turning to The Village Minstrel, Clare's first attempt at a long poem, we see an ambitious endeavour to give a panoramic view of rural life, embracing such diverse themes as enclosure, village festivities, nostalgia for childhood, the growth of a young poet and his alienation from his fellow villagers. The structure of the poem, which consists of 120 Spenserian stanzas, is well handled; ostensibly, the poem traces the growth to manhood of the peasant poet, Lubin. In fact, the focus constantly shifts away from him in order to describe various aspects of rural life and, unfortunately, the psychological development of the protagonist is inadequately dealt with: this is one of the poem's chief flaws. Nevertheless, the final third of the poem is strongly elegiac in tone and laments

the ravages caused by enclosure and the alienation of Lubin in his native village: thus, it becomes a thinly veiled projection of Clare's own unhappy experience in Helpston. As such, this section merits close attention, for it indicates unambiguously that, early in his career, Clare was beginning to feel estranged owing to the malicious gossip of the villagers. In the last five stanzas, Lubin appears as a clear alter-ego of Clare: a man given to wandering amid the countryside and shunning society:

Nor has his taste with manhood e'er declin'd;
You still may see him on his lonely way,
O'er stile or gate in thoughtful mood reclin'd;
Or 'long the road with folded arms to stray,
Mixing with autumn's sighs or summer gay;
And curious, nature's secrets to explore,
Brushing the twigs of woods or copse away,
To roam the lonely shade so silent o'er,
Sweet muttering all his joys where clowns intrude no more.

(SPJC, 56)

From his childhood, Lubin has aspirations to become a poet, yet, because of his low social status, these ambitions seem to have no prospect of being fulfilled:

Thus Lubin's early days did rugged roll,
And mixt in timely toil - but e'en as now,
Ambitious prospects fired his little soul,
And fancy soared and sung, 'bove poverty's control.

(SPJC, 27)

Significantly, fellow peasants berate his abilities and cruelly slander him:

'Mong many a foe his wild weeds ope to view,
And malice mocks him with a rude disdain;
Proving pretensions to the muse as vain,
They deem her talents far beyond his skill,...

(SPJC, 56)

The poem ends on a pessimistic and uncertain note. Lubin remains an isolated figure, full of vain hopes and derided by his contemporaries. This certainly seems to reflect Clare's fears about whether his own gifts would reap their reward or whether he too would succumb to the ravages of betrayal, denigration and antipathy:

Time's steady movements must her end decide,
And leave him painful still to hope the day,
And grope through ignorance his doubtful way,
By wisdom disregarded, fools annoy'd.
And if no worth anticipates the lay,
Then let his childish notions be destroy'd,
And he his time employ as erst it was employ'd.

(SPJC, 57)

Consonant with this mood of gloom about his personal fortunes is the emphasis upon the destruction of the poet's native landscape by enclosure. The impact of enclosure upon Clare's consciousness has already been alluded to; the worst effect was, from his viewpoint, the sweeping changes wrought upon the topography around Helpston. The village common, the open-field system and many beloved natural landmarks were banished forever. Clare complains in a number of poems about the greed of the enclosers, to whom the beauty of nature was a mere irrelevance and for whom the only value of the land was financial. A poignant stanza in The Village Minstrel amply illustrates this:

O dear delightful spots, his native place!
How Lubin look'd upon the days gone by;
How he, though young, would past delights retrace,
Bend o'er gull'd holes where stood his trees, and sigh,
With tears the while bemoist'ning in his eye;
How look'd he for the green, a green no more;
Mourning to scenes that made him no reply,
Save the strong accents they in memory bore,
'Our scenes that charm'd thy youth are dead, to bloom no more.'

(SPJC, 54)

The shock which enclosure imposed upon Clare's spirit cannot be overestimated. He saw it not only as a social evil which brought further hardship on the village, as "The Fallen Elm" (MC, 192) indicates, but even as a sacrilegious act that struck at the roots of man's kinship with nature. Moreover, it filled him with a deep sense of desolation and, as seen in the stanza quoted, rendered him a stranger in his own beloved terrain. This feeling of anguish is reverberated succinctly in a fine poem of this period to which I have already referred, "The Mores":

And sky bound mores in mangled garbs are left
Like mighty giants of their limbs bereft
Fence now meets fence in owners little bounds
Of field and meadow large as garden grounds
In little parcels little minds to please
With men and flocks imprisoned ill at ease...

(SPPJC, 170)

This feeling of disorientation left by enclosure is only paralleled by the shock produced in 1832 after Clare's move from Helpston to nearby Northborough, where, again, the change in topography is highly important.

In spite of the pessimism about his own solitary vocation as a poet and the damage done by enclosure, Clare was undeterred from pursuing the lone communing with nature that sustained and inspired him for most of his life. Indeed, several early poems follow the pattern of the loco-descriptive genre, in which the bard wanders through the countryside alone, describing its various attractions as he encounters them, and draws moralistic conclusions from these experiences. Unfortunately, this verse-form lends itself to

digressions and diffuseness and, for the most part, Clare found it difficult to resist these temptations. Even so, certain passages from the loco-descriptive poems convey movingly the solace and delight to be found in secluded nooks by a perceptive poet. The most notable poems in this genre include "Cowper Green" (Poems 1,174), "Recollections After A Ramble" (Poems 1,181) and "Solitude" (Poems 1,190).

These poems follow the pattern of a loosely connected series of images culled from the poet's rambles and finish with suitable philosophical conclusions. In these poems, the secluded regions of nature, untouched by the "spoiling axe" (Poems 1,176) of the enclosers, bear a virgin sanctity which lends them a primaeval innocence. Cowper Green is therefore a "sacred lonely spot" (Poems 1,179) reminiscent of Eden itself. Perhaps the most typical of these poems is entitled "Solitude": as the title suggests, the poem embodies Clare's deepest feelings about nature and solitude.

The poem employs the metre of Milton's "Il Penseroso" and bears certain superficial resemblances to its precursor: the use of the couplet form, the mood of relaxed contemplation and the use of a personified abstraction are broad points in common. However, Clare's poem deals characteristically with nature, solitude, worldly transience and the uplifting of the soul in a final vision of transcendence.

Solitude itself appears as a balm for the soul, a haven from the scorn and oppression which the poet meets in the world. Already,

the seeds of Clare's later misanthropic tendencies are being sown:

But when sorrows more oppress,
When the world brings more distress,
Wishing to despise as then
Brunts of fate, and scorn of men;
When fate's demons thus intrude,
Then I seek thee, Solitude ,...

(Poems, 1,195)

The paths through which Solitude, personified as his guiding spirit,
leads him are truly wild and unspoiled by man:

In such wildernesses, where
Ne'er an axe was heard to sound,
Or a tree's fall gulsh'd the ground,
Where (as if that spot could be)
First foot-mark'd the ground by me,
All is still, and wild, and gay,
Left as at creation's day. ...

(Poems 1,194)

Clare reflects on the pride and arrogance of his fellow men,
who forget their own transience and nature's permanence:

And man, to me a galling thing,
Own'd creation's lord and king,
A minute's length, a zephyr's breath,
Sport of fate, and prey of death,...

(Poems, 1,196)

Here, far from humankind, the poet views man and nature from a
true perspective: God's providential care for man is seen in
nature and in life's struggles:

Here I judge the world aright,
Here see vain man in his true light,
Learn patience, in this trying hour,
To gild life's brambles with a flower,
Take pattern from the hints thou'st given,
And follow in thy steps to heaven.

(Poems, 1,198)

The poem reveals Clare's heavy dependence upon the literary clichés of the previous century: the tetrameter couplet verse-form, the ruined abbey and the conventional sentiments about nature and solitude are typical of the tradition of reflective poetry. At the same time, however, the poem contains a number of Clare's characteristic preoccupations: the need to be separate from humanity is heavily stressed and the value placed upon the unspoiled Edenic wilderness is typical of him.

Clare's suspicion of the values and attitudes of men, underlined by his revulsion towards enclosure and his rejection at the hands of the villagers, surfaces in his finest long poem of the period, The Shepherd's Calendar, and in the satirical long poem, "The Parish". In The Shepherd's Calendar, Clare rejoices in the beauties of nature at various times of the year and presents fine vignettes of rural toil, but this is not the whole picture: there are also disturbing insights into the cruelty and barbarity of peasant life. Even in The Village Minstrel, Clare had given evidence of human quarrelling, animal baiting and gossiping; in "The Parish", (SPJC, 140) Clare gives pen-portraits of various local worthies who have exploited the poor and spread corruption since the enclosure of the area. The poem is fierce, almost hysterical, in its continual denunciation of gentry, farmers, justices and clergy who constitute the "meanest dregs of tyranny and crime" (SPJC, 140); the poem falls very much into the Augustan tradition of satire and, though some of its passages are deftly composed, the prolixity and the monotony of tone mar the work seriously as a whole. Nevertheless, it gives clear expression to Clare's feeling that society, as reflected in the microcosm of Helpston,

was becoming corrupt and self-seeking and that the average rural labourer was being converted into "oppression's humble slave" (SPJC, 140). In The Shepherd's Calendar, however, it is not simply the land-owning classes and the establishment who are guilty of evil and tyranny. In "August", impoverished boys are ill-treated by parsimonious women and small animals are brutally killed by peasants; in "May", birds are driven from their habitats and in "July", young girls are mocked by ribald swains. These incidents are presented with the minimum of comment and the evils are left to declare themselves; by this time, Clare had learned the value of restraint and understatement and he remains as a discreet observer of events for most of the poem. However, there is growing evidence of a loss of faith in the goodness of his fellow men and a sense that the happiness which characterized his youth in pre-enclosure Helpston was yielding to the selfishness of a new order, ~~that~~ included materialistic nouveaux riches, a corrupt officialdom and a benighted peasantry. A decade later, this darkening vision of humanity was to become demonic in character.

As indicated, Clare remains an unobtrusive observer throughout most of The Shepherd's Calendar, allowing his leisurely descriptions of rural life to speak for themselves. Basically, the poem follows in the well established tradition of Spenser's The Shepherd's Calendar, which spawned several similar works in the eighteenth-century, notably Gay's The Shepherd's Week. The moods of the seasons are reflected in each of the twelve months, and the slow pace and detailed descriptions of rural life express the perennial rhythms of the countryside. Clare employs a variety of verse-forms, but the overall

pace remains a slow, dignified one. Occasionally, the poet does intrude into the poem, as in "October", where Clare, having surveyed the teeming impressions of the month, then gives a gloomy self-portrait which is contrasted with the carefree innocence and spontaneous delight of a young boy:

These pictures linger thro the shortning day
And cheer the lone bards mellancholy way
And now and then a solitary boy
Journeying and muttering oer his dreams of joy

(SC, 115)

The figure of the solitary boy, engaged upon some carefree rural task such as cowtending or shepherding, appears a number of times in Clare's verse and harks back to his own past and his happy childhood experiences, which contrast strongly with the strife attendant upon adult life. Indeed, in "March", there is a remarkable passage which depicts a boy gazing in awe at the flocks of geese which fly far above him. His gaze is then drawn towards a solitary crane, which, in its starkness, reflects both the boy's isolation and that of the poet himself. The description is given an authentic freshness by the use of the dialect word "cranking":

He hears the wild geese gabble oer his head
And pleased wi fancys in his musings bred
He marks the figur d forms in which they flye ...
While far above the solitary crane
Swings lonly to unfrozen dykes again
Cranking a jarring m&llancholy cry
Thro' the wild journey of the cheerless sky...

(SC, 33)

While the images of isolation in The Shepherd's Calendar are carefully presented, a number of poems give vent far more directly to this theme. Indeed, a thinly disguised picture of Clare's isolation can be found in "The Fate of Genius", one of a group of poems known as "the Village Tales". These are gloomy narrative poems, drenched for the most part in almost Hardy-esque fatalism and dealing with morbid accounts of seduction and betrayal.

"The Fate of Genius" is indeed grimly ironic in that it foreshadows, in part, Clare's own fate, and possibly reflects the downfall and early death of the peasant poet, Robert Bloomfield. The poem deals with the meteoric rise to fame and untimely death of a lonely, misunderstood peasant poet. Despite its obtrusive pathos, as it eulogizes "the rustic genius from the darkness", the poem clearly articulates all of the problems that Clare faced in Helpston. The poet's behaviour even resembles Clare's own, as the village clerk testifies:

'I knew him from a child', the clerk would say,
 'And often noticed his dislike to play;
 Oft met him then, lone left by woods and streams,
 Muttering about as people do in dreams;...
 E'en children startled from his oddness ran,
 And shunn'd his wanderings as "the crazy man";
 Tho' harmless as the things he mix'd among -
 His ways were gentle and unknown to wrong....

(Poems 1,498)

The poet swiftly achieves fame as strangers purchase his verse and visit his humble "shed". But, soon, suspicious gossips disparage him and "black his merits with their lies" (Poems 1,499).

Finally, the sensitive poet pines away beneath the onslaught of cruel criticism and falls into neglect, eventually dying alone.

The epitaph on his tomb pays tribute, in its rather conventional way, to the lofty vocation of one who was too good to share life with merciless worldlings:

' "Here sleep the hopes of one whose glowing birth
Was found too warm for this unfeeling earth,..." ?

(Poems, 1,500)

The feelings of isolation to which this poem clearly gives expression are reflected in Clare's correspondence of the period, as a letter to John Taylor written in 1820 discloses. Clare's unhappiness at the lack of literary stimulus, his loneliness and his estrangement from his fellow villagers are well revealed:

I wish I livd nearer you at least I wish London
woud creep within 20 miles of Helpstone I don't
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-... I find more pleasure
in wandering the fields then in mixing among my silent
neighbours who are insensible of everyting but toiling...

(Letters, 132)

In some ways far more ominous than "The Fate of Genius" are two awesome apocalyptic poems, "The Dream" and "The Nightmare". Both are influenced by the Gothic literary tradition and, in fact, Clare openly acknowledged the inspiration of De Quincey's Confessions of an English Opium-Eater upon "The Dream" (See Poems, 408). In spite of the literary influences, however, both works have a firm genesis in nightmares which Clare had during the early 1820s. He suffered from bouts of depression and numerous physical ailments during this period, and the poems echo the insecurity of a troubled mind.

Uncertainties about his poetic vocation and fears of rejection by God, based upon a sense of failure and sinfulness, are clearly exposed. Furthermore, Clare described the conditions which led to the composition of "The Dream" in a way that demonstrates the extent of the severe mental and material pressures upon him and even foreshadows his later madness:

...I'm determin'd in the teeth of vexation to
surmount dissapointment by unwearied
struggles - under these feelings the dream
was written & that is the reason of their
explanation -...I mustn't do no more
terrible things yet they stir me up to such
a pitch that leaves a disrelish for my old
accustom'd wanderings after nature -...

(Letters, 132)

Even the writing of such poems disturbed him deeply, as this extract indicates. Of the two poems, "The Dream" is longer and more diffuse, though several passages contain imagery of a frightening intensity. Clare's spiritual and artistic insecurity and the horror of the fate which he envisages are conveyed in terrifying terms:

Stars drunk with dread rolled giddy from the heaven,
And staggering worlds like wrecks in storms were driven;
The pallid moon hung fluttering on the sight,
As startled bird whose wings are stretched for flight;...

(Poems 1,402)

This vision of universal destruction becomes so fearful that it assumes a vividness as strong as reality itself:

And midst the dreads of horror's mad extreme
I lost all notion of its being a dream:
Sinking, I fell through depths that seemed to be
As far from fathom as Eternity;...

(Poems 1,403)

Not only is the poet's own being threatened, but his beloved nature suffers annihilation:

The pleasant hues of woods and fields were past,
And nature's beauties had enjoyed their last:
The coloured flower, the green of field and tree,
What they had been for ever ceased to be:...

(Poems 1,401)

"The Nightmare" begins almost like a Chaucerian dream vision poem with a picture of a "sweet far land" and a mansion, in front of which pass large crowds. None of the crowd seems to acknowledge the poet until, suddenly, a beautiful blue-eyed woman, clad in flowing robes, approaches him and acts as his guide and companion, leading him to the mansion. As they approach the mansion, however, a strange noise is heard: this noise fills the crowd and the woman with trepidation. A bright light appears and the "music" reaches a crescendo. The mansion disintegrates and pandemonium ensues; at the last moment, even Clare's faithful guide vanishes, to be replaced by a hideous fiend:

Millions of hopes, hung on a spider's tie
'Tween time's suspense and fate's eternity,
Seemed cut at once, and all around the host
Felt at that moment if his own was lost;...

.....

(Poems 1,406)

And scarce I turned her desert flight to trace
Ere a foul fiend seemed standing in her place,
'Twas Mary's voice that hung in her farewell;
The sound that moment on my memory fell -
A sound that held the music of the past;...

(Poems 1,407)

The woman is thus explicitly identified as Mary; however, she **not only** reminds us of his adolescent love but probably acts as a symbol for his poetic muse, also. But it seems that neither love nor the muse can survive the dreadful onslaught upon his personality. Scenes of horror - "Huge circles lost to eyes" and "dead groans" - surround the poet. At this point, he awakes, but so deeply has the dream been imprinted upon his mind that it seems to foreshadow an objective reality:

Horror and joy and mystery when by
Seemed less of vision than reality,
A nightmare mystery of a sealing doom,
A feeble picture of the dread to come.

(Poems 1,408)

The appearance of the figure whom Clare names as Mary is most important. It shows that, as early as 1823, Clare was beginning to find in the memory of his childhood sweetheart one whom he could idealise and remove from the realm of earthly imperfection. The full deification of Mary does not occur until the High Beech period, but, already, Mary appears to be identified with what Jungians would call the "anima". According to the psychoanalyst, **Von** Franz, the anima figure:

... takes on the role of guide, or mediator,
to the world within...

(1)

A similar, though more optimistic dream, is recorded in a prose fragment entitled simply "The Dream" (Prose, 231), in which the anima figure once more appears, but this time directs Clare

to copies of his verse on a bookshelf. However, the disappearance of the anima in the poem, "The Dream", is obviously menacing and foretakens a sense of terrible isolation and the evanescence of Clare's spiritual and artistic vitality. Together, these two frightening poems give indications of the kinds of stresses which drove Clare to insanity in the 1830s.

One of the finest of Clare's early poems on isolation is again firmly anchored in an **unforgettable** experience. The lyric, "What is Life?", is a bleak meditation upon life's brevity and frailty, written in 1818. What elevates the poem far above the status of most of Clare's early reflective verse is its intensity, its aptly chosen imagery and careful construction. Moreover, a clear reference to the poem's composition is found in Clare's **prose writings**. It was written shortly after Clare's deception by the unscrupulous bookseller, J.B. Henson, who had **betrayed** a promise to help with the publication of some verse. At the time, Clare was finding it difficult to obtain work or to find recognition for his poetry. Also, he desperately needed to help his family out of their dire financial straits. He described the situation as follows:

...in one of these musings, my prosing thoughts lost themselves ~~in taking a view, as I sat beneath the~~ shelter of a woodland hedge, of my parents' distresses at home, and of my labouring so hard and so vainly to get out of debt, and of my still added perplexities of ill-timed love.

Striving to remedy all, and all to no purpose, I burst out in an exclamation of distress, "What is Life?" and instantly recollecting such a subject would be a good one for a poem, I hastily scatted down the first 2 verses of it,...

(Sketches, 76)

Hence, the poem springs directly from an incident in Clare's life; in this case, a highly unpleasant one. Certainly, it gives

confirmation, if any were needed, of the close links between Clare's life and his verse. The first stanza calls to mind the tone of the melancholy tradition in eighteenth-century verse, as it gloomily likens life to a catalogue of insubstantial entities. The poem's skilful construction, consisting, as it does, of an alternation of rhetorical question and answer, conveys the internal dialogue of a troubled mind with itself; the brief questions are given answers which employ haunting images of mist, dreams and bubbles to evoke life's transience:

And what is Life? an hour-glass on the run
A mist retreating from the morning sun
A busy bustling still repeated dream
Its length? A moment's pause, a moment's thought
And happiness? A bubble on the stream
That in the act of siezing shrinks to nought

(SPPJC, 6)

The second half of this stanza points to the fragility of all human hopes for self-betterment; these hopes are expressed in the bright images of "dewy lawn" and the "flowret of its gem", which are set against the frailty of the "Puffing gales", the "cobweb" and "thin disguise", in a well modulated antithesis:

Vain hopes-what are they? Puffing gales of morn
That of its charms divests the dewy lawn
And robs each flowret of its gem and dies
A cobweb hiding disappointments thorn
Which stings more keenly thro' the thin disguise

(SPPJC, 6)

Thus, life cannot be a "thing to be desir'd" and Clare reaches out towards death and the peace beyond the grave. The thinking of the poem is reminiscent of the gloomy religious verse of

Blair and Young. Moreover, the desire to escape from life's problems through death appears periodically in Clare's work and reaches its culmination in "I am" (SPPJC, 195). Hence, death appears to offer the best remedy for one who has been reduced to the straits of poverty and humiliation:

And what is death? Is still the cause unfound
The dark mysterious name of horrid sound
A long and ling'ring sleep the weary crave-
And peace - where can its happiness abound?
No where at all but Heaven and the grave

(SPPJC, 6)

From the earliest period of his poetic apprenticeship, Clare showed a sympathy for creatures which appeared to him to be particularly humble and frail, and fond of seclusion. Several poems, including the early "Address to a Lark" (Poems 1, 25), "The Robin" (SPJC, 8) and the fine sonnet "The Primrose" (SPJC, 24) all deal with nature's smaller denizens. Clare later developed to a high degree the art of describing small, vulnerable creatures. Indeed, there is sometimes an element of identification with the life of such creatures, for Clare felt that the qualities of humility and sensitivity, which he perceived in them, were vital for human beings. He, too, felt threatened by various enemies and frail in the face of life's vicissitudes; hence, he was well able to sympathize with such creatures. In the following decade, Clare developed this ability to its full extent in the bird and animal poems; in the asylum poem "Clock-a-Clay", he even progressed towards an empathic relationship with one creature (SPJC, 315).

In "To the Snipe", a poem from this period with an unusual stanzaic form, Clare succeeds admirably in conveying the unobtrusiveness of the bird and the value of solitude. The vocabulary reflects the influence of Wordsworth, notably in such expressions as "a dweller and a joy", "mystic indeed" and "habitual love". Overall, however, the poem bears Clare's unmistakable fingerprints. His fascination for the snipe lies in its eschewal of humankind and the aura of mystery which it thereby acquires:

Lover of swamps
The quagmire over grown
With hassock tufts of sedge—where fear encamps
Around thy home alone

(SPPJC, 69)

.....

And here mayhap
When summer suns hath drest
The moors rude desolate and spongy lap
May hide thy mystic nest

(SPPJC, 70)

By nesting in the "remotest shades", waterfowl thus gain a mystique of their own. Indeed, they seem to "dread/the very breath of man" (SPPJC, 70) and to seek lonely spots where they may live a self-contained existence. Such human foes as the "free booter" and "sculking fowler" threaten the birds but Clare believes that a "power divine" protects them, both against men and the harsh environment. His own motive for seeking the snipe's haunts is pure, for he feels that, by observing the habits of the birds, he will gain insight into nature's profoundest mysteries:

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

I see the sky
Smile on the meanest spot
Giving to all that creep or walk or flye
A calm and cordial lot

Thine teaches me
Right feelings to employ
That in the dreariest places peace will be
A dweller and a joy

(SPPJC, 71-2)

The last stanza carries a Wordsworthian insistence upon the capacity of nature to instruct men who are willing to learn her secrets. Furthermore, Clare feels an obvious sympathy for a creature which is harmless, yet harried by men, and which leads a tranquil life far from the human maelstrom.

Another highly important strand in Clare's isolation during this period is the sense of disappointment and desolation which he felt as a result of the parting between himself and Mary Joyce. For, the short-lived relationship between himself and Mary left an indelible impression upon him; as time passed, he came to hallow the relationship and to idealise Mary. Hence, the disappointment occasioned by his parting from Mary became part of a more generalised yearning for the past and the innocence of childhood in pre-enclosure Helpston. Clare's feelings for Patty never seem to have achieved the intensity of his prior love for Mary. This is further confirmed by the fact that Clare dreamed of a woman whom he identified as Mary, as we know from both the poem and the prose account entitled "The Dream". Clare's later belief that Mary was his first wife and Patty his second has deep psychological significance. For, both

women differed widely in appearance: Mary was light-skinned and fair-haired, whereas Patty was dark-haired and sensuous; Clare seemed to associate Mary with the artistic and spiritual longings which he felt, while Patty became associated with his physical needs. This dual aspect of the anima is a situation again familiar to Jungian psychologists.

Two interesting poems of the period clearly reveal the nature of Clare's feelings for Mary and articulate the sense of poignancy at their parting. In "Dedication to ****", Clare describes their mutual love of nature's solitudes:

O M**** thou that once made all
What youthful dreams could pleasure call
That once did love to walk with me
And own thy taste for scenery...

(SPPJC, 1)

Clare indicates that the relationship, in which, for once, he was able to find a person sensitive enough to appreciate the things which he most treasured, is no more. There is a plaintive tone of regret in sections of the poem as he realises that the shared happiness which he knew is now forever consigned to the past:

Thy voice so long in silence bound
To me that I forget the sound
And tho thy presence warms my theme
Like beauty floating in a dream.
Yet I will think that such may be
The buried secrets all to me
And if it be as hopes portray
Then will thy smiles like dews of heaven
Cheer my lone walks my toils repay
And all I ask be given

(SPPJC, 3)

The forlorn poet vainly hopes that her memory will linger with him but the reference to the "dreams" reveals how her physical presence is forever removed from him: only the intensely powerful image of her former presence remains.

It is indeed ironic that Clare wrote of another fine poem, which is entitled "Ballad: Where is the heart", that it would be the "last doggerel" ever to speak of Mary (Letters, 123). Ostensibly, the poem represents a farewell to a lover, and the words "Fare thee well" chime lugubriously at the end of each stanza. The poem beautifully articulates the tension in his mind, for, though he knows that he and Mary are "parted now" and "no more to meet", such are his feelings for her that he is unable to reconcile himself to the fact:

We met, we loved, we've met the last,
The farewell word is spoken;
O Mary, canst thou feel the past
And keep thy heart unbroken?
To think how warm we loved, and how
Those hopes should blossom never;
To think how we are parted now,
And parted, oh, for ever -
Fare thee well.

(Poems 2, 77)

The ~~last~~ stanza contains a surprisingly blunt admission of the split in Clare's loyalties between Mary and Patty. While recognising that there is no possibility of renewing the relationship with the former, Clare affirms that she will always hold the larger part of his affections. Moreover, the poem aptly presages the exalted function with which he would endow Mary's memory in the later verse:

Thou wert the first my heart to win,
 Thou art the last to wear it;
 And though another claims a kin,
 Thou must be one to share it.
 Oh, had we known when hopes were sweet
 That hopes would once be thwarted,
 That we should part, no more to meet,
 How sadly we had parted!
 Fare thee well.

(Poems, 2, 77)

The escapist tendency which we have already seen emerging in Clare's early verse - the desire to relive past joys and to return to an age of innocence away from the corruption of men - is aptly summarized in the sonnet, "The Happiness of Ignorance". It plainly illustrates the more dangerous side of Clare's desire to escape from civilisation and to live in an entirely isolated world. There is an almost Rousseauesque belief that a primitive existence lived away from civilisation is preferable to the one which most men lead in their corrupt world. Society is thus seen as detrimental to the individual's integrity. Clare postulates a pre-lapsarian existence in which he would grow up without human contacts and be reared, like Romulus and Remus, by wild beasts. It is indeed disturbing that so early in his career, Clare should have felt such yearnings for an isolated existence and manifested such profound cynicism about society:

Ere I had known the world & understood
 How many follies wisdom names its own
 Distinguishing things evil from things good
 The dread of sin & death - ere I had known
 Knowledge the root of evil - had I been
 Left in some lone place where the world is wild
 & trace of troubling man was never seen
 Brought up by nature as her favourite child
 As born for nought but joy where all rejoice
 Em-paradised in ignorance of sin
 Where nature tries with never chiding voice
 Like tender nurse nought but our smiles to win
 The future dreamless beautiful would be
 The present - foretaste of eternity

(MC, 438)

From this survey of Clare's earlier verse, the complexity of his sense of isolation and its dependence upon various biographical and temperamental factors becomes apparent. His innate love of solitary rambling, his mistrust of the blindness and insensitivity of his fellow peasants, not to mention their sometimes appalling cruelty, made him feel a stranger in his own village. The unfortunate relationship with Mary Joyce filled him with the disturbing sense that he had lost the best love of his life and the only woman with whom he could establish a deeply satisfying relationship. The banishment of the open-field system in Helpston created in him a yearning for the vanished happiness of the past. Further, periodic illness and depression during the early 1820s, combined with a nervous sense of his own sinfulness that may have arisen partly through contact with fervent Christians, filled him with a deep spiritual malaise. His longing for a past full of innocence and joy, in which the landscape was unspoiled and society uncorrupted, left him greatly at odds with his fellow men. His primary consolation was derived from the re-creation of this happiness in the form of verse. Unpleasant experiences with publishers and flatterers during the decade did much to deepen this plight: not even the four visits to London could alleviate his isolation for long.

Chapter Two - Endnotes

(1) M.-L. von Franz, "The Process of Individuation",
from C.G. Jung ed. Man and his Symbols, London, 1978, p. 193

The period of 1824 - 36 represents Clare's coming to maturity as a poet and some of his finest nature poetry emerged during it. Indeed, it is remarkable, in view of the stresses which he underwent during these years, that so much of the verse from the period reflects the joy which he derived from long rambles and from the close observation of secluded birds and animals. Mention has already been made of the various pressures which he endured during this period: various illnesses, problems with his publishers Taylor and Hessey, an unfortunate affair, a family which swelled to include seven children and the financial worries attendant on this, all combined to make life very difficult for him. The fund set up by Taylor, Lord Radstock and Mrs Emerson was not sufficient to provide for his needs; even worse, Clare was, in effect, deprived of a publisher following the termination of the publishing company of Taylor and Hessey in 1825. He was unable to find a publisher for his projected volume, The Midsummer Cushion, and, during the late 1820s, he was reduced to attempting to sell his verse by door-to-door hawking. After the termination of his publishers' partnership, no more literary dinners were held, thus depriving Clare of the opportunity of meeting many old acquaintances when he visited London for the last time in 1828. The literary friendships which he made in London began to fade as his correspondence went unanswered. By 1830, Clare would write despairingly to Taylor of the isolation which he suffered in Helpston:

There is nothing that would give me more pleasure than the revival of our correspondence but as the fault is not mine I cannot mend it... I look upon the early acquaintance which my rhyming trifles provided me as constituting the happiest period of my life I wish nothing had broken in upon those associations for they had grown as dear to me as my own fireside ... where is Darley he never writes & Dewint the I have written two letters to him (he) never noticed them...

(Letters, 247-8)

Even near the time of the move to Northborough, Clare still felt isolated, and felt he was living in an area:

...overflowing with obscurity & vulgarity far away from taste & books & friends...

(Letters, 257)

Clare did, it is true, have a few trusted friends in the Northamptonshire area. His letters of the 1820s refer to such friends as Tom Porter, who was responsible for showing his verse to Drury in 1818, Edward Artis, the famous butler-archaeologist, whom Clare assisted on some excavations, and Thomas Henderson, a keen gardener and naturalist. He maintained contact with the notorious Billings brothers and also, farther afield, with Bishop Marsh of Peterborough. On the other hand, his good friend Octavius Gilchrist died in 1823, and Edward Drury moved away from Stamford the year before. Hence, there is no doubt that Clare was greatly deprived of literary friends in his own area for most of the 1820s onwards. His move to Northborough did nothing to mitigate this situation and, indeed, placed him in a worse position financially. Furthermore, Clare suffered fresh misfortunes with the death of one of his children, (See Letters, 282 and 362) then the death of his mother in 1835, an event which may have contributed to the final collapse of his sanity.

As previously indicated, however, it is impossible to ignore the more beneficial features of Clare's isolation and his solitary rambling. He was able to give detailed attention to the writing of verse, and solitude furnished the vital stimulus for much of his creativity, as The Midsummer Cushion and The Rural Muse indicate. Indeed, the word "joy" appears in poem after poem of the 1820s, as Clare celebrates the delights of the wildlife that he encounters. Nowhere is this joy more evident than in "Summer Images", a carefully crafted poem, whose imagery is Keatsian in its lushness. To Clare, joy was not a superficial or transient feeling but a deeply satisfying aesthetic and spiritual pleasure, which illuminated his whole being: such a feeling as Wordsworth described as "the deep power of joy".⁽¹⁾ As its title suggests, "Summer Images" consists of a series of vignettes of the landscape and rural life; the dominant mood is one of quiet and contentment amid scenes which far surpass those of the noisy city. In spite of his rewarding visits to London, Clare could never forsake nature, the taproot of his inspiration:

Me not the noise of brawling pleasures cheer
 In nightly revels or in city streets
 But joys which sooth: and not distract mine ear
 That one at leisure meets
 In the green woods and meadows summer shorn
 Or fields where bee flye greets
 Ones ear with mellow horn

(SPPJC, 146)

Eschewing mankind's haunts, the poet seeks "spots solitude provides" for undisturbed contemplation. In observing nature, he sees that wildlife possesses its own "inscape", as Hopkins would term it: each plant and animal has unique traits which endow it

with individuality. Indeed, in simply being themselves and fulfilling their humble purpose within the ecological framework, nature's creatures gain a joy which careworn or self-centred men lack - a joy which only sensitive souls can appreciate:

Where speckled thrush by self delight embued
Singeth unto himself for joys amends
And drinks the honey dew of solitude
Where happiness attends
With inbred joy untill his heart oerflows
Of which the worlds rude friends
Nought heeding nothing knows

(SPPJC, 146)

Moreover, the solitudes of nature teach the poet a deeper lesson than that of mere passive enjoyment of her features. For, nature is seen not merely as an aggregate of plants and animals but as the repository of the deity's beauty and wisdom. Hence, the man who loves nature and is in tune with her values will receive the same benefits of grace and happiness as a religious believer.

"The Voice of Nature" resoundingly proclaims this truth:

There is a page in which that voice aloud
Speaks music to the few and not the crowd;
Though no romantic scenes my feet have trod,
The voice of nature as the voice of God
Appeals to me in every tree and flower,
Breathing his glory, magnitude and power....

(SPJC, 185)

Here, then, Clare shows the same capacity as Wordsworth to detect "a sense sublime/Of something far more deeply interfused" (2) behind the outer workings of nature. Amongst the boons which she gives to the believer are "joy", "magic spells" and "happy tidings" (SPJC, 185).

Woodlands, in particular, seem to have provided favourite haunts for observation and rumination: such poems as "The Woods" (MC, 260), "Walks in the Woods" (MC, 280) and "Wood Rides" (MC, 490) certainly indicate as much. Nowhere is the healing influence of solitude and its catalytic influence upon poetic creativity so clearly seen as in "The Woods":

No human eye is visible
No human sound attracts
The ear - but musing solitude
One unembodied thought
Thinks the heart into stillness as the world
Was left behind for something green & new

& lonely - & I've thought
In such a spot to build
An hermitage or hut
With books & leisure left
How sweet t'would be but then again
I've turned to my old home & felt it vain

(MC, 260)

In the sonnet, "Pastoral Fancies", Clare recounts in some detail the benefits to be acquired from solitude. These include relaxation for the mind and a true sense of compensation for the hardships of life:

Bidding a long farewell to every trouble,
The envy and the hate of evil men;
Feeling cares lessen, happiness redouble,
And all I lost as if 'twere found agen.
Vain life unseen; the past alone known then:
No worldly intercourse my mind should have,
To lure me backward to its crowded den;...

(Poems, 2, 16)

In "Emmonsales Heath", by contrast, Clare points out how the neglect of nature's attractions by his insensitive, self-centred

contemporaries has unfortunate repercussions for them. For, their finer faculties, both aesthetic and spiritual, become atrophied owing to their neglect of nature and poesy:

His heart is dead to quiet hours
No love his mind employs
Poesy with him neer shares its flowers
Nor solitude its joys

(SPPJC, 168)

An idea which becomes closely connected with Clare's sense of isolation during the 1820s is that of fame. To Clare, "fame" did not mean transient popularity such as he enjoyed after the publication of his first volume. Rather, he believed that the artist who wished to achieve lasting renown and to be remembered by succeeding generations would be a man with the determination to avoid the whimsical fashions of popular literary taste. True artists would be men who cherished eternal values: those of love, nature, poesy and solitude; they would never stoop to alter their styles or subject-matter to win short-lived praise or make speedy financial gains. However, for the artist who embarks upon such an arduous path, there are many obstacles: he must be prepared to face neglect, disparagement and ridicule in order to preserve his integrity and to continue writing verse of real value. This, of course, was the perilous path which Clare chose.

In the rather long and loosely structured poem, "The Progress of Rhyme", Clare illustrates how an artist dedicated to eternal values will find the courage and motivation to continue writing:

No not a friend on earth had I
But my own kin and poesy
Nor wealth - and yet I felt indeed
As rich as any body need
To be - for health and hope and joy
Was mine altho a lonely boy
And what I felt - as now I sing
Made friends of all and every thing
Save man the vulgar and the low...

(SPPJC, 124)

This personal testimony to his own trials is echoed on a more general level in a number of sonnets concerning fame, written during the 1820s. In "Merit", Clare boldly asserts that true artistic talent must rise above all criticism and derision to vindicate itself. The solar image deftly reinforces the ultimate assurance of victory for merit:

So from the throws of envy hate & strife
Genius bursts forth & breaths eternal life
In vain the taunt would blight the scoff would sere
Like cobweb network falls the gibe & sneer
& genius like a sunburst from the cloud
Throws forth her light her mind is heard aloud...

(MC, 447)

In the second of two sonnets entitled "To the Memory of Bloomfield", Clare praises one of his favourite poets for his selfless dedication to true artistic endeavour:

Sweet unassuming minstrel not to thee
The dazzling fashions of the day belong
Natures wild pictures field & cloud & tree
& quiet brooks far distant from the throng...

(MC, 397)

In the sonnets, "Honesty" and "Slander", Clare exposes the evils to which genius is subjected. In "Slander", there is a very personal note, as if he is recalling his own treatment in Helpston:

It feeds upon the honours of the great
It mars the reputation of the just
It eats its being into worths estate
& levels all distinctions in the dust...

(MC, 413)

In "Honesty", Clare affirms the durability of this virtue, which he prized so greatly in the face of evil:

Cant hates it-hypocrites condemn it - & the herd
Seeking self interest frown & pass it bye
Tis trampled on - tis bantered - & deterred
Tis scoffed - & mocked at - yet it doth not die...

(MC, 411)

Yet, although he praises the value of true fame in some sonnets and criticizes "Gilt fashions follis" in "To A Poet" (MC, 107), Clare is not wholly unequivocal about fame's ultimate value. The sonnets, "Fame" and "Vanity of Fame", reach the sad conclusion that all the toil which has gone into the production of great literature is in vain; for, sadly, fame is not an adequate compensation for the herculean creative efforts made by the artist and for his ultimate effacement by death. In "Fame", fame itself is likened to a series of hollow, insubstantial entities: a sun in "solitary glory" shining on a withered land, a dream, an echo of a dead man's voice and a cold, unfeeling stone statue. In all, it is a feeble remnant of a person's true worth:

A picture that from all eyes praise is stealing
A statue towering over glory's game
That cannot feel while he that was all feeling
Is past & gone & nothing but a name

(MC, 396)

In "Vanity Of Fame", Clare arrives at the grim conclusion that the annals of fame are far too large and thus they cannot ensure that an artist will be remembered in the future. As time passes, so many names are entered into the annals that fame is eventually degraded to the status of mere popularity; sadly, the combined weight of human genius over the ages will bury the artist's name:

... to think ones name
Buoyant with visions of eternity
& as familiar now in the world's ear
As flowers & sunshine to the summer's eye
Shall be forgot with other things that were
& like old words grown out of use thrown by
In the confused lap of still obscurity

(MC, 395)

However, it is not merely the fate of the lonely genius endeavouring to preserve his fame in the face of opposition which is important in this period. The darker side of love, and the sense of isolation left in its aftermath, is a highly significant theme, as "Adieu To My False Love Forever" (Poems 2, 152) and "Love Scorned By Pride" (Poems 2, 161) indicate. Far more impressive than either of these bleak tales, however, is the magnificent "First Loves Recollections". This lyric captures, above all others, Clare's sense of loss as a result of his parting from Mary and his failure to be reconciled to this loss. Here, the tension between the mental impression of the girl's beauty and the void left by her physical absence, is skilfully counterpointed. The poet confesses

guilt that he should still feel so strongly about his lover: his sorrow is heightened by the transient images of dreams, shadows and blossoms:

FIRST love will with the heart remain
When all its hopes are bye
As frail rose blossoms still retain
Their fragrance till they die
And joys first dreams will haunt the mind
With shadows whence they sprung
As summer leaves the stems behind
On which springs blossoms hung

(SPPJC, 43-44)

The poet realises that he has "lost ~~that right~~" to call her his lover: but his guilt for this is offset by the more disturbing sensation that in some way his mental image of her is fading with the insidious passage of time:

Thy face was so familiar grown
Thy self so often nigh
A moments memory when alone
Would bring thee to mine eye
But now my very dreams forget
That witching look to trace
Though there thy beauty lingers yet
It wears a strangers face

(SPPJC, 44)

The only consolation offered to the poet in the final stanza is that their parting is merely one comparatively minor tragedy in the midst of life's sadness:

When last thy gentle cheek I prest
And heard thee feign adieu
I little thought that seeming jest
Would prove a word so true
A fate like this hath oft befell
Even loftier hopes then ours
Spring bids full many buds to swell
That neer can grow to flowers

(SPPJC, 45)

Equally as fine as "First Loves Recollections" is the deftly crafted lyric "Love and Memory". It is an elegy for a dead companion which combines a haunting rhythm and simplicity of diction with a profound gravity of tone. Though it contains no mention of this person's name, it powerfully conveys the tensions which Clare experienced in his grief: a present bereft of the beloved's presence, a past filled with joy and the hollow comfort that his love is at least safe in eternity's realm:

THOU art gone the dark journey
That leaves no returning
Tis fruitless to mourn thee
But who can help mourning
To think of the life
That did laugh on thy brow
In the beautiful past
Left so desolate now

(SPPJC, 33)

The fact that his love is at peace cannot assuage his sorrow, because he cannot find his own peace of mind:

Yet thy love shed upon me
Life more than my own
And now thou art from me
My being is gone
Words know not my grief
Thus without thee to dwell
Yet in one I felt all
When life bade thee farewell

(SPPJC, 35-6)

Some comment upon Clare's sensitivity towards any form of change has already been made. Clare's reaction to the enclosure of Helpston was truly a severe one, and it was the changes to the topography which he found most distressing. In 1832, however, Clare took the opportunity to move with his large family away from

his beloved native Helpston to a cottage provided for him by one of his patrons, Lord Milton, at nearby Northborough. The hope amongst Clare and his friends was that he would be able to establish himself as an independent farmer and improve his unenviable financial situation. Before the move, he was brimful of enthusiasm and he wrote that he aspired to become "independant of all but old friends & good health" (Letters, 258). But Clare's illusions of a more prosperous life were quickly dispelled: the burden of seven children, growing ill-health and financial worries rapidly saw to that. Furthermore, the change in environment, even over such a small distance, was enough to affect Clare deeply, filling him with disorientation and separating him from the scenes in which he had grown to manhood and experienced joyful events. Only a few months after the move, Clare wrote plaintively to Taylor in September 1832, explaining how his hopes had been overturned:

I feel the situation in which difficulty places me dreadfully but as my staff of independance is broken by that accident that nobody foresees viz. a large family... I must do as I can...

If Mr. Woodhouse is returned do your earliest opportunity to serve me for I am as helpless as a child & every thing is going wrong with me.

(Letters, 269-70)

This note of pathos is echoed by an earlier letter in which Clare speaks of the mental barrier which he had to overcome in making the move: seldom is his almost animistic kinship with nature so strongly and eloquently stated as here:

... I have had some difficulties to leave
the woods & heaths & favourite spots that
have known me so long for the very molehills
on the heath & the old trees in the hedges
seem bidding me farewell... & altho my flitting is
not above three miles off--there is neither wood nor
heath furze bush molehill or oak tree about it...

(Letters, 258)

The fact that nature's features appeared to be reciprocating
his sorrow, because they knew the poet personally, gives a
remarkable insight into Clare's sense of organic unity with nature.

These feelings are superbly expressed in a long poem written
after Clare's departure from Helpston and entitled "The Flitting".
Here, his dismay and sense of deracination are clearly formulated.
The personal nature of the loss is reinforced by the fact that
eight of the ~~twenty~~ twenty-seven tetrameter stanzas begin with the
pronoun "I":

IVE left my own old home of homes
Green fields and every pleasant place
The summer like a stranger comes
I pause and hardly know her face
I miss the hazels happy green
The blue bells quiet hanging blooms
Where envy's sneer was never seen
Where staring malice never comes

(SPPJC, 176)

The sense of loss is too powerful for it to degenerate into
mere sentimentality; indeed, in the seventh stanza, he declares
that his yearning for his former home is not simply homesickness
but a sense of loss which has wounded his whole poetic sensibility:

Alone and in a stranger scene
Far from spots my heart esteems
The closen with their ancient green
Heath woods and pastures sunny streams
The hawthorns here were hung with may
But still they seem in deader green
The sun een seems to lose its way
Nor knows the quarter it is in

(SPPJC, 177)

The poem carries a feature very characteristic of Clare's verse: the sense that the innocent joys of the past are gone, never to be recovered. In a stanza very reminiscent of the letter quoted overleaf, Clare shows how he has been deprived of old companions who were able to communicate with him far more meaningfully than most humans:

No - pasture molehills used to lie
And talk to me of sunny days
And then the glad sheep resting bye
All still in ruminating praise
Of summer and the pleasant place
And every weed and blossom too
Was looking upward in my face
With friendship welcome 'how do ye do'

(SPPJC, 179)

There was a suggestion that the old landscape was endowed with an Edenic innocence and, later, this is made explicit: plants are greeted as the heirs of a lost paradise:

All tennants of an ancient place
And heirs of noble heritage
Coeval they with adams race
And blest with more substantial age
For when the world first saw the sun
These little flowers beheld him too
And then his love for earth begun
They were the first his smiles to woo

(SPPJC, 180)

Northborough, however, is an entirely foreign land:

Here every tree is strange to me
All foreign things where ere I go
Theres none where boyhood made a swee
Or clambered up to rob a crow...

(SPPJC, 179)

Towards the end of the poem, Clare makes a resounding declaration of his love of nature, which extends to all of her manifestations:

I feel at times a love and joy
For every weed and every thing
A feeling kindred from a boy
A feeling brought with every spring

(SPPJC, 181)

The repetition of the word "feel" indicates the profundity of his attachment to nature. Yet, the poem does not end in a wholly pessimistic manner; for, as the lines quoted immediately above indicate, nature's benign, though outwardly less attractive appearance in Northborough gives the promise of new comfort and companionship, in spite of changes in topography and human affections:

The ivy at the parlour end
The woodbine at the garden gate
Are all and each affections friend
That renders parting desolate
But times will change and friends must part
And nature still can make amends
Their memory lingers round the heart
Like life whose essence is its friends

(SPPJC, 182)

This note of hope is not mirrored in another slightly earlier poem, "Decay". This is a far more generalised lament than "The Flitting", as the title suggests. Probably written before the removal, it records a far more frightening and damaging sense of loss. It can even be compared with "Dejection: An Ode" by Coleridge, in terms of its sense of the loss of creativity, although it lacks the tautness and philosophical complexity of the latter. "Decay" is an elegy for what Clare felt to be the waning of his creative powers, and it records a mood of despair in which he sensed that the his whole imaginative being had become drained and barren. Poesy is here, as elsewhere in Romantic poetry, synonymous with the power of poetic imagination. What is so alarming in the poem is the feeling that, concomitant with the loss of poesy, there is a resultant deadening and distortion of the poet's perception of reality:

O ~~POESY~~ is on the wane
For fancys visions all unfitting
I hardly know her face again
Nature herself seems on the flitting
The fields grow old and common things
The grass the sky the winds a blowing
And spots where still a beauty clings
Are sighing 'going all a going'
O ~~poesy~~ is on the wane
I hardly know her face again

(SPPJC, 182)

Throughout the poem, the final couplet of each ten-line stanza provides a dirge-like refrain which re-emphasizes the burden of his loss and its deadening effect upon his faculties. In the earlier "Pastoral Poesy", Clare had dealt with the concept of poesy at length, showing that it is a power which informs both consciousness and the natural world, enriching the whole continuum of life:

& such is poesy its power
May varied lights employ
Yet to all mind it gives the dower
Of self creating joy

(MC, 291-2)

Without it, however, he is unable to detect the corresponding
immanence of poesy in nature:

The bank with brambles over spread
And little molehills round about it
Was more to me then laurel shades
With paths and gravel finely clouted
And streaking here and streaking there
Through shaven grass and many a border
With rutty lanes had no compare
And heaths were in a richer order
But poesy is in its wane
I hardly know her face again

(SPPJC, 182-3)

Indeed, just as he was unable to explain why fields seemed
more "then edens", so now he is at a loss to comprehend the waning
of his own powers; he only feels the cosmic sense of disorientation
which this loss has engendered:

These heavens are gone-the mountains grey
Turned mist-the sun a homeless ranger
Pursues a naked weary way
Unnoticed like a very stranger
O poesy is on its wane
Nor love nor joy is mine again

(SPPJC, 183)

This sense of loss is all the more fearsome because of its
completeness; it affects the poet's most cherished values: "love"
and "joy", the mainsprings of his existence, are banished without
poesy's presence and the recollection of the past becomes sheer agony:

The stream it is a naked stream
Where we on sundays used to ramble
The sky hangs oer a broken dream
The brambles dwindled to a bramble
O poesy is on its wane
I cannot find her haunts again

(SPPJC, 183)

The last stanza offers not a shred of hope for the future: he cannot visualize any rekindling of the spirit of poesy within him. Thus, his whole life is blighted and, as Coleridge would have put it, his "genial spirits" have failed; love and friendship are seen as deceptive snares and hope becomes an empty illusion. The poem concludes with a desperate but seemingly vain plea for the return of poesy:

And friendship it hath burned away
Just like a very ember cooling
A make believe on april day
That sent the simple heart a fooling
Mere jesting in an earnest way
Decieving on and still decieving
And hope is but a fancy play
And joy the art of true believing
For poesy is on the wane
O could I feel her faith again

(SPPJC, 184)

We have already noted Clare's ability to create in rich detail the profusion of natural life and to sympathize with small creatures in their secluded haunts. Clare developed this ability to a high degree in his bird poems and sonnets of the late 1820s and early 1830s. In these poems, Clare is at pains to record the intimate details of birdlife and to reveal its frailty and vulnerability in the face of man's inroads. Clare is especially impressed by birds which shun man's activities and lead their own secretive,

self-contained existence in the wilderness. "Lone Happiness"
aptly summarizes Clare's attraction towards such isolated creatures:

'~~THESE~~ birds, how happy must they be!
I muttered, as I reached to pull
The woodbine twisting round the tree
In spots so wild and beautiful;

(Poems, 2, 238)

.....

I see-and from the world away
I feel what she can never give,
So happy at my heart to-day
That from the world I wish to live.

(Poems, 2, 239)

The lone sand martin holds great interest for Clare, since it
nests in the least promising spots, following some strange,
unfathomable instinct. Its love of isolation mirrors Clare's
own and encourages him to enjoy a world-denying way of life:

Thou hermit haunter of the lonely glen
& common wild & heath-the desolate face
Of rude waste landscapes far away from men...
I've 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

(MC, 460)

This ability to sympathize and even to identify with creatures
which are especially fragile and in danger from humans is seen to its
full effect in a series of terrifying animal poems of the 1830s.
During the period of 1835-7, Clare's health underwent a steep
decline but he continued to write and to express an increasingly

gloomy vision of the callousness and barbarism of man. The seeds of this attitude had, of course, been with him for years, but now it mushroomed into its full ugliness. The most notable poems which illustrate this vision are the justly acclaimed "The Badger" (SPPJC, 84), "The Fox" (SPPJC, 87), "The Marten" (SPPJC, 86) and "The Hedgehog" (SPPJC, 88). In "The Badger", Clare recounts the plight of a lone, courageous badger, hounded from his den by mindless worldlings and baited by men and animals. In spite of the impossible odds, the badger makes a brave stand against a large host of adversaries until they finally sate their sadistic impulses by killing him. Clare's sympathy for the badger is achieved by masterly understatement:

He drives away and beats them every one
And then they loose them all and set them on
He falls as dead and kicked by boys and men
Then starts and grins and drives the crowd agen
Till kicked and torn and beaten out he lies
And leaves his hold and cackles groans and dies

(SPPJC, 86)

In a poem entitled "The Hedgehog", Clare stresses the strangeness and innocuousness of the hedgehog, which is killed by gypsies and served as food, in spite of its unpalatability. The first section is remarkable for its sudden change of pronoun from "he" to "it", revealing how selfish humans degrade nature's creatures to mere instruments for their pleasure:

He makes a nest and fills it full of fruit
On the hedge bottom hunts for crabs and eeloes
And whistles like a cricket as he goes
It rolls up like a ball or shapeless hog
When gipseys hunt it with their noisey dogs
I've seen it in their camps they call it sweet
Though black and bitter and unsavoury meat

(SPPJC, 88)

The second section reveals the folly of hunters who relentlessly pursue the harmless "unsavoury" creature. The last line of the poem stands as a genuine cri de coeur from a poet weary of the horrors which his fellow men unleash upon nature and each other:

But still they hunt the hedges all about
And shepherd dogs are trained to hunt them out
They hurl with savage force the stick and stone
And no one cares and still the strife goes on

(SPPJC, 89)

"The Destroyer", a short poem in pentameter couplets, highlights even more succinctly man's violent instincts and explains the reasons for Clare's estrangement from humanity. There is a sharp and striking contrast between the Chaucerian richness of its opening:

IN suns and showers luxuriant May came forth
And spread her riches as of nothing worth,
Cowslips and daisies, buttercups and crowds
Without a name as if they dropt from clouds,...

(Poems 2, 283)

and the blind destructiveness of a shepherd who unwittingly crushes this beauty:

The simple shepherd in his early hour
With almost every footstep crushed a flower.
The winds did all they could, though oft in vain,
To raise and form them on their stalks again,
Yet some were crushed so much they could not rise,
Finding in poet's heart a room for sighs....

(Poems 2, 283)

By contrast, the shepherd's dog treads the grass and it springs erect again. Thus, Clare demonstrates how "harm falls most in man's destroying way". True, the damage here is unpremeditated but it is

symptomatic of man's deleterious relationship with nature. The last four lines signal that man's evil is not localised but more menacing, because it is all-pervasive. The unusual image of the tigers and the alliterated "h" all combine to evoke the savagery of man. Despite his superior intelligence and moral instincts, man in fact lowers himself to a standard below that of the beasts:

And who could think in such a lovely time
And such a spot, where quiet seemed in prime,
As nê'er to be disturbed, that strife and fear
Like crouching tigers had howled havoc here?

(Poems, 2, 283)

A number of poems also point clearly to a sense not only of separation from the cruel maelstrom of humanity but also to a profound existential isolation. One of the most remarkable of these is "The Stranger", which, interestingly enough, is one of the few poems by Clare whose theme is strongly influenced by the portrait of Jesus in the gospels. Unusually, the poem deals directly with the person of Christ and his rejection by men; generally, Clare seemed to be more attracted to the sterner image of God presented in parts of the Old Testament, where holiness, judgement and awesome power are sometimes foremost in the picture of Jehovah that is revealed. His choice of psalms for paraphrasing would certainly seem to indicate this - at least in those of the 1840s. Also, of course, Clare more frequently sought experience of God through His handiwork in nature. Here, however, he adopts an orthodox theological approach to this subject, giving special emphasis to the suffering and rejection of Christ by his fellow men. The title itself - "The Stranger" - automatically suggests one whose values and lifestyle differ totally

from those around him. Not surprisingly, there is a strongly implied identification with the "outcast" and "fugitive" Christ. This is clearly brought home by the fact that the first three stanzas concentrate not upon Jesus, but upon the poet's own sufferings:

When pain disturbs my peace and rest,
Am I hopeless grief to keep,
When some have slept on torture's breast
And smiled as in the sweetest sleep,
Ay, peace on thorns, in faith forgiven,
And pillowed on the hope of heaven?

(Poems 2, 275)

Clare derives solace from the fact that Christ's lot was even more unpleasant than his own. Clare sees himself as "low" and "broken down", whereas Christ, in his humility and patience, is the very archetype of downtrodden wretches:

Ay, once a stranger blest the earth
Who never caused a heart to mourn,
Whose very voice gave sorrow mirth-
And how did earth his worth return?
It spurned him from its lowliest lot,
The meanest station owned him not;

(Poems 2, 275)

This perhaps echoes Clare's own rejection at the hands of his fellow villagers and the eventual neglect by London acquaintances. Indeed, in the fifth stanza, Christ is a "homeless wanderer", almost like a Solitary figure:

An outcast thrown in sorrow's way,
A fugitive that knew no sin,
Yet in lone places forced to stray-
Men would not take the stranger in....

(Poems 2, 275)

As we recall Clare's isolation and inoffensiveness, and his own love for "lone places", the attractiveness of the figure of Christ becomes clear. Christ is a friend of "the feeble", "the world-imprisoned" and "the weary" (Poems 2, 276). It is some consolation to Clare that God's own son, the embodiment of values which Clare admired, should suffer misfortune and isolation to such a degree. Following his escape from High Beech, Clare himself was transformed into a homeless wanderer, engaged upon a forlorn but noble quest. Moreover, it is the intensely personal feeling and sincerity of the poem which prevent it from lapsing into conventional pietism.

In a similar vein, "The Outcast," another poem from the troubled period of 1835-7, deals with an impoverished, mentally retarded outcast who wanders through local villages, despised by conventional society and forced to eke out a bare existence as best he can:

HE goes about the fields from day to day
And gathers wool to bother want away;
But want as usual follows at his heels,
He cannot labour and he never steals.

He lives among the persecuted poor,
And laughter jeers and passes by his door.
He rarely meets a face without a frown,
The poorest mortal laughs and runs him down;
He never makes reply but holds his tongue
And only mutters as he goes along....

(Poems 2, 353)

Another group of poems from this grim period clearly points towards Clare's unfortunate fate, and reveals a mind at the end of its tether. "The Poet's Song" is a short poem which shows Clare's

own awareness of the calamity which was soon to befall him. The complete futility and, even worse, the sacrificial nature of the poet's vocation are recognised with dismay; for the poet's role is a cross too heavy to be borne and it lacks the meanest comforts given to the poorest of men. The poet reaps no fruit from his labours except the verse itself, and this is achieved at the expense of wearisome toil:

The many have a home retreat
To while away a weary hour;
The poorest have a corner seat
And only covet wealth and power.

Despised and hated all along,
The bard has nothing but a song.

(Poems 2, 374)

Perhaps the most direct indications of the stresses which drove Clare to insanity are seen in the gloomy couplets of "Approaching Night". Here, he berates the callousness and duplicity of those who raise the peasant poet onto a pedestal of fame and flatter him, only to desert him at their whim and abandon him to recrudescant poverty:

OH, take this world away from me!
Its strife I cannot bear to see,
Its very praises hurt me more
Than e'en its coldness did before,
Its hollow ways torment me now
And start a cold sweat on my brow,
Its noise I cannot bear to hear,
Its joy is trouble to my ear,
Its ways I cannot bear to see,
Its crowds are solitudes to me....

(Poems 2, 263)

The paradox of the last line quoted above underlines the extent of his alienation from a society whose values are antithetical to



his own. Hence, he now longs for the time before he became famous, and wishes that he could recapture the quiet anonymity of that period. Even this is ironic, however, for, as a poor man, he sought fame and success as a poet, and the fact that he achieved it when he did saved him and his family from ruin. Now, the picture is reversed, and fame and success are perceived as empty and worthless. At least, when he was a mere unknown labourer, his expectations had been low; but now he is trapped in the vice of yearning for the way of life from which he once tried to hard to escape:

Oh, how I long to be agen
That poor and independent man,
With labour's lot from morn to night
And books to read at candle-light;
That followed labour in the field
From light to dark when toil could yield
Real happiness with little gain,
Rich thoughtless health unknown to pain:
Though leaning on my spade to rest,
I've thought how richer folks were blest
And knew not quiet was the best.

(Poems 2, 263)

"Love and Solitude" is a sonnet which foreshadows the asylum verse in its celebration of solitude as the source of true freedom from life's traumas. This, though, is far more than a customary longing for solitude; it is an almost Gnostic sense of alienation from the physical world. The wish to be a "prisoner", seen in line three, was, of course, fulfilled in a way that Clare would not have desired. In lines five and six, the poet appears as an observer of the heavens who stands outside life's flux, witnessing cosmic catastrophes. What is most astonishing is the rapid change of mood and desire in the last four lines of the sestet: in this dramatic

volte-face, solitude is renounced and he declares that only the love of woman can satisfy his soul. This swift fluctuation with respect to object of his desires portends the alternation between the love of woman and nature seen in "Child Harold":

I ~~HATE~~ the very noise of troublous man
Who did and does me all the harm he can.
Free from the world I would a prisoner be
And my own shadow all my company;
And lonely see the shooting stars appear,
Worlds rushing into judgment all the year.
Oh, lead me onward to the loneliest shade,
The dearest place that quiet ever made,
Where kingcups grow most beauteous to behold
And shut up green and open into gold,
Forewell to poesy—and leave the will;
Take all the world away—and leave me still
The mirth and music of a woman's voice,
That bids the heart be happy and rejoice.

(Poems 2, 375)

Though a gloomy note is sounded in these poems, it is more appropriate to summarize Clare's feelings about the value of solitude during the period of 1824-36 by examining the sonnet, "Universal Goodness", which is a touchstone for attitudes that persist throughout his verse. Its theme is the divinely infused beauty of nature, in even her humblest aspects, and her ability to instruct men in wisdom. Arrogant man is in no position to criticize: he must submit to her learning since, "far off and near", she possesses a numinous, benevolent character:

I ~~LOOK~~ on nature less with critic's eyes
Than with that feeling every scene supplies,
Feeling of reverence that warms and clings
Around the heart while viewing pleasing things;
And heath and pastures, hedgerow-stunted tree,
Are more than Alps with all its hills to me;
The bramble for a bower, the old mole-hill
For seat, delights me, wander where I will;
I feel a presence of delight and fear,
Of love and majesty far off and near;
Go where I will, its absence cannot be,
And solitude and God are one to me;
A presence that one's gloomiest cares caress
And fills up every place to guard and bless.

(Poems 2, 308)

The sestet, with its reference to "a presence of delight and fear" sounds Wordsworthian, recalling his claim in The Prelude that he was "fostered alike by beauty and by fear" in nature's presence.⁽³⁾ With Clare, however, the beautiful aspects of nature are always more strongly emphasized and rarely, at least in the pre-asylum verse, is fear associated with nature. The twelfth line presents obvious difficulties in its direct equation of God and solitude; however, it would be unwise to interpret this statement as a proclamation of pantheistic belief. Clare believed, as demonstrated earlier, in God's immanence in nature and it is easy to see how the deep sense of God's presence is mediated so strongly via natural beauty that the two seem to fuse; in a sense, the grace of God revealed in solitude is able to allay the poet's "gloomiest cares".

In perspective, then, it is not surprising that the theme of isolation is so prominent in this fertile period of Clare's career. It appears in several guises and permeates a number of different verse - forms. Clare continued to write almost up to the time of his removal to High Beech, and it is truly remarkable that then, and later during the asylum years, he was able to express himself with such lucidity in poetry, though his speech had become almost incoherent. A number of other interesting points can be seen in hindsight; we have noted that, a number of times, lines in Clare's verse ironically predicted his eventual descent into madness. Hence, he knew that isolation could eventually have dire consequences for his mental well-being. For, in spite of his oft-expressed desire to avoid mankind as much as possible and to rely upon nature for solace, Clare, in fact, relied heavily upon the friendship of those who remained faithful to him during the 1830s; he greatly treasured

his correspondence with Taylor and Mrs. Emerson, even if they could not appreciate the full extent of his difficulties, and bore a heavy emotional dependence upon his family and such few friends as lived nearby. At High Beech, Clare came to realise that a life apart from friends and loved ones was truly hellish. From then onwards, he was constrained to find within his own being the resources to continue writing, to maintain his identity and to search for some kind of spiritual fulfilment.

Endnotes to Chapter Three

- (1) William Wordsworth, "Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey..." 1.48, The Poetical Works of Wordsworth, ed. T. Hutchinson, London, 1969, p.164
- (2) William Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey..." ll.95-6, The Poetical Works...p.164
- (3) William Wordsworth, The Prelude, Bk.I, 1.302, The Poetical Works... p.498

CHAPTER FOUR : "In This Cold World Without A Home"
The Poems of 1837 - 41

Clare was removed to High Beech asylum at Epping in June 1837 and remained there until his escape in July 1841. Information concerning the first three years of his stay is not plentiful. However, under the compassionate supervision of Dr. Matthew Allen's régime, Clare's physical health improved greatly and he was able to participate in the outdoor work programme for patients. This improvement in physical health was not, however, paralleled by the recovery of his sanity and he fell under the grip of several delusions; he also suffered greatly from loneliness and sexual tensions and bore fierce resentment towards those who kept him in the asylum away from his family. The gradual build-up of these powerful tensions led him to escape and to walk home to Northborough; the account of this bleak three-day journey, during the course of which Clare was forced to eat grass at one stage to appease his hunger, is contained, as already mentioned, in his notebook, The Journey from Essex. If Clare wrote any verse at High Beech before 1840, none has yet come to light; considering the trauma of his removal to the asylum and his state of debility when he first entered it, it is hardly surprising that it took a while before he recovered his creative powers. Dr. Matthew Allen, the asylum's founder, reported in 1840 that Clare sometimes wrote "beautiful poetic effusions" (Life, 385) and, indeed, some sonnets and short poems date from that year.

Understandably, Clare's isolation assumes greater prominence in both his letters and verse during this period. Letters from High Beech addressed to his family speak pathetically of his desire

to return to his two wives and family, and of his longing for his native Northamptonshire. A letter addressed to Mary Joyce, now firmly established as his first wife, gives vent to powerful frustrations:

No one knows how sick I am of this confinement possessing two wives that ought to be my own & cannot see either one of the other If I was in prison for felony I could not be served worse than I am... I sat under the Elm trees in old Ma thew's Homestead Leppits Hill where I now am - 2 or 3 evenings & wrote a new canto of Don Juan - merely to pass the time away but nothing seemed to shorten it in the least...

(Letters, 290)

Other letters reinforce this stark impression: a letter of 1840, addressed to an Eliza Phillips, claims that his enemies have "disowned & even forgot" about him (Letters, 291) and reveals that challenges which he issued to the public under the delusional persona of a prizefighter have been ignored. The full extent of the tensions which impelled him to escape are disclosed in a strangely punctuated letter of March 12th 1841, that is addressed to Patty:

Though Essex Is A Very Pleasant County - Yet
To Me 'There Is No Place Like Home'...For
What Reason They Keep Me Here I Cannot Tell
For I Have Been No Otherwise Than Well A
Couple Of Years At The Least & Never Was
Very Ill Only Harrassed By Perpetual Bother -
& It Would Seem By Keeping Me Here One Year
After Another That I Was Destined For The
Same Fate Agen & I Would Sooner Be Packed On
A Slave Ship For Africa Than Belong To The
Destiny Of Mock Friends & Real Enemies -...

(Letters, 292)

It is in Clare's two major poems of the period, "Don Juan" and "Child Harold" that his tensions and longings surface most clearly. However, several lyric poems, written chiefly in 1840, reveal a marked continuity with the pre-asylum verse, if a less assured sense of form. Significantly, Clare still nurtured the belief that true artistic talent would receive due recognition even if the artist himself were neglected and scorned by the public. In the sonnet, "On the Neglect of True Merit", Clare asserted that:

FASHION and Folly always follow fame,
Which Merit, slowly paced, is slow to claim.
The gaudy and the mean, men love to praise,
But quiet Merit lives for other days....

(SPJC, 238)

During 1841, however, most of Clare's energies were directed towards "Don Juan" and "Child Harold". During this year, journalist Cyrus Redding obtained a copy of Byron's verse for Clare, at the latter's request. The re-reading of the Byronic originals no doubt gave Clare an immense stimulus towards the writing of his own verse, though his poems differ greatly from the originals. Indeed, Clare's two poems, though written concurrently, are poles apart in outlook. On a structural level, they employ quite similar stanzaic forms - ottava rima in the case of "Don Juan" and Spenserians in the case of "Child Harold"- and amongst these stanzas are interspersed more lyrical shorter poems. Some themes are also shared: notably love, isolation and the search for truth, but the handling of these varies widely. Both poems are flawed because of Clare's difficulty in dissociating the events of his life from his poetry, but both gain poignancy from his efforts to stand outside the flux of madness and to assess his life with some objectivity.

Of the two, "Don Juan" is the more overtly Byronic in several respects. The tone is fiercely satirical and invariably scurrilous and Clare's targets are high society, politicians, the female sex and the asylum régime. It is a hysterical poem, in which Clare sees himself as a lone fighter for truth, honesty and poetic integrity in the midst of a totally corrupt society; the asylum and the abuses which Clare ~~encountered there become~~ a microcosm of the world at large. Parallels are drawn between sexual malpractices in the asylum and the low morals in the city, where entertainment has become debased:

Earth hells or b-gg-r sh-ps or what you please
Where men close prisoners are and women ravished
I've often seen such dirty sights as these
I've often seen good money spent and lavished
To keep bad houses up for doctors fees
And I have known a b-gg-rs tally travers'd
Till all his good intents began to falter
- When death brought in his bill and left the halter

(LPJC, 91)

While the rich and the politicians exploit the poor and perpetuate social evils, the minority ~~which attempts to uphold~~ honesty ~~is~~ ruthlessly suppressed:

O glorious constitution what-a picking---
Ye've had from your tax harvest and your tythe
Old hens which cluck about that fair young chicken
- Cocks without spurs that yet can crow 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 mad houses lock up

(LPJC, 91)

Thus, in stanzas 25 and 26, Clare inveighs against the asylum régime itself, claiming that it has separated him from female company.

Dr. Allen himself is anathematised as "Doctor Bottle imp" (LPJE, 90) and dismissed as a corrupt petty tyrant.

It is the sheer abusiveness which distinguishes "Don Juan" not only from the Byronic original, but also from the vast majority of Clare's work. Not even in "The Parish", where Clare's criticism of local worthies becomes vitriolic, is there a descent into scurrility. Moreover, Byron's cynicism towards women is subtly expressed; Clare's scatological imagery extends to almost every page of the poem, and, in view of his customary reverence towards women, "Don Juan" truly reveals the depth of his resentment against all whom he felt had reduced him to such a degraded status.

The first five stanzas rail against the hypocrisy and deceitfulness of women, especially married ones. The first stanza ironically likens the status of poets to that of whores, showing that, in a debased society, the poet must struggle to champion the values which he most cherishes:

'Poets are born' - and so are whores - the trade is
Grown universal - in these canting days
Women of fashion must of course be ladies
And whoreing is the business - that still pays
Playhouses Ballrooms - there the masquerade is
To do what was of old - and now adays
Their maids - nay wives so innocent and blooming
Cuckold their spouses to seem honest women

(LPJC, 83)

Clare's disillusionment with women and marriage is expressed in the fiercest terms: marriage is regarded as a snare into which the unwary man falls. After the ceremony, all the anticipated joys of marriage are lost and the wife quickly becomes unfaithful:

Love worse then debt or drink or any fate
It is the damnest smart of matrimony
A hell incarnate is a woman - mate
The knot is tied - and then we loose the honey...

(LPJC, 84)

Clare is no doubt reflecting upon the unhappier moments of his marriage to Patty, and, perhaps, the fact that she never visited him at High Beech (nor indeed at Northampton, as later events were to prove). Even so, the venomous attitude adopted towards women seems somewhat excessive.

Set against this, however, is a strain which reveals the yearning of a lonely man, desperate for the company of women, in spite of their fickleness. This ambivalent attitude carries through into "Child Harold", where Mary is sometimes a desirable angel and at other times a deceiving siren:

I have two wives and 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 and bonny as a flower
And one o Lord - now do bring in the tea men
Were bards pens steamers each of ten horse power
I could not bring her beautye fair to weather
So I've towed both in harbour blest together

(LPJC, 92)

This impression of heartfelt yearning is reinforced by the inclusion in the poem - and quite incongruously in the context - of a beautiful lyric addressed to a woman named Eliza Phillips. The dominant note is one of wistful melancholy. The poet invites her to share his company "Underneath the forest tree" (LPJC, 88) but, by the final stanza, she has deserted him, leaving him utterly forlorn:

The sun wakes up the pleasant morn
And finds me lonely and forlorn
Then wears away to sunny noon
The flowers in bloom the birds in tune
While dull and dowie all the year
No smiles to see no voice to hear
I in this forest prison lie
With none to heed my silent sigh
And underneath this beachen tree
With none to sigh for Love but thee

(LPJC, 89)

Another major strand in the poem which heightens Clare's isolation in his criticism of political incompetence and corruption. Clare clearly read the newspapers, and his impressions of the decadence of royalty and the government seem to reflect, on a larger level, the injustice and ill-treatment which he had received in his own life. He deplores the ineffectuality of Melbourne, the marriage of Victoria and Albert (once again showing his disillusionment with marriage), the Whig administration and the worthlessness of both parties. All in all, Clare's vision is one of a corrupt world: the insanity of the asylum is mirrored on a larger scale by the abuses in public life. Gruesome images of decay are used to convey his contempt:

These batch of toadstools on this rotten tree
Shall be the cabinet of any queen
Though not such cobblers as her servants be
They're of Gods making - that is plainly seen
Nor red nor green nor orange - they are free
To thrive and flourish as the Whigs have been
But come tomorrow - like the Whigs forgotten
You'll find them withered stinking dead and rotten

(LPJC, 87)

Against the Whig and Tory "imps of hell" (LPJC, 88) Clare defends his own idealistic creed, which exalts truth, fidelity and the love of nature and verse:

I love good fellowship and wit and punning
I love 'true love' and God my taste defend
I hate most damnably all sorts of cunning -
I love the Moor and Marsh and Ponders end -
I do not like the song of 'cease your funning'...

(LPJC, 88)

Altogether, "Don Juan" is a fascinating, if flawed poem and it reveals with great clarity the resentment, the frustration and the misogynistic feelings which the lonely Clare felt at High Beech. It reveals a mind striving to retain its individual integrity and define its own values against the internal stresses of madness and the apparent duplicity and corruption of public and private life, ranging from institutions such as the madhouse to the state itself. The result is a nightmarish vision of a fallen world: a vision fully in keeping with, but more extensive than, the pessimistic animal poems of 1835-7 and the local corruption seen in "The Parish".

In turning to "Child Harold", we are confronted at once by some daunting textual problems which have led critics to reconstruct the poem in very different ways. The poem was begun in the spring of 1841 at High Beech and writing continued until Clare's escape in July. Work was resumed during Clare's brief sojourn at Northborough, but a final draft was never completed, possibly because of his removal to Northampton in December 1841. The poem was begun in a notebook, Ms.8, which accompanied him during the escape, but he began a separate draft in Ms.6, which contains forty-one stanzas

and fifteen songs: however, several of the Ms. B stanzas are omitted and we cannot be sure if this was intended to be the final version. Therefore, critics have been moved to follow very different lines of reconstruction: Grigson suggests that Clare wanted to arrange the poem into four cantos, following a hint in one of Clare's letters (PJCM, 16); the Tibbles have arranged the poem on a seasonal basis according to which time of year the stanzas refer to (SPJC, 239); Al-Wasiti, however, has adopted Grigson's suggestions of the division into cantos and taken into account the references to season and place. (1) Robinson and Summerfield have adopted a more cautious approach by appending the part of the poem that appears only in Ms. B to the other manuscript version. Possibly, Clare's final reconstruction might have assumed a form similar to that suggested by Al-Wasiti: we shall never know for certain. Here, however, in view of these formidable difficulties, the more prudent, if less stimulating editing of Robinson and Summerfield has been followed. In this version, the ending of the poem marks a mood of tranquillity after the turmoil which precedes it; the Tibbles' version ends on a gloomier note, since they place the melancholy "Song: In this cold world without a home" (SPJC, 277) last of all. In spite of the differences in stanzaic order between the various versions, it is nonetheless possible to discern a considerable measure of continuity between them.

In view of the prominence of the theme of isolation in "Child Harold", the poem deserves special attention. The Robinson and Summerfield reconstruction consists of seventy-eight stanzas, interspersed with twenty-four songs and ballads. This format is derived from the Byronic original, where, however, the songs are much

less frequent. In fact, there are only broad points of contact between the two poems. Byron's poem follows a clear narrative progression as it traces the hero's passage across Europe. There is no external protagonist in Clare's poem: if anything, his own restless consciousness lies at its core. Certain themes are shared with Byron's poem: the poet's isolation, the struggle for self-understanding, the pangs of love and the attraction of nature, but all are expressed in different contexts. Overall, Clare's poem follows an irregular cyclical pattern, with certain ideas recurring continually in a way which suggests the obsessive fluctuations of a psychotic mind. References to the seasons abound but in the present text, at least, no discernible pattern can be found. Above all, it must be remembered that the poem lacks structural unity and coherence and, owing to its incompleteness, it cannot be seen as an artistic success in toto: nevertheless, several individual sections have a beauty and searching intensity seldom matched in Clare's work.

Several basic ideas and antinomies lie at the heart of the poem, and lend it some semblance of unity. Images of storm and calm, light and darkness, heaven and hell, motion and rest, freedom and prison, truth and falsehood, home and homelessness continually reappear. The poem is intimately related to Clare's own life as he looks to the past for solace or strives to gain a vision which will alleviate his misery in the present. The movement of the poem suggests various literary motifs and archetypes. In one sense, Clare is involved in a desperate search for fulfilment, security and self-knowledge; equally, he is attempting to extricate himself from the misery and despair of the past. Dominating his quest is the idée fixe of finding Mary and uniting his love with her own.

Sometimes, the quest is seen in sensual, sometimes in more spiritual terms; but the Mary Joyce of his youth has faded away as a distinct individual and the quest for the love of Mary is absorbed into a more far-reaching spiritual aim. For, Clare links Mary's love with a number of key terms: home, rest, peace, truth, hope and joy. There is also a sense of a paradise that has been lost and the belief that, if only Mary can be found and her love confirmed, this may be regained. Indeed, the desire to rejoin Mary was the dominant motive for Clare's escape from High Beech. The Romantic motif of the Solitary is applicable to the poem in the sense that Clare's own tormented consciousness drifts through a kind of limbo, separated from past joys, comforted at times by fond memories and the balm of nature, and spurred on by a vision of freedom and transcendence which remains perpetually beyond reach.

In the opening stanza, Clare echoes his previous consideration of the poet's role in "Don Juan". Once more, he shows how the true poet must have integrity and uphold the worthiness of nature against the inroads of lesser poetic talents and a hostile society; it is rural verse which stands supreme above other genres:

Many are poets—though they use no pen
To show their labours to the shuffling age
Real poets must be truly honest men
Tied to no mongrel laws on flatterys page
No zeal have they for wrong or party rage
— The life of labour is a rural song
That hurts no cause—nor warfare tries to wage
Toil like the brook in music wears along—
Great little minds claim right to act the wrong

(LPJC, 35)

The first ballad in the poem introduces the theme of the poet's loneliness in confinement and the comforts which nature offers him:

Summer morning is risen
And to even it wends
And still Im in prison
Without any friends

I had joys assurance
Though in bondage I lie
- I am still left in durance
Unwilling to sigh

(LPJC, 35)

After a glimmer of hope in the assertion that nature's "love is eternal", Clare lapses into a lamentation for his confinement: the repeated negatives combine to evoke a gloomily effective picture:

For homes and friends vanished
I have kindness not wrath
For in days care has banished
My heart possessed both

My hopes are all hopeless
My skys have no sun
Winter fell in youths mayday
And still freezes on

(LPJC, 35-6)

Mary - the source of the poet's inspiration and the goal of his quest - is introduced early in the poem. Her love and beauty are viewed as the only mainstays that can solace the despairing poet:

Though cares still will gather like clouds in my sky
Though hopes may grow hopeless and fetters recoil
While the sun of existance sheds light in my eye
I'll be free in a prison and cling to the soil
I'll cling to the spot where my first love was cherished
Where my heart nay my soul unto Mary I gave
And when my last hope and existance is perished
Her memory will shine like a sun on my grave

(LPJC, 37)

However, this exalted vision of Mary's love is not maintained consistently. At times, she may seem to be "the sunrise of my natal day" (LPJC, 37). However, in a song which recalls the agonising **eighty mile journey from High Beech to Northborough, Clare** comes to realise that, in truth, his quest is doomed to be barren and frustrating, for Mary seems unattainable. Indeed, there is a bitter awareness that, in such a quest, "that way madness lies", as Lear would have said:

I've wandered many a weary mile
Love in my heart was burning
To seek a home in Mary(s) smile
But cold is loves returning
The cold ground was a feather bed
Truth never acts contrary
I had no home above my head
My home was love and Mary

I had no home in early youth
When my first love was thwarted
But if her heart still beats with truth
We'll never more be parted
And changing as her love may be
My own shall never vary
Nor night nor day I'm never free
But sigh for abscent Mary

Nor night nor day nor sun nor shade
Week month nor rolling year
Repairs the breach wronged love hath made
There madness-misery here
Lifes lease was lengthened by her smiles
- Are truth and love contrary
No ray of hope my life beguiles
I've lost love home and Mary

(LPJC, 38)

It is striking that whenever Clare looks back upon the past, it inevitably enhances his sense of isolation, as he broods over the chaos and failure which dogged him. Two moving stanzas, in which fact and fantasy freely mingle, capture the turbulent mixture of guilt, bewilderment and disgust as he looks back on his life;

the asylum itself seems to offer a foretaste of hell, with the moral degradation of its inmates:

My life hath been one love-no blot it out
My life hath been one chain of contradictions
Madhouses Prisons wh-re shops- never doubt
But that my life hath had some strong convictions
That such was wrong- religion makes restrictions
I would have followed - but life turned a bubble
And clumb the giant stile of maledictions
They took me from my wife and to save trouble
I wed again and made the error double

Yet absence claims them both and keeps them too
And locks me in a shop in spite of law
Among a low lived set and dirty crew
Here let the Muse oblivions curtain draw
And let man think- for God hath often saw
Things here too dirty for the light of day
For in a madhouse there exists no law =
Now stagnant grows my too refined clay
I envy birds their wings to fly away

(LPJC, 40)

Perhaps the most striking pointer towards the desperation that led Clare to flee from the asylum can be seen in the mighty apocalyptic song "Written in a Thunderstorm July 15th 1841¹⁰". The almost prophetic and Biblical language of this song reappears once more in Ms.110 and the Biblical paraphrases; its first two stanzas create a mood of cosmic pessimism so profound that not even a raging thunderstorm can dispel it. The external storm no doubt mirrors the mental turmoil that Clare himself has undergone:

The heavens are wrath-the thunders rattling peal
Rolls like a vast volcano in the sky
Yet nothing starts the apathy I feel
Nor chills with fear eternal destiny

My soul is apathy-a ruin vast
Time cannot clear the ruined mass away
My life is hell-the hopeless die is cast
And manhoods prime is premature decay

(LPJC, 42)

In the third stanza, however, Clare rises to a posture of titanic defiance and spiritual courage, as he commands the elements to bombard his soul and liberate him completely from earthly torments. The solar image in the penultimate stanza marks Clare's brief passage into a state of visionary transcendence; sundering the bonds of mortality, he realises in his own being a feeling of eternal love and imaginative vitality. In the final stanza, the Promethean challenge of the poet is renewed and we are left with an almost solipsistic sense of self-exaltation on his part:

Roll on ye wrath of thunders-peal on peal
Till worlds are ruins and myself alone
Melt heart and soul cased in obdurate steel
Till I can feel that nature is my throne

I live in love sun of undying light
And fathom my own heart for ways of good
In its pure atmosphere day without night
Smiles on the plains the forest and the flood

Smile on ye elements of earth and sky
Or frown in thunders as ye frown on me
Bid earth and its delusions pass away
But leave the mind as its creator free

(LPJC, 42)

Yet, a few stanzas later, this vision has collapsed completely and he is left in a twilight world of broken hopes, clutching desperately towards Mary and nature's beauty for consolation:

Life is to me a dream that never wakes
Night finds me on this lengthening road alone
Love is to me a thought that ever aches
A frost bound thought that freezes life to stone
Mary in truth and nature still my own
That warms the winter of my aching breast
Thy name is joy nor will I life bemoan -
Midnight when sleep takes charge of natures rest
Finds me awake and friendless- not distress

(LPJC, 43)

Stanza 25 retrospects upon Clare's search for fulfilment in love and poetry. His rise to fame is likened to that of a comet: his downfall is attributed to his hatred of injustice and his love of honesty. The second half of the stanza concedes that his love for Mary is hopeless: the key words "peace", "truth", "hope", "home" and "rest" are all tied closely to her person and the figure of "Edens gates" suggests his banishment from the pleasures of the past. The sunset image fittingly marks the fading of his hopes of obtaining her love:

Fame blazed upon me like a comets glare
Fame waned and left me like a fallen star
Because I told the evil what they are
And truth and falshood never wished to mar
My Life hath been a wreck-and I've gone far
For peace and truth - and hope - for home and rest
- Like Edens gates - fate throws a constant bar-
Thoughts may o'ertake the sunset in the west
- Man meets no home within a woman's breast

(LPJC, 49)

The thirtieth stanza broadens the focus of the poem and, in a way reminiscent of, albeit more restrained than "Don Juan", excoriates the corrupt society which has rejected and imprisoned the poet, spurning his values of sincerity and truth:

This life is made of lying and grimace
This world is filled with whoring and decieving
Hypocrisy ne'er masks an honest face
Story's are told-but seeing is believing...

(LPJC, 52)

One of the most striking expressions of Clare's desolation appears in the beautiful "Song: 'In this cold world without a home'". The poet's desolation and his hapless yearning for Mary are movingly conveyed, using the seasons as a metaphor for his grief.

The key words "hope", "home", "joy" and "truth" are located in Mary and she becomes his ultimate refuge. But, in stanza two, the hope placed in her love is undercut by the realisation that her absence demonstrates a lack of love for him; as on other occasions, his faith in the constancy of her love suffers a severe buffeting:

In this cold world without a home
Disconsolate I go
The summer looks as cold to me
As winters frost and snow
Though winters scenes are dull and drear
A colder lot I prove
No home had I through all the year
But Marys honest love

But Love inconstant as the wind
Soon shifts another way
No other home my heart can find
Life wasting day by day
I sigh and sit and sit and sigh
for better days to come
For Mary was my hope and joy
Her truth and heart my home

(LPJC, 67)

Yet, it is not the absence of Mary by itself, nor the lack of family and friends, which grieves him here. For, in a later stanza, there is a much more broad-reaching vision of despair - human life is seen as nought but a morass of suffering and the experience is similar to the "dark night of the soul" spoken of by mystics. This strangely punctuated stanza plumbs the very depths of despair:

My Mind Is Dark And Fathomless And Wears
The Hues Of Hopeless Agony And Hell
No Plummet Ever Sounds The Souls Affairs
There Death Eternal Never Sounds The Knell
There Love Imprisoned Sighs The Long Farewell
And Still May Sigh In Thoughts No Heart Hath Penned
Alone In Loneliness Where Sorrows Dwell
And Hopeless Hope; Hopes On And Meets No End
Wastes Without Springs And Homes Without A Friend

(LPJC, 69)

The latter stanza is comparable in its sense of desolation with G.M. Hopkins's untitled sonnet "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day...":

I am gall, I am heartburn, God's most deep decree
Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me;
Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.

Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see
The lost are like this, and their scourge to be
As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.

(2)

Towards the poem's end, Clare uses the image of an orphan to express his sense of alienation and homelessness: a very appropriate projection of his own plight. This is all the more striking since he normally sees the child as a repository of joy and freedom; but, here, the reverse is the case:

What is the Orphan Child Without A Friend
That Knows No Fathers Care Or Mothers Love
No Leading Hand His Infant Steps Defend
And None To Notice But His God Above
No Joy's Are Seen His Little Heart To Move
Care Turns All Joys to Dross And Nought to Gold
And He In Fancys Time May Still Disprove
Growing To Cares And Sorrows Menifold
Bird Of The Waste A Lamb Without A Fold

(LPJC, 70)

But it is Mary's failure to return his love which sometimes seems to be his most galling misfortune and his biggest disappointment. This is seen in the sharply modulated antithesis of an earlier stanza, where love and hate, movement and stillness, life and death are all juxtaposed to convey his sense of betrayal and perplexity:

Absence in love is worse than any fate
Summer is winter's desert and the spring
Is like a ruined city desolate
Joy dies and hope retires on feeble wing
Nature sinks heedless - birds unheeded sing
Tis solitude in cities - crowds all move
Like living death - though all to life still cling
The strongest bitterest thing that life can prove
Is woman's undisguise of hate and love

(LPJC, 64)

At the end of the poem, it is interesting that nature seems to provide a haven for the weary poet. Women, friends and the world at large have betrayed him but the solitude of nature can still provide an anodyne for his wounds:

Hail Solitude still Peace and Lonely good
Thou spirit of all joys to be alone
My best of friends these glades and this green wood
Where nature is herself and loves her own
The hearts hid anguish here I make it known
And tell my troubles to the gentle wind
Friends cold neglects have froze my heart to stone
And wrecked the voyage of a quiet mind
With wives and friends and every hope disjointed

(LPJC, 79)

Significantly, Solitude is personified in the final three stanzas as a "wedded mate" and "queen". For, she is the ideal lover who can always be relied upon to delight the poet with her charms. Unlike human companions, Solitude is faithful and will not disappoint him: hence, he feels able to scorn "Love and all its idle fate". This pattern has already been seen at work in Clare's verse: when spurned or neglected by humans, he turns to nature for consolation. The two attractions of the poem, nature and Mary, sometimes appear as rivals and, at other times, seem almost to fuse into one object of desire in the spiritual quest. Moreover, the fenland landscape,

with its Edenic associations, is linked to the enjoyment of young love. Indeed, Mary almost seems to become "nature's self", and at one with the motive force of nature:

For in that hamlet lives my rising sun
Whose beams hath cheered me all my lorn life long
My heart to nature there was early won
For she was nature's self - and still my song
Is her through sun and shade through right and wrong
On her my memory forever dwells
The flower of Eden....

(LPJC, 59-60)

It is only when the "flower of Eden" deserts him that nature and woman's love are completely disjoined and, ultimately, he realises that woman's love is too fickle to offer the certainty and security of nature's presence.

In retrospect, then, "Child Harold" is full of rich insights into Clare's loneliness at High Beech. Its continuity with the pre-asylum verse is evident: love, nature, isolation, the search for spiritual fulfilment and the struggle for self-mastery are all present here. Naturally, certain ideas assume greater importance: freedom becomes a prime goal because of Clare's confinement; truth, in human relationships and as an absolute, is paramount; the desire for peace, rest and home is doubly significant for a poet who is far from his home and family and battling desperately against mental disintegration. However, the use of the Byronic verse form and the wider range of imagery and expression, and, above all, the sheer intensity of emotion go far beyond what Clare had attempted before; even if the poem is not a success as a whole, it contains sections of surpassing beauty.

Overall, it is fascinating to perceive how Clare's isolation is manifested in these two very different long poems. In "Don Juan", he fiercely vents his resentment at his confinement by fulminating coarsely at the human authorities which have both imprisoned him and meted out injustice and depravity upon society at large. At the opposite pole, "Child Harold" conveys the more tender aspects of his loneliness and his hopeless quest to escape isolation through Mary's love. Indeed, it was the cathartic expression of his loneliness in the form of verse that helped him to shoulder its cruel burden.

Endnotes to Chapter Four

- (1) Salman Al-Wasiti, "English Romantic Poetry..."
Appendix A, pp. 405ff
- (2) Gerard Manley-Hopkins, "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day..."
11.9-14, Poems of Gerard Manley-Hopkins, ed.
R. Bridges, London, 1930, p. 65

Of all Clare's verse, it is perhaps a small number of asylum lyrics which have received the most critical attention and acclaim. Much of this attention has, in fact, been focused upon the great existential lyrics of 1844, at the expense of other impressive poems written between 1845 and 1850. However, the theme of isolation follows a strong thread through the verse of the Northampton period; again, not unexpectedly, in view of the fact that he received few visitors and that, after 1850, his movements beyond the asylum were severely restricted. Clare was certainly fortunate in receiving encouragement to continue writing from William Knight, the House Steward at the asylum and the transcriber of some eight hundred poems which have become known as "The Knight Transcripts"; and also from Thomas Inskip, a watchmaker and poet from Shefford, who had known Clare during the 1820s, and, unlike most of Clare's former acquaintances, renewed contact with him during the asylum period. By 1850, Inskip had died and Knight had moved to another area; following their departure, he received little stimulus to continue writing, except when occasional visitors came to see him. Indeed, before 1850, Clare was allowed to visit Northampton town but this privilege was finally withdrawn and he was virtually confined to the asylum grounds. Bearing in mind how unfavourable the conditions were for anyone who wished to find poetic inspiration, it is a tribute to Clare's dedication to the muse and to his courage in struggling against his illness, that he continued to compose for so long. "The Knight Transcripts" poems constitute the bulk of Clare's output from this period, but any chronological

assessment of them is rendered difficult by manuscript problems. Grigson has attempted to put them into a rough chronological order in his Poems of John Clare's Madness, and, more recently, Al-Wasiti has suggested that the poems be assigned to two broad groupings, one of which dates from 1844-49 and the other which stretches from 1850-56. (1)

However, copious though his output of lyric verse might have been during these years, other verse forms are also extant: notably ~~the~~ Biblical paraphrases and the rough draft of an unfinished long poem known as Ms.110. In view of the sheer bulk of Clare's output during the Northampton period, attention will be given here only to the most striking manifestations of the theme of isolation. In fact, the quality of the second volume of "The Knight Transcripts" weakens progressively and practically all of Clare's important Northampton verse was written during the 1840s.

Firstly, the Biblical paraphrases must command our attention. At the outset, it must be stressed that these are not by any means the first examples of this genre that Clare produced; during the 1820s, he frequently read the Bible in times of difficulty and would paraphrase favourite passages. However, the paraphrases of the 1840s, most of which were written during Clare's months at Northborough in 1841, following the escape from High Beech, are remarkable because they centre upon scriptural passages which emphasize the fall~~ness~~ of humanity or ~~upon~~ apocalyptic visions of the annihilation of mankind and the preservation of an elect group of believers. ~~Most of the~~ paraphrases are based upon the Old Testament, whereas only four are drawn from the New Testament; hence, the

Old Testament emphasis on the wrath of God against sinners is given precedence over the New Testament message of forgiveness. The choice of these passages no doubt springs from the fact that there was a strong connection between the orthodox Christian view of the depravity of mankind and Clare's own experience of man's iniquity. It is also possible that Clare is harking back to the fearsome threats of judgement which he would have heard during his contact with the Ranter sect and in the evangelical literature sent to him by the devout Lord Radstock. It would seem, in any case, that the promise of eternal life amongst God's elect afforded some comfort to him during the early 1840s.

Undoubtedly the most arresting of the paraphrases is that of Psalm 102, which takes the form of a prayer addressed to God in the midst of desolation. Clare has recast the psalm into seven six-line stanzas rhyming ababcc. All except the final stanza consist of four tetrameter lines - these being the first and third lines and the final couplet - and two shorter trimeter lines. These shorter lines are effective in highlighting key affirmations and enhancing the vigorous rhythm. Structurally, stanzas one to four reveal the extent of Clare's distress: he is isolated and at the mercy of his enemies, with none to support him but God alone. The final three stanzas shift the focus away from his own suffering towards God's faithfulness and, thus, some hope is established.

Furthermore, Clare was well able to see the parallel between the misfortunes of the psalmist and his own. The Biblical superscription for the original psalm reads "A prayer of one afflicted, when he is faint and pours out his complaint before the Lord".⁽²⁾ The first eleven verses of the original are

characterised by a deep sense of spiritual depression and physical debility. Clare captures the force of the images of heat, decay and loneliness very skilfully:

Lord hear my prayer when trouble glooms
Let sorrow find a way
And when the day of trouble comes
Turn not thy face away
My bones like hearth stones burn away
My life like vapoury smoke decays

My heart is smitten like the grass
That withered lies and dead
And I so lost to what I was
Forget to eat my bread
My voice is groaning all the day
My bones prick through this skin of clay

The wildernesses pelican
The deserts lonely owl
I am their like a desert man
In ways as lone and foul
As sparrows on the cottage top
I wait till I with faintness drop

I bear my enemies reproach
All silently I mourn
They on my private peace encroach
Against me they are sworn
Ashes as bread my trouble shares
And mix my food with weeping cares

(LPJC, 160-f)

There is, in fact, greater stress here than in the original upon isolation: the poet is like "The deserts lonely owl", and "a desert man", who inhabits ways "lone and foul", whereas the psalmist is simply a "lonely bird on the housetop".⁽³⁾ Stanza four emphasizes the poet's suffering, but also his silent endurance of it.

The final three stanzas show how he is able to see his misfortune as part of God's providential plan for mankind. God will finally

emerge triumphant, rewarding his chosen faithful remnant for their perseverance in the face of suffering:

Yet not for them is sorrows toil
I fear no mortals frown
But thou hast held me up awhile
And thou hast cast me down
My days like shadows waste from view
I mourn like withered grass in dew

But thou Lord shalt endure forever
All generations through
Thou shalt to Zion be the giver
Of joy and mercy too
Her very stones are in their trust
Thy servants reverence her dust

(LPJC, 161)

Other paraphrases echo this note of suffering and isolation, albeit not in such an imposing manner. Other passages paraphrased include *several chapters from Job* and "The Lamentations of Jeremiah", chapter 3. Both of these Biblical characters were notable for the sheer weight of misfortune which they underwent, and also for their alienation from their contemporaries. Jeremiah, rejected by his own family and vilified by his compatriots, was a prophet of doom who single-handedly upheld the eternal values of God. Job, having lost all his possessions and his family, was left to argue with God alone, and he spurned the condolences of his comforters. The misfortunes of these eminent Biblical figures must have struck a resonant chord in Clare's breast and enabled him to identify with their plights, and thus to derive some consolation. "The Lamentations of Jeremiah" begins on a peculiarly poignant note and follows the pattern of pentameter couplets:

I am the man that affliction hath seen
By the rod of his wrath sorely scourged have I been
He hath turned against me like a vision of night
& led me to darkness and not into light...

(N.Ms.6, 50)

Moreover, the deep sense of humanity's sinfulness and the certainty of its doom are well conveyed in the majestic paraphrase of Psalm 97. Again, only the minority of mankind, who uphold the true worship of God, will survive:

His thunders and lightnings
blazen the world
The earth saw & trembled
where ruin was hurled

.....

Hate evil ye people whose
love is the Lord
He preserveth his saints
by the truth of his word

(N.Ms.6, 31)

Turning from the paraphrases to Ms.110, we are confronted with a chaotic, incomplete manuscript, obviously a rough draft, consisting of a mixture of songs and stanzas after the manner of "Child Harold". The poem contains a very broad range of references, including allusions to exotic lands such as Greece, Italy and Turkey. There are also references to a woman named Haidee, who, of course, appears in Byron's Don Juan, but, once again, there is no sign of an external protagonist such as appears in Byron's long poems. There are also references to Robert Burns, Clare's chief delusional persona of the Northampton period, and also to Cowper, which suggests the power of rural attractions. Though no logical pattern can be discerned among the mass of fragments - which Clare never managed to arrange

into a coherent whole - love, nature, and poetry seem to be three of the main ideas. However, before the poem begins, it is prefaced by a Cowperian quotation stressing the beneficent influence of solitude for poets:

'O for a Lodge in some vast wilderness
Some boundless contiguity (of) shade
Where rumour of oppression and deceit
Of unsuccessful or successful war
Might never reach me more' Cowper

(LPJC, 97)

One important strand in the poem is the disappearance of joys which were experienced in the past; a poignant stanza reveals how the poet is now deprived of love and nature:

I wish I was were I would be
Alone with beauty and the free
I wish I was where I have been
A lover on the village green
Where old pits swell'd and mosses grew
Along with one who loved so true

(LPJC, 103)

The lament for the past is supplemented by a more frightening realisation of the monstrous and murky depths within the human personality. With its powerful images of depth and darkness, the fifth stanza reveals the fathomless depths of the human heart, in a way which anticipates the later "I am" (SPPJC, 195). Here, Clare truly explores the extremities of the human soul:

There is a chasm in the heart of man
That nothing fathoms like a gulph at sea
A depth of darkness lines may never span
A shade unsunned in dark eternity
Thoughts without shadows - that eye can see
Or thought imagine tis unknown to fame
Like day at midnight such its youth to me
At ten years old it boyhoods care came
Now manhoods forty past tis just the same

(LPJC, 100)

The apocalyptic note of the paraphrases is sounded again in Ms.110, in the fearsome imagery of a piece entitled "Song Last Day", of which two rather different versions are extant (LPJC, 104 and 108). Significantly, Clare sees himself as one whom God will favour while the rest of sinful humanity **are** eradicated:

Black as the deadly thunder cloud
The stars shall turn to dun
And heaven by that darkness bowed
Shall make days light be done
When stars and skys shall all decay
And earth no more shall be
When heaven itself shall pass away
Then thou'lt remember me

(LPJC, 109)

Indeed, letters from the Northampton period reinforce the idea that Clare has been unjustly imprisoned and made to suffer a "purgatorial hell" (LPJC, 29) by a corrupt society:

...in fact I am in Prison because I wont leave my family
and tell a falshood-this is the English Bastile a
government Prison where harmless people are trapped
and tortured till they die-...

(LPJC, 29)

Yet, in the beautiful song "The North Star", Clare returns to a more optimistic perspective, and affirms his faith in Providence as a stay against the misery and isolation of life. Cast in six-line stanzas, the song has a simplicity and profundity typical of Clare at his most convincing. The star itself becomes a symbol of hope through the ages; its permanence contrasts strongly with the frailty of human life, as exemplified by the stark images of the hermit's lonely cell and the marine traveller:

There is a Star I know it well
Sun of the northern sky
That cheers the hermits lonely cell
Like heavens unerring eye
Twas there a thousand thousand years
And still in the same place appears

..... (LPJC, 132)

Thou lone and solitary star
A lamp oer oceans pathless brine
Beacon to those who travel far
Upon this hemisphere is thine
Such light is by religion given
To light our blinded way to heaven

(LPJC, 133)

The use of marine imagery to reinforce the sense of human fragility and isolation is a device used a number of times in the asylum verse, notably in "I am" (SPPJC, 195) and in a short lyric "A Sea Boy on the Giddy Mast" (PJCM, 112).

Furthermore, having placed faith in Providence, Clare also extols poetry and the life of the imagination in Ms.110. In one stanza, the poet's life is seen as a noble one, which lifts him above the ranks of lesser mortals; he feels sure that the ravages of time will not damage the fame secured by great verse:

Poets and Poesy are aspirations
Of minds superior to the common lot
The light and life and ornament of nations
That leave no writing they could wish to blot
Time mossed in centurys finds them unforgot...

(LPJC, 125)

This supreme faith in the power of verse and the dignity of the poet's vocation is echoed elsewhere in the asylum poetry. Faced with a claustrophobic situation in which it seemed that the public might never read any more of his verse, Clare nevertheless restated

that true poetry must endure and gain an eternal value in spite of all setbacks. Moreover, the power of verse could ease the poet's loneliness, as this magnificent stanza from "Child Harold", with its sweeping images of the flood and the irresistible dynamism of poetry, recalls:

Flow on my 'verse though barren thou mayest be
Of thought—Yet sing and let thy fancys roll
In Early days thou swept a mighty sea
All calm in troublous deeps and spurned controul
Thou fire and iceberg to an aching soul
And 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

(LPJC, 76)

In turning from the chaotic world of Ms.110 to the asylum lyrics, we must bear in mind a number of considerations. For Clare seems to have had two especially fruitful years, 1844 and 1847, from which emerged several fine lyrics. That the writing of verse, in the face of the frustrations that he bore, was a deep source of comfort and a vital outlet for his pent-up tensions is evident from a number of letters. In some letters, as yet still unpublished, Clare complains of the lack of reading materials and the problems which hampered his creative efforts in his stultifying environment:

I am still wanting like Sterns Prisoners Starling to
"get out" but cant find the Way... write to me soon
when you can for I am very lonely by times... I am
without Books or Amusements of any kind...

(N.Ms. 412. Letter of July 8th, 1850)

The reference to the starling refers to the caged starling in Sterne's A Sentimental Journey, and this provides a bleak image

of Clare's confinement.

Certainly, this background of isolation, combined with a lack of literary stimulus, makes the composition of the four great 1844 lyrics, "An Invite to Eternity", "I am", "Sonnet: I am", and "A Vision", more comprehensible. Al-Wasiti has plausibly suggested that part of the reason for the date of these poems relates to Clare's being confined to the asylum grounds, following a drinking bout during one of his visits to Northampton town.⁽⁴⁾ Hence, these lyrics were written partly out of a sense of resentment against this treatment. Strangely, though, Clare was again confined to the asylum after a similar offence in 1847 and, judging from the lyrics of that year, he seems to have reacted less violently.

It is difficult to assess the order of composition of these four poems. "I am" and "Sonnet: I am" follow each other without a break in the manuscript and it was Inskip who first realised that they were separate poems. "Sonnet: I am" appears to reflect the disillusionment felt after such an experience as is described in "A Vision", but we cannot definitely link the two in this way. What all of these poems share is a visionary intensity and a prophetic-majesty of phrasing which has led the Tibbles to refer to them as "semi-mystical" (SPJC, XV111). However, from our perspective, each of these poems reflects a different aspect of Clare's isolation and offers a different avenue for dealing with it.

"An Invite to Eternity" presents us with a rich ambivalence and complexity, which have stimulated a wide range of critical responses. The poem employs the Marlovian framework of an invitation to a

woman to share the joys of love, and gives this framework a grim twist. Here, an unnamed maiden is asked to share the "valley depths of shade" with the poet. Whether the woman is an anima figure or a memory of Mary Joyce, or even the poet's muse, she carries a deep significance. If the latter interpretation is to be preferred, then Clare is summoning the power of verse to accompany him into the lonely hell of madness, which seems reminiscent of the mystical "dark night of the soul":

WILT thou go with me sweet maid
Say maiden wilt thou go with me
Through the valley depths of shade
Of night and dark obscurity
Where the path hath lost its way
Where the sun forgets the day
Where there's nor life nor light to see
Sweet maiden wilt thou go with me

(SPPJC, 196)

The second stanza is rich in images which suggest the tumult, the confusion and the loss of identity in madness. References to "flooding streams" and "ocean waves" show this insecurity in marine terms. Thus, the height of mountains gives way to the dark caves, which evoke the depths of the subconscious mind. Life seems to evanesce in dreamlike fashion and the closest family ties disintegrate in this nightmarish realm:

Where stones will turn to flooding streams
Where plains will rise like ocean waves
Where life will fade like visioned dreams
And mountains darken into caves
Say maiden wilt thou go with me
Through this sad non-identity
Where parents live and are forgot
And sisters live and know us not

(SPPJC, 197)

The last two stanzas expand upon this picture of confusion, in which features of mundane life mingle with hellish fragments of another realm. The third stanza involves a vigorous, paradoxical juxtaposition of being and non-being and life and death, in which Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" antithesis is given an unusual twist; in this strange realm, being seems to be a part of non-being. The reference to shadows in the final line evokes the transience and insubstantiality of this bizarre world, while the all-embracing sky almost swallows the poet and maiden. Significantly, their intended destination lacks "life or home or name", so that all bastions of security and means of identification have vanished:

Say maiden wilt thou go with me
In this strange death of life to be
To live in death and be the same
Without this life or home or name
At once to be and not to be
That was and is not-yet to see
Things pass like shadows- and the sky
Above, below, around us lie.

The land of shadows wilt thou trace
And look nor know each others face
The present mixed with reasons gone
And past and present all as one
Say maiden can thy life be led
To join the living with the dead
Then trace thy footsteps on with me
We're wed to one eternity

(SPPJC, 197)

The last stanza assumes that the maiden will indeed be his companion in this land of shadows. Blindness and nescience are an integral part of this realm. In lines three and four, past and present coalesce into a timeless experience of negation. The third line poses a textual problem, since Grigson (PJCM, 131) and the Tibbles (SPJC, 296) leave reason in the singular, whereas Robinson and

Summerfield make it plural. The former seems to make better sense in the context, for human reason has indeed gone; but if the latter reading is to be preferred, then it could mean that **his** reasons for living have gone. In the second half of the stanza, the maiden's presence will "join the living with the dead", thus forming a bridge between the two worlds. The final line would suggest that the woman assents to the poet's invitation; even, it seems, in madness, the poet's artistic and spiritual vitality will accompany him. However, on a gloomier note, there appears to be no question of any re-emergence from this dark realm, nor is love mentioned at all, for all human relationships have disappeared.

In "I am", however, Clare is left to face his personal hell alone. The overall movement of the poem does much to reinforce its powerful impact upon the reader. The first two sections have a turbulent, undulatory rhythm which, in concert with the sea imagery, creates a mood of instability and confusion. The final stanza represents a quiet subsiding of these emotions and the emergence from despair via an imaginative self-projection into eternity. The final mood is one of calm and gentle yearning:

I AM-yet what I am, none cares or knows;
My friends forsake me like a memory lost:
I am the self-consumer of my woes -
They rise and vanish in oblivions host,
Like shadows in love frenzied stifled throes
And yet I am, and live-like vapours tost

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
Into the living sea of waking dreams,
Where there is neither sense of life or joys,
But the vast shipwreck of my lifes esteems;
Even the dearest that I love the best
Are strange-nay, rather, stranger than the rest.

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.

(SPPJC, 195)

In the first stanza, Clare is confronted with the brutal fact of his own existence, which is stripped of the props and comforts of normal life and rendered hellish by the isolation of insanity. Loneliness weighs heavily upon him: "none cares or knows" about him and he is thereby reduced to "a memory lost". He has thus become the self-consumer of his sorrows, which ironically supplant his lost friends and appear as "oblivions host". Line five reveals the desperate search and failure to find fulfilment in love. The last line confronts him again with his own onerous, strife-tossed existence.

The words "I am", which invoke the intolerable burden of his crippled personality, bear a wealth of literary associations. The famous statement of Yahweh—"I am that I am"—in the Old Testament and the "Cogito ergo sum" of Descartes are given an ironic twist, for, to Clare, existence itself has become a dead weight and full of suffering. Like Sartre's hero, Roquentin, in La Nausée, Clare feels that he is de trop.

In the second section, the problem of meaninglessness is faced most acutely. His own life is as transient as "vapours tost" into an emptiness of "scorn and noise", the last phrase perhaps recalling Macbeth's description of life as a "tale of sound and fury". The images of "sea" and "shipwreck" hark back to the kind

of insecurity seen in "An Invite to Eternity", as does the almost Buddhist description of his existence as "waking dreams". The final indignity is the estrangement from family, friends and loves, whose very intimacy with him in the past exacerbates his loneliness now. The cumulative power of the alliterated sibilants in the stanza does much to assist the sweeping rhythm of the verse.

In the final stanza, storm has yielded to calm as Clare projects himself into an idealised existence beyond earth's bourne. The imagery is soft and tranquil: the grass and sky perpetuate the idea of a benevolent nature; a deep sleep links the poet with the carefree innocence of childhood, and the bittersweet longing for woman's love is transcended by the love of God; hence, the permanence and security of eternity are associated with the most pleasurable echoes of earthly life and the blissful oblivion of sleep in God's presence provides balm for the wounds of madness.

In "A Vision", however, the yearnings of "I am" are superseded by a far more active and dramatic projection of the poetic imagination. Like a number of Clare's finest poems, this lyric possesses an august prophetic tone, almost reminiscent of Blake. Here, the poet is seen as a Promethean figure who bursts the bonds of mortality in a vision of artistic freedom. The Romantic ideas of the Solitary and the poet as seer are particularly appropriate here. Moreover, this is a peculiarly personal triumph, achieved by means of a singular dedication to the poetic vocation. Far from being one of the "unacknowledged legislators of the world", in Shelley's terms, Clare here proclaims himself as an artist with the most astonishing powers. The ninefold repetition of the pronoun "I" reveals how, in this extraordinary

vision, the poet's being swells to cosmic proportions, **uplifted** by his own imaginative vigour:

I **LOST** the love of heaven above
I spurned the lust of earth below
I felt the sweets of fancied love
And hell itself my only foe

I lost earth's joys but felt the glow
Of heaven's flame abound in me
Till loveliness and I did grow
The bard of immortality

I loved but woman fell away
I hid me from her faded fame
I snatched the sun's eternal ray
And wrote till earth was but a name

In every language upon earth
On every shore, o'er every sea,
I gave my name immortal birth,
And kept my spirit with the free
August 2nd 1844

(SPPJC, 198)

A rich ambivalence pervades the first two stanzas. In the first, the poet forfeits the love of "heaven", presumably associated with the comforts of orthodox religion, and rejects the "lust of earth below", probably indicating the various attractions that earth can offer rather than the purely sexual connotations of the term. In the third line, the negatives are cancelled by his attraction to "the sweets of fancied love": presumably a love which transcends that of earthly loves and involves a much wider spiritual dimension. Similarly, "hell", in line four, can be viewed in a number of ways; possibly it refers to madness or even carries its usual religious connotations.

The second stanza completes the renunciation of earth's joys and, now, in seeming contradiction to the first stanza, "heaven's flame" is said to inspire him. Clearly, heaven is here being used in a

rather different sense, this time with connotations of supreme artistic and spiritual freedom, rather than with the more conventional Christian ideas of the communal bliss of God's saints. Thus, in line three, he actually unites with the abstract quality of "loveliness", incarnating it himself and becoming a majestic poet-seer, a "bard of immortality".

The third stanza marks a severance from earthly, sensual love and the achievement of a higher freedom. Woman's "faded fame" is unworthy of him; his vision of fame must now transcend all earthly criteria. In the two final lines, he reaches out in a titanic posture of defiance to make himself master of "the sun's eternal ray"; the sun suggests the very source of creativity and imagination, which he now appropriates for his own artistic ends. Such, indeed, is its power that earth itself is "but a name" in comparison with his artistry. In this supreme gesture, he becomes like one of the bodhisattvas of Mahayana Buddhism, exceeding even the gods themselves in stature.

The apotheosis of the poet is completed in the final stanza, as he dons the mantle of the word incarnate and spreads his art and name all over the world. Thus he, like Christ, attains "immortal birth", assuming the powers of the great "I am", and he becomes in his own person the source of what Coleridge called "the Primary Imagination". This is truly Clare's vision of the "egotistical sublime" - a vision in which he becomes totally self-sufficient and a supreme artist, emulating God in his solitary bliss.

However, this precarious moment of exaltation is counterbalanced

by the antithetical experience of "Sonnet:I am". In this sonnet, he reaches his spiritual nadir; all of his high aspirations are overturned and, as in the first section of "I am", he is confronted afresh with the intolerable burden of his own personality. At the same time, the memory of his glorious sense of exaltation in some past experience is ineradicably and tormentingly ingrained within him. But this sense of the emptiness of the present now outweighs the sublime memory of his visionary experience:

I **FEEL** I am, I only know I am
And plod upon the earth as dull and void
Earth's prison chilled my body with its dram
Of dullness, and my soaring thoughts destroyed.
I fled to solitudes from passions dream
But strife pursued-I only know I am.
I was a being created in the race
Of men disdaining bounds of place and time-
A spirit that could travel o'er the space
Of earth and heaven-like a thought sublime,
Tracing creation, like my maker, free-
A soul unshackled like eternity,
Spurning earth's vain and soul debasing thrall
But now I only know I am- that's all.

(SPPJC, 196)

Structurally, the sonnet is interesting. The octave/sestet division of the conventional sonnet is reversed so that the sestet describes the poet's ennui and the octave looks retrospectively at his past experience. The whole is given a tightly-knit unity by means of the similarity of the first, sixth and last lines; the circular motion of his gloomy thoughts brings him back to the grim reality of the final line and completes the sense of incarceration. The despair of the sestet is given added weight by the prevalence of heavy monosyllables in the first two lines, which conjure up the sound of a prisoner trudging wearily in his chains. Clearly, the

poem's title links it closely with "I am" but it is far more pessimistic for, in "I am", he at least looks forward to the peaceful sleep of heaven at the end of his spiritual and mental torments on earth. But in "Sonnet: I am", the memory of what has been achieved in the past merely adds to the unrelieved suffering of the poet in the present.

The dualism of body and spirit is certainly a pronounced feature of the sonnet. Indeed, Clare displays an almost Gnostic distrust of the body, seeing it as part of a lower order that is to be discarded when the spirit is freed. Hence, the poet feels "dull" and "void" and "chilled" as the vision fades and the destruction of his "soaring thoughts" reduces life in the mortal world to a hollow shell. In the fifth line, the familiar thought of human love - "passions dream" - is rejected and the poet flees to "solitude": whether this refers to nature's solitude or to that of his heart it is difficult to judge. Yet he is still pursued by "strife", which probably indicates the pain and misunderstanding that have dogged him in love during the past. Indeed, the unsatisfactory nature of love is reinforced by the grim refrain - "I only know I am" - which confronts him again with the burden of his own identity.

In the octave, Clare reflects upon his lofty aspirations. He was one of those created to exist beyond the bounds of "place and time", spurning the humdrum world. Hence, he sees himself as the magus of "A Vision", with unlimited spiritual and artistic freedom. Freedom and "eternity" are directly equated in line twelve: earthly life constitutes a "soul debasing thrall", a familiar Platonic concept. In a sense, his confinement in the asylum can be

seen as an analogue of the human condition itself. Finally, the long majestic sentence which began in the seventh line and continues to the thirteenth line, is suffixed by a short blunt sentence recalling line one: there is a wealth of understatement in "that's all" and an ironic contrast between his vision and the pitiful reality which ensues. The focus shrinks from a vision of eternity down to one wretched mortal and the word "all" aptly embraces the redundancy of his earthly existence.

These lyrics are clearly amongst Clare's finest creations and the Tibbles have, as stated, referred to them as "semi-mystical". However, mysticism implies the realisation of unity with a person or principle infinitely greater than oneself, as Parrinder has demonstrated.⁽⁵⁾ Clearly, one must be careful about applying such a loose term to these lyrics, for the goal of each poem varies. In "An Invite to Eternity", Clare and the maiden are bound to one destiny, whereas in "I am", the poet desires a dreamless sleep in God's presence: there is no union with God in either poem. In "A Vision", Clare actually usurps the attributes of godhead himself, whereas in "Sonnet: I am" he undergoes not unity but a feeling of dissociation from the previous self-apotheosis. But, however parlous it may be to describe these poems as "semi-mystical", it is certain that each illuminates a different aspect of Clare's isolation.

The mood of pessimism expressed in some of the 1844 lyrics is resumed in several other fine poems of this decade. In the "Sonnet" which begins "Enough of misery keeps my heart alive...", there is an almost Buddhist sense of the suffering that life involves; of course, this misery is exacerbated by Clare's confinement in the asylum.

Here, Clare strives manfully to avoid self-pity and, as in the earlier "Love and Solitude" (Poems 2, 375), he looks towards woman's love as a haven from isolation: here, as in "Child Harold", "love" and "truth" abide supremely in the relationship between a man and a woman. The last four lines assert love's supremacy, but also underline the high value of family ties far more eloquently than any of his letters to his own distant family:

ENOUGH of misery keeps my heart alive
To make it feel more mental agony:
Till even life itself becomes all pain,
And bondage more than hell to keep alive;
And still I live, nor murmur nor complain,
Save that the bonds which hold me may make free
My lonely solitude and give me rest,
When every foe hath ceased to trouble me
On the soft throbbing of a woman's breast;
Where love and truth and feeling live confest.
The little cottage with those bonds of joy
My family-life's blood within my breast
Is not more dear than is each girl and boy
Which time matures and nothing can destroy.

(SPJC, 299)

In the sonnet, "Written in Prison", the element of pathos is much stronger and, were it not for the intensity of the imagery, the poem would be weakened considerably. Clare traces back to his childhood his love of solitude and nature, together with the innate sensitivity which alienated him from his fellow men. His own value as an individual is seen against his background of poverty and the implacable scorn of his contemporaries. Moreover, the sonnet is neatly rounded off by the reference to the fly, whose freedom the poet envies: the first reference to the fly is in the present tense and the second is set in the past, thus stressing the continuity of misery through his life:

I **ENVY** e'en the fly its gleams of joy
 In the green woods; from being but a boy
 Among the vulgar and the lowly bred,
 I envied e'en the hare her grassy bed.
 Inured to strife and hardships from a child,
 I traced with lonely step the desert wild;
 Sighed o'er bird pleasures, but no nest destroyed;
 With pleasure felt the singing they enjoyed;
 Saw nature smile on all and shed no tears,
 A slave through ages, though a child in years;
 The mockery and scorn of those more old,
 An Aesop in the world's extended fold.
 The fly I envy settling in the sun
 On the green leaf, and wish my goal was won.

(SPJC, 341)

In a short poem, "A Regret", Clare briefly captures the acute tedium of an existence which is deprived of the joys of love, friendship and freedom. The repeated negatives emphasize the desolation of the mood:

I'VE none to love and none to fear
 And none to meet at gloaming,
 For I'm a woe-worn prisoner here,
 No more with freedom roaming;
 Shut up from friends and all beside,
 With none to sit beside me,
 How gloomy now the moments glide
 Where sore oppressions hide me!

(Poems 2, 520)

The lyric "Left Alone" extends these feelings of gloom to a wider scope. The weather is used as an effective metaphor for the poet's grief. His isolation blights his perceptions to the degree that the world itself is deprived of any meaning: the long third and sixth lines help to prolong the idea of a monotonous existence, full of unending weariness:

LEFT in the world alone,
Where nothing seems my own,
And everything is weariness to me,
'Tis a life without an end,
'Tis a world without a friend,
And everything is sorrowful I see.

(Poems 2, 522)

In the final stanza, the bleak image of the stone hints at the way in which the poet has been depersonalised by the tedious existence that he endures: he is reduced to an inanimate object in a wintry landscape:

The sun shines wan and pale,
Chill blows the northern gale,
And odd leaves shake and quiver on the tree,
While I am left alone,
Chilled as a mossy stone,
And all the world is frowning over me.

(Poems 2, 522)

As mentioned previously, the bulk of "The Knight Transcripts" consists of love lyrics and ballads addressed to sundry country lasses. These poems recreate the joys of youthful courtship, often in a sentimental and straightforward way. Clare obviously endeavoured to stave off despondency by re-awakening the pleasant memories of his youth and celebrating the more positive aspects of love. But a number of Northampton lyrics give vent to the darker side of love: the waning of affections, the sadness of parting and the feeling of abandonment left in its wake.

The first of these is a powerful lyric entitled "Stanzas", where the poet struggles to recall the countenance of a dark-haired maiden whom he once loved deeply. But the passing of time has all but erased the features of the woman from the poet's mind. It may

well be that the poem reflects Clare's dismay about the confusion between fact and fantasy in his own mind as he struggled against the insidious effects of his psychosis. But whatever the motives behind its composition, the poem is an impressive technical achievement. The three eight-line stanzas are each formed from two quatrains: these enable the poet to counterpoint memory and desire, past and present, and light and darkness with great subtlety. Indeed, as the poem progresses, the vagueness of the woman's features is dispelled, and, in the second and third stanzas, her beauty becomes so clearly formed that it completely dominates the poet's thoughts. The last stanza reveals how the poet has secretly cherished her image in his mind: now, however, her impression on his mind has become so overwhelming that he is obsessed by it and everything else seems to lose its reality and fade from view. The woman's appearance is certainly not that of Mary and seems more reminiscent of Patty in her younger years; the more sensual aspects of her appearance are heavily stressed. However, she goes unnamed (despite the fact that the poet claims to know her name in stanza two) and, once more, we are left to feel that perhaps Jung's theory of the dark aspect of the anima may amplify her significance for us:

BLACK absence hides upon the past,
I quite forget thy face;
And memory like the angry blast
Will love's last smile erase.
I try to think of what has been,
But all is blank to me;
And other faces pass between
My early love and thee.

I try to trace thy memory now,
And only find thy name;
Those inky lashes on thy brow,
Black hair and eyes the same;
Thy round pale face of snowy dyes,
There's nothing paints thee there.
A darkness comes before my eyes
For nothing seems so fair.

I knew thy name so sweet and young;
'Twas music to my ears,
A silent word upon my tongue,
A hidden thought for years.
Dark hair and lashes swarthy too,
Arched on thy forehead pale:
All else is vanished from my view
Like voices on the gale.

(SPJC, 295)

Unfortunately, however real the woman might seem, she cannot be with him physically, for it is obviously many years since they have met. Hence, in spite of the grip that her image exerts upon him, she cannot meet him in person. Thus, in spite of the joy that her memory brings in the second and third stanzas, the first stanza's warning that absence and the passing of time must be faced still sounds a menacing note and reminds us of the dichotomy between memory and absence.

Although a number of poems give a grim appraisal of the poet's loneliness in the asylum, there are signs elsewhere that he is able to come to terms with it. By turning his attention to composition, Clare was at least able to give some substance to happy memories and to forget his isolation at times. His final long poem, "A Rhapsody", (PJCM, 211) which dates from 1853, celebrates the joys of nature and his last poem of all, "Birds'-Nests" (SPJC, 343) which was written with difficulty, once more focuses on the more tranquil aspects of nature and seems to suggest a coming to terms with the limitations of his existence. From the later 1840s comes a remarkable, childlike poem, "Clock-a-Clay". The deceptive simplicity of this poem, with its insistent, repetitive rhythm masks Clare's astonishing ability to share the life of the ladybird, and, in this case, to achieve an empathic identification with it. The bird poems of The Midsummer

Cushion had already demonstrated Clare's skill in subjecting birdlife to his intimate and reverential analysis, but, here, the poet identifies himself with the fragile and vulnerable existence of the ladybird. The ladybird itself is snugly ensconced within the cowslips, protected from the inclement weather, and it leads a lonely, self-contained existence:

Day by day and night by night,
All the week I hide from sight;
In the cowslips peeps I lie,
In rain and dew still warm and dry;
Day and night, and night and day,
Red, black-spotted clock-a-clay.

My home it shakes in wind and showers,
Pale green pillar top't wi' flowers,
Bending at the wild wind's breath,
Till I touch the grass beneath;
Here still I live, lone clock-a-clay,
Watching for the time of day.

(SPJC, 316)

The poem which perhaps epitomizes Clare's lifelong love of solitude more than any other is a single Spenserian stanza written in 1847 and entitled quite simply "Solitude". Solitude is here regarded both as a haven from the malice and ignorance of those who despise nature and as the cornucopia of peace and harmony. The reconciliation with nature's healing powers is seen in the fact that "Green solitude", though seemingly a prison, represents true freedom. Moreover, the striking identification with Robinson Crusoe, one of Clare's boyhood heroes, suggests the fact that he too could be content and self-sufficient amid the wilds of nature and far from men:

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 field
Whose dark green oaks his noontide leisure shield.

(PJCM, 159)

Thus, the verse of the Northampton period highlights more clearly than ever the importance and complexity of the theme of isolation. At one level, the magnificent 1844 lyrics emerge from Clare's titanic struggle against the forces of mental disintegration, the lack of friends, the absence of literary stimulus, and his responses to these problems. The defiance, the despair and the occasional moments of illumination are clearly articulated. The dark side of love and the effects that absence could have upon a lonely poet are seen in the moving lyric entitled "Stanzas". On the other hand, the surpassing worth of the poetic vocation-in spite of the neglect of men- can be seen in Ms.110. For a while, at least, Clare was attracted by the hope of the salvation of God's elect, as his metrical paraphrases reveal.

However, it seemed to be the therapeutic values of solitude and nature which yielded some solace to Clare in his final years at Northampton. Thus, most of the themes which greatly concerned Clare during his career are taken up, sometimes in new and unexpected contexts, in the asylum verse. Throughout "The Knight Transcripts", love, nature, solitude and poetry continued to be Clare's main preoccupations. In the face of growing mental confusion, the inevitable encroachment of old age, the lack of companions and artistic stimulus, Clare held steadfastly to his vocation and remained a poet to the last.

Endnotes to Chapter Five

- (1) Salman Al-Wasiti, "English Romantic Poetry..." Appendix B, pp. 453-8
- (2) D.J. Fant ed, The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Glasgow, 1952, p.530
- (3) **D.J. Fant ed,** The Holy Bible p. 531
- (4) Al-Wasiti, "English Romantic Poetry...", p.313
- (5) Geoffrey Parrinder, Mysticism in the World's Religions, London, 1976, p. 15

CONCLUSION: "The Quiet Progress of a Name"-
 Isolation in Perspective

From the study of the preceding chapters, it is hoped that two salient features will emerge. The first of these is the prevalence of the theme of isolation in Clare's poetry from Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery, through to "The Knight Transcripts". The second is the importance of this theme for any understanding of his work, and its clear relationship with other major ideas in his verse. Thus, isolation appears in many guises and links with such diverse preoccupations as love, nature, poetry, the past and the search for spiritual fulfilment. This is not, of course, to say that isolation can provide the definitive key to his verse but it can at least offer a fruitful means of exploration.

A number of important questions and problems are raised by any consideration of this theme. It will by now be obvious that Clare's oft-expressed love for solitude did not involve a total withdrawal from mankind such as a hermit monk might desire. For Clare, solitude invariably meant being alone amid the rich, varied delights of nature: a separation from other men which led him to appreciate more fully the mysterious ways of wildlife. The positive virtues of this desire have already been noted: Clare was able to gain a remarkably detailed insight into bird and plant life and to gain a kind of spiritual and aesthetic satisfaction which had fruitful repercussions in terms of poetic creativity. On the other hand, the destructive effects of Clare's tendency to separate himself from his fellow men have been remarked upon. There is indeed a clear irony here, for Clare was a man to whom friendship was vitally important: he greatly

enjoyed his visits to London and his correspondence with Mrs Emerson, Taylor and other literary figures. A life of complete isolation without friends or family was never his goal; unfortunately, just such a state of isolation became his fate during the asylum years. It is indeed lucky that Clare was encouraged to write at Northampton by Knight and Inskip, for, without their friendship, he would certainly have found it difficult to continue versifying for so long. The decline in the quality of his verse, following the loss of these friends, is noteworthy. Clearly, Clare needed to find a balance between his desire for solitude and his need for friendships with people of sensitivity and artistic talent. Unfortunately, from the mid-1820s and with the decline in his commercial success, he found it more difficult to keep in contact with erstwhile friends. A sensitive peasant poet in his situation needed substantial financial, emotional and aesthetic assistance if he were to continue his vocation successfully. Sadly, he did not receive sufficient assistance and, inevitably, financial and domestic pressures uncovered his instability and toppled his sanity.

However, it is possible to discern more clearly how certain of Clare's personality traits and attitudes towards life contributed to his ultimate isolation and descent into madness. Clare's unbending insistence upon continuing to write verse, even in the face of the delays in the publication of The Shepherd's Calendar, when he realised that the changing tastes of the public would render his writing unprofitable, is typical of his sturdy independence of mind and his dedication to a lonely and precarious vocation. This decision to continue writing in an unfashionable style, in the hope that one day he might attain true fame, was completely laudable in

terms of artistic integrity, but it was bound to result in financial ruin. Clare saw himself as a poet above all else and, during the 1820s, he would only revert to seasonal labouring when compelled to supplement his income.

Moreover, as has been noted in some detail, Clare's overall vision tended to be a retrospective one. The dominant mood of many poems throughout his career is one of yearning, either for the pre-enclosure landscape, for his first love or for the joys of childhood. Even though the poems of The Midsummer Cushion reflect a healthy present-centred enjoyment of nature, there is sometimes a sense, as in "The Voice of Nature", that nature retains the glory of a grander lost paradise, wherein man and all creatures were in harmony. It is also highly significant that, after 1824, Clare seldom attempted again to find a social embodiment of his poetic vision. "The Parish" and, later, "Don Juan" reflect a deeply pessimistic view of society. After 1824, Clare concentrated on nature, poetry, the love of man and woman and various personal issues at the expense of attempts to formulate a large-scale social perspective. This last criticism has been made most forcibly by E.J. Bush, who maintains that, unlike other Romantic poets, Clare failed signally in creating a positive vision of society.⁽¹⁾ Neither The Village Minstrel nor The Shepherd's Calendar, both of which touch upon aspects of the rural community, could be said to aspire towards a comprehensive vision.

That there is much truth in some of these allegations cannot be denied. Clare's work is lacking in a future-orientated perspective and, even in the verse of the early 1820s, he is continually harking back to the departed joys of the past, as The Village Minstrel amply reveals. However, his background was far more impoverished than that

of the other Romantics and the consequent financial and domestic burdens upon him were more crippling than those of his fellow poets. Moreover, he experienced rejection at the hands of his local community in Helpston and increasingly from his London acquaintances and the reading public. Further, it could hardly be expected that a poet certified as insane and isolated in two different asylums from family and friends, could generate the optimism to fashion a communal vision, especially when the wider community had served him so badly and when he had to battle **even to retain** his own identity. That Clare never lost faith in human relationships is evident from his pathetic asylum letters to his family and from the large body of love poetry which he continued to write well into the 1850s. Also, the Biblical paraphrases of 1841 give indications of a belief in an elect community of believers whose salvation would be assured even after the rest of sinful humanity had been destroyed. This vision does seem to have been relatively short-lived since later lyrics such as "A Vision" revert to a more solitary view of the poet's destiny. Nevertheless, this reveals that amid all the strictures of the asylum régime, Clare did not become a complete misanthropist.

Overall then, Clare's sense of isolation was a complex phenomenon, formed by several factors. Though Clare was influenced by the eighteenth-century retirement poets and by his Romantic contemporaries, his sense of isolation was distinctively personal. His background of rural poverty, his anomalous status as a peasant poet, his dedication to a kind of poetry which went rapidly out of fashion, ~~and~~ his own deep-rooted instability and spiritual malaise, all combined to heighten his sense of isolation in a unique way. On the other

hand, his isolation was not so tied to purely local features that its impact cannot be felt by readers of our own time; hence the reason why his verse has increased in popularity over recent decades. The sense of isolation which pervades "The Nightmare", "Decay", "Child Harold" and the 1844 lyrics is universal in scope, and the angst and meaninglessness which are so poignantly portrayed in several Northampton lyrics find their echo in much modern literature. This explains the upsurge of critical interest in the great 1844 lyrics in recent years. Furthermore, there is in much of Clare's work a profound yearning to escape from the ill-effects of isolation and to find some form of spiritual fulfilment, which Greg Crossan has described as "a relish for eternity". (2) For Clare, man was no mere "poor, bare, fork'd animal" but a dignified being with immense creative potential and a breadth of imagination that the limitations of humanity could not stifle. It is perhaps in the lyric "A Vision" that these high aspirations are supremely embodied. J.W. Beach, in his The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry, discusses the idea of spiritual isolation with regard to the Romantic poets and, though he does not allude to Clare, his words are especially relevant to Clare's problems as man and poet:

One of the hardest things for man to bear is spiritual isolation. The sense that he stands alone in the universe goes terribly against his gregarious sentiments. He is so frail and ineffectual a being, his experience and achievement fall so far short of what his ranging imagination conceives and his impetuous heart demands! He has an overpowering impulse to construct a system which will enable him to feel that he does not stand alone but is intimately associated with some force or group, infinitely more powerful and significant than himself. In religion he may feel himself thus intimately associated with God and with other holy beings - the community of saints. With the waning of religious faith he grasps at nature - at the great benevolent order of things in which every

individual is provided for in the harmonious plan of the whole; which speaks to him through every lovely and sublime object, and in whose eternal flux, while he may be lost, he is yet not ineffectual or without significance....

(3)

This passage is certainly applicable to Clare's sense of isolation and his desire to escape from it through communion with nature and through his own visions of a community of **saints** in the Biblical paraphrases. However, it must be borne in mind that, for Clare, the determination to retain his sense of individuality and the sacredness of personal identity always counterbalanced his tendency to merge himself with nature or into a wider community.

Finally, the vexed question of Clare's stature as a poet must be examined. Here, his handling of the theme of isolation can give us only a partial glimpse into an assessment of his achievement. The limitations of his vision, as indicated by E. J. Bush, ⁽¹⁾ have already been alluded to: to an extent, Clare was certainly hampered by escapist tendencies. It may further be alleged that Clare's inability to formulate a clear ars poetica and a comprehensive philosophy weigh against our assessment of him as a major Romantic poet. Moreover, his lifelong difficulties with spelling and punctuation must also count against him when allowances have been made for the fact that he received little formal education. Yet, in spite of these objections, his talent was, as Robert Shaw noted in his centenary comments on Clare, "an immensely and rewardingly varied one".⁽⁴⁾ There is a ruggedness and unmistakable individuality about Clare's verse, born of his desire to forge his own style of detailed descriptive nature poetry and deal with the eternal verities. Clare's eschewal of fashionable idioms, his use of authentic dialect words in his richly detailed nature poetry,

the searing intensity of his later lyrics and the sense of being a lone figure, standing against the shallowness and deceit of the world at large, all combine to give his work a refreshing distinctiveness. He must be appraised on his own merits and not as a mere shadow of Wordsworth or Coleridge. Edmund Blunden's comments made in the mid-1960s are still relevant to the present state of criticism on Clare:

He is still too little known, and perhaps is one of the English writers whom it is singularly difficult to estimate. To label him as one of the best nature poets is easy but incomplete; to regard his work in an artistic sense, or in its intellectual or philosophical light, as of the very highest order, is to invite storms....

(5)

It is hoped that the present study will throw some light on this confused picture and contribute towards the understanding of Clare's highly individual achievement.

Endnotes to Conclusion

- (1) E. H. ~~John~~ Bush, "The Poetry of John Clare..." pp. 342-9
- (2) See Greg Crossan, A Relish for Eternity..., Salzburg, 1976
- (3) Joseph W. Beach, "The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry", New York, 1956, pp 8-9
- (4) Robert Shaw, "John Clare's 'Paradise Lost'-and Regained", Northamptonshire Past and Present, 1964 (iii) pp.201-2. Quoted by Mark Storey in Clare: The Critical Heritage, London, 1973, p.440
- (5) Edmund Blunden, "Poet of Common Objects", The Daily Telegraph, 11th. June 1964, p.20. Quoted by Storey, Clare: The Critical Heritage, p.440

List of Works Consulted

The list of works given here in no way constitutes a complete bibliography of materials available on Clare. It contains only the primary and secondary sources most relevant to this thesis. The most comprehensive bibliography on Clare yet compiled appears in Dr. Greg Crossan's A Relish for Eternity: The Process of Divinization in the Poetry of John Clare.

Primary Sources

(1) British Museum Manuscripts.

Ms. Egerton 2245 - 2250: six volumes of letters to Clare from Taylor, Hessey, Radstock, Drury, Mrs. Emerson and others.

(2) Northampton Manuscripts

The second largest Clare collection in existence. It includes material from all periods in his career, especially his letters and asylum poems.

Amongst the latter are:

Ms. 6) containing "Don Juan" and "Child Harold"

Ms. 8)

Ms.20: Volumes 1 and 2, "The Knight Transcripts" (many still unpublished).

The collection has been catalogued by:

Powell, David: "The John Clare Collection in Northampton Public Library," Library World, No.65, May 1964, pp. 262-263

(3) Peterborough Manuscripts

The largest single collection of Clare manuscripts, containing most of the pre-asylum poetry and prose.

This has been catalogued by:

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(4) Microfilms

Both the Northampton and Peterborough collections are now available on microfilm from:

E.P. Microfilms Limited, Wakefield, Yorkshire.

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The Shepherd's Calendar: with Village Stories and Other Poems.

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