THEMES OF REFUGE IN JOHN CLARE'S POETRY

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THOMAS DAWE

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THEMES OF REFUGE
IN JOHN CLARE'S POETRY

by

Thomas Dawe, B.A. (Ed.), B.A.

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Memorial University of Newfoundland

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ABSTRACT

Themes of refuge pervade the poetry of English poet, John Clare (1793-1864). Several of those themes can be examined by considering a wide range of Clare's poetry in which he is preoccupied with motifs of security, shelter, and retreat from the cares and disappointments of society, seeking instead his private world of peaceful contemplation and vision.

Clare's emphasis on a visionary Eden can be considered as a theme of refuge in his poetry; the poet takes the Garden symbol of biblical and Romantic tradition and adapts it to his own particular system. In his Eden poems, Clare can turn away from the miseries of his deprived life and envision a place of constant, timeless beauty, spiritual presence, innocence, glory, and natural freshness. Motifs of spring and childhood are frequent in this context as Clare returns often in his imagination to that perfect setting before the axe of enclosure chopped down most of the trees, and the adult state of reason ended the child's world of wonder and fantasy. Also relative to the Eden refuge in Clare's poetry is the way he celebrates all Sabbath moments, however brief, as heavenly breaks from sweaty labour, the curse of man's Fall.

Clare's companion in this Paradise is Mary, his ideal, spiritual lady; from his childhood sweetheart, Mary Joyce, she developed, over the years, into the poet's perfect Platonic wife, his symbol of timeless beauty, his muse, his guardian angel, his benign goddess, and into a number of various other special female figures. In Mary's divine company, Clare feels safe from the toils of life; without her, however, he feels doomed with all the rank and file of fallen humanity, destined for anxiety, sorrow, depression and the nightmare of hell.

There are a number of other retreat themes in Clare's poetry: sheltered nooks in a pleasant, natural landscape away from the din of labour, comfortable shades that enclose the poet in an atmosphere conducive to imagination's pleasures, the bird's nest secure in the protection of nature's bosom away from insensitive man, and the domestic retreat, the snug, tidy nest of a cottage where the poet can still feel nature's influence as he reads or dreams in peace far away from the noisy world. In this latter aspect, Clare sometimes echoes the poetry of William Cowper who also celebrates the bliss of the simple, cottage retreat.

In all his modes of refuge and retreat, in his exercise of imaginative vision, Clare is intimate with all the positive entities of the natural world. Eden and Mary can continually bloom for him again as long as he keeps his

heart and imagination true to his recreation of those confined, special places in the sheltered landscape of Helpstone, his blessed childhood home.

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INTRODUCTION

Themes of refuge are prominent in the poetry of John Clare (1793-1864). Throughout his poems conceived and written in Helpstone (1809-1832), those composed during his stays at Northborough (1832-1837 and 1841), and those written in the mental hospitals at High Beech, Epping (1837-1841), and Northampton Asylum (1842-1864), motifs of shelter and retreat abound. From the cruel realities of his life, described by Geoffrey Grigson as "a history of deprivations",[1] Clare turns to the haven of his poetic imagination.

In his flight from the actual world of care and misery, Clare exhibits those "areas of experience"[2] shared by writers of the Romantic movement; for example, his emphasis on the sensitive individual apart from an indifferent society, his closeness to nature, his stand against reason as the governing principle of men's lives, and his creation of art out of states of sadness, melancholy and despair. He also displays a wide sense of love as a true and governing ideal far above the mere purpose of physical

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[1] Mark Storey, ed., Clare: The Critical Heritage, London, 1973, p. 409. (Hereafter referred to as Criticism.)

[2] Howard E. Hugo, "Introduction", The Portable Romantic Reader, Viking Press, New York, 1960, pp. 1-25. (Hereafter referred to as Reader.)

satisfaction. In his isolation he looks to a golden age of the past, an Eden that provides him with a satisfying unity that he finds missing in the present. The poet himself is a type of Romantic hero in his quest for a perfect landscape apart from a practical, labour-bound world that fails to see any connection between imagination and reality. He seeks a timeless, visionary anchorage where a child can still be happy in a benign and beautiful landscape.

The symbol of the Garden of Eden and other related biblical motifs are all significant in Clare's writing. Though he sometimes displays scorn for society's institutionalized Christianity and belittles the value of the parson's Sunday sermons, Clare knows his Bible. He is aware of the Eden of Genesis with its story of man's first garden, a state of perfection, prime innocence, bliss, wonder, beauty, and closeness to Divinity. He is also aware of the poetic tradition of Eden, for he often compares his own Paradise with "those Edens by the poets sung."[3] In his vision of the Garden as some ideal representation of pure landscape, poetry, and innocent, unconscious communication with nature, Clare is similar to the Romantic writers who often see in Eden the epitome of a number of features that

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[3] The Poems of John Clare, ed. J.W. Tibble (2 vols.), London, 1935, p. 5, vol. I. (Hereafter indicated by page and volume number in brackets after titles of poems and quotations.)

appeal to their Romantic temperaments: the unique Adam, the individual unlike anybody else, man as a blessed child not tormented by the reason of a more mature world, and man experiencing a communion with a spiritual being and participating fully in a love outside the limitation of mere sexuality. The fresh wonders of nature, the utopian setting, the isolation from crowded, human society, the harmony of God, man, and the natural elements, the non-pragmatic state, past glory, creation out of darkness and chaos, are all elements of interest to the Romantic. In Eden they see man uncluttered by class and racial distinctions, social rules, the demeaning facts of labour, reasoning philosophies, and all the other blights that followed the Fall.[4]

Other biblical motifs such as the visions of the prophets, the spirit of Christ who is the Second Adam,[5] angelic and other divine figures, power falling from Heaven, rapture, heaven on earth, inspiration, and wide notions of Christianity outside of any church context, are all related to the refuge and sanctuary of Clare's Eden. With his imagination the poet can always realize a victory of spirit over matter because anytime he fails to find the Garden in his immediate landscape he can always create it and cause

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[4]Genesis 3.

[5]I Corinthians 15: 45-47. See also Romans 5.

Eden to flower for him again. He shares this power with the Creator in Genesis who brings light, life, color, shape and structure out of the dark void.

The themes of refuge in Clare's poetry may be considered under the topics of "Eden", "Mary", and "Other Retreats" which are all related by their motifs of shelter or asylum.

Chapter One of this thesis considers several aspects of Eden[6] in Clare's poetry. The poet regards this prime landscape as a radiant retreat of innocence and freshness outside the stifling limits of the adult world with its cares and sorrows. The poet's ideal haven with its connotations of a natural, unspoiled setting is akin to the atmosphere of each new spring that offers the sensitive person a genesis of hope and renewal. Clare often writes about the glowing promise of spring in the revival of the flowers when "the time of the singing of birds is come."[7]

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[6]The theme of Eden in Clare's poetry is briefly mentioned by J. Middleton Murry and Harold Bloom in Storey's Criticism (pp. 332 and 431). E. Robinson and G. Summerfield see Eden as part of a "conscious pattern" in Clare's poetry in their Introduction to Clare: Selected Poems and Prose, London (1966), 1970, p. 18. Mark Storey's The Poetry of John Clare: A Critical Introduction (London, 1974, pp. 13-14 and 98-106) briefly considers Clare's theme of Eden. For a fuller study of this theme see Janet Todd, In Adam's Garden, Florida, 1973, although this study deals with only Clare's pre-asylum poetry.

[7]Song of Solomon 2:12.

Though, in despair, he sometimes views the harsh facts of his life in terms of winter's blight and storm, he often seeks the refuge of his eternal spring where Paradise still blooms and a new creation is always possible for him. Relative to this visionary setting are the many poems about children which indicate how Clare views the initial years of human life as a blessed existence close to nature in a genuine poetic atmosphere. He considers it tragic that all children grow away from the brilliant sphere of wonder, fantasy and pure magic, and become locked in the rigid bounds of adult maturity, fixed in the chains of labour and pragmatic reasoning. Sometimes in his poems, therefore, Clare regards himself as a fortunate child who has retained an unaffected sense of wonderment, as one who experiences novelty in each day's natural spectacle. That is why Arthur Symons writes that Clare's "feeling towards things was always that of a child, and as he lived so he wrote, by recollection."[8] Clare seeks comfort and stability in the pattern he creates from such recollections throughout his poetry; these sharp reflections remain clear and vivid for the poet even as material things alter and fade away.

Another aspect of the prime, visionary world of Clare is that it often exists in a verdant, pre-enclosure

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[8] Criticism, p. 305.

setting, a Paradise that has since been ruined by the merciless axe of man and his insensitive government, all in the name of "progress". Even the presence of Nature herself seems to mourn with the depressed poet when he recalls the lush glory of the original, beautiful earth. His grief, however, does not entirely subdue or overpower him because a breath of Eden can still fan his visage; though the immediate view appears as sadly scarred and spoiled, the poetic imagination transforms the doleful area into a visionary sphere, a landscape in which the simple natural objects appear charged with some powerful, invisible energy.

Another interesting feature of Clare's Eden is the way he joyfully anticipates any Sabbath break from the routine of stolid toil and labour; he celebrates, in his poetry, all moments of prime leisure and positive freedom that were lost when Adam failed in Eden and thus doomed mankind to a burdensome life of bread-winning as a slave of the clock in a climate of perpetual sweat and wrinkled brows. In his keen dislike for such obtuse, non-poetic labour, Clare hopefully looks toward the richness of every single moment outside the restrictions of a commonplace, work-day world. He extols the Edenic liberty of intervals such as Sunday, the calm respite of evening, the pleasant lull of early morning, and even those abbreviated lunch breaks when the sweating workers can seek their pleasant

nooks and groves. As the sounds of toil fade across the contours of the land, the poet sees beauty in the idle plough silently at rest in the tranquil fields. This discarded tool on its side in the grass and flowers seems to be a symbol of labour's ceasing; now work is over and it reposes as a pleasant seat for some playing children or a sportive object in a landscape of complete freedom. Clare views such Sabbath moments as generous portions of a greater Eden.

Chapter Two examines the theme of Mary in Clare's poetry. Though he laments the loss of Mary Joyce, his childhood sweetheart, a girl who never knew about the poet's boyish adoration for her, he is comforted all the rest of his life by the image of a special Mary. Taking the place of Mary, the farmer's daughter, is a visionary lady of the poet's Garden; she who is the true "Eve of his Eden"[9] becomes his phantom guide and comforting Platonic consort. As his "spiritual companion",[10] she appears as a symbol of timeless beauty and essential innocence. She remains an element of refuge in Clare's poetry; in fact, she is the inspiration for a number of his poems. As the poet's religious ideal, she is identified with, or shares the

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[9]Robinson and Summerfield, op. cit., p. 21.

[10]Naomi Lewis, "Clare As A Lyric Poet", Criticism, p. 422.

essential attributes of other female apparitions in his work: guiding spirits who lead him into the paths of excellence, and other figures of delight such as dream maidens, angels, ethereal charmers, and protective goddesses.

Clare often sees Mary within the pleasant forms of nature around him and even speaks to her through the gentle elements in his solitary moments. He is more comfortable talking to the trees, the nodding flowers, the parting grasses, the passing clouds, than to any women in the flesh. For Clare, true love is equated with undisturbed, placid things far removed from the commonplace lusts of man. He sometimes sees Nature herself as his guiding "mistress"[11] and she too has the beautiful shape and spirit of ideal Mary. Indeed, the poet's own phrase, "self-creating joy"[12] can apply equally to his visions of both Mary and mistress Nature who one day "would be his widow".[13] As Clare associates Mary with distinctive spots in his local terrain, her fond image never really leaves his mind; he can always hear her soothing voice in the fragrant cell of an arbor where a soft breeze tips dew from the shallow cups of the leaves into the leaning grass blades and the glistening flower petals. Sometimes

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[11] J. Middleton Murry, "J.M. Murry, An Enthusiastic View", Criticism, p. 336.

[12] Unsigned Review, Times Literary Supplement, April 1956, No. 2826, Criticism, p. 420.

[13] Ibid.

her voice whispers in the largo of twilight around an old mossy bridge, or at the blessed spot where they last milked the cow together. He feels her benign presence also in that sheltered place where they hid together on one occasion while the rain tapped on the roof of leaves above them. This "wife of his imagination"[14] is always in evidence across the bountiful landscape and the poet senses her not only in the wide and prominent features of the land's contours but even in the hidden, miniature cells beneath the delicate laths of the flower stalks and the lowly weeds. Because of her blessed, revealing presence Clare can feel the breath of Paradise in what most people regard as empty, common places.

Though Mary is often seen as a comforting element of sanctuary and refuge throughout Clare's work, there are a few poems which indicate the great sense of overpowering loss that strikes the poet when he realizes she is not by his side. In these negative moments he progresses through a terrible dream or nightmare, sinking into hell and certain damnation. When she who represents love, beauty, innocence, and benign nature is taken from his side, he is left in chaos and darkness with all the doomed victims of the Fall, the great masses of common mankind. Without her, Clare

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[14] Unsigned Article, Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine, Feb. 1867, Criticism, p. 284.

feels that he is lost and lacks the power to rise above the dull ranks of ignorance and conformity. Alone without his spiritual guide he feels the foul, stinking breath of hell's fiend on his sweating face instead of the peerless caress of a breeze from blooming Eden. Bereft of Mary and Nature he shivers in an assembly of lost souls who are poles apart from any blessed spirit of inspiration and creation. But often, for Clare, such horrid images are submerged by positive, poetic visions of Mary and Eden in many of his poems.

Chapter Three considers various other motifs of refuge and retreat in Clare's work, for example, his fascination with all lonely places away from society. In these quiet spots the poet feels at home with the wild creatures and envies their placid, sheltered lives; he admires the solitary hermit's nest deep in the bosom of nature's bounty, akin to all the wild hidden and sheltered places secure in the pleasant shadows of living and growing things. Though the sun with its life-giving rays has been called "the king-image"[15] of his poetry, Clare also demonstrates a love for the shady areas that grow deeper as the sun grows brighter. He celebrates those refreshing shades away from the non-Edenic, sweaty fields of toil,

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[15]Unsigned Article, Times Literary Supplement, Criticism, p. 420.

often lauding their protective atmosphere as he observes many living things thriving away from the sun's oppressive glare. In these nooks he feels that the spirit of nature resides and transforms all the cooling places into sacred retreats.

One of the most prominent images of retreat in Clare's poetry is the secure bird's nest. He is intrigued with those delicate cells of sticks, grass, hair, and other discarded items shaped in a circle of refuge away from the harm of man's noisy, insensitive world. Close to these nests, the bird-watching Clare feels profound poetic thoughts that transcend mere words; he senses a stirring awe and mystery in the comforting and evocative atmosphere of the creatures' simple homes.

Another related theme of retreat is the poet's longing for a snug nest of his own in a cosy cottage, or some commodious nook with walls against an outside world. In his visions he sees clearly his domestic refuge far from the bustle of the world, and invincible in any biting gales of winter. Clare resembles William Cowper in this appreciation of domestic bliss. He admires Cowper's poetry in praise of simple beauties in the green outdoors as well as home comforts by the genial hearth where the solitary poet can read and participate fully in a rich, contemplative life; here he can repose in a warm atmosphere and

imagination's joys as the fire in the grate defies the cold wind that slams against the cottage walls. For Clare, his home retreat is never far from the munificence of the natural world where a tree, for example, sometimes becomes the poet's fond companion on guard outside the window, and talks in the chimney on evenings of story. Sometimes too a hollow tree becomes Clare's cottage when it rains and he relaxes in perfect consolation with not a single drop finding the surface of the untarnished floor. From his doorstep he invites birds to nest in the security of his roof and share his cosy haven where man will not bother them.

The positive themes of Eden, with its symbol of the Garden and other connecting biblical elements, and visionary Mary are complemented by numerous other motifs of refuge in Clare's poetry. His quest for an intimate asylum blessed by nature pervades both his early and later work. In this regard, Clare is like the Romantics who demonstrate, in their writings, an interest in experiences akin to his themes of sanctuary. It is an injustice to Clare to see him as a mere descriptive poet with no scheme or system evident in his work. He does indeed use the myth of Eden, as Robinson and Summerfield point out, as a "conscious pattern".[16] Furthermore, the Romantics' themes of individual

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[16] See footnote #6.

feeling or sensitivity, imagination as superior to reason, the ideal world of the past, the spirit of nature, isolation from the world of man's accomplishments, the spirit of pure love in evidence in the universe, artistic opposition to the insensitive demands of a practical society, and the creation of art as a stay against doubt, darkness and chaos - all have echoes in Clare's themes of refuge.

CHAPTER ONE

EDEN

In "January. A Cottage Evening", the first poem in The Shepherd's Calendar,[1] John Clare recalls his past childhood security on pleasurable winter evenings within cottage walls that were illuminated by a glowing fireplace as the elders told ghost stories and fairy tales. He fondly recollects the setting of enjoyable company around a cordial hearth where he shivered in delightful fear with his ears cocked to the spectral lore of the old people and with his eyes fixed to the fanciful shapes the fire threw up across the dim walls. In this atmosphere of "phantom magic",[2] the young poet listened to the old "dames" and their talk of "wonders never ceasing" as a clock ticked somewhere in the warm shadows and reminded the children that their bed-time hour was inevitably approaching. Clare recalls how reluctantly he and the other children would climb to their waiting beds in the loft to dream of haunting shapes through a long winter's night as the frost hardened outside in the

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[1] John Clare: The Shepherd's Calendar, E. Robinson and G. Summerfield, eds., London (1964), 1973, pp. 10-21.

[2] Selected Poetry and Prose of Coleridge, D. Stauffer, ed., Modern Library, New York, 1951, p. 6.

yawning darkness and wraith-like snow-drifts leaned against the cottage walls. Clare is fascinated by this Edenic stage in his life before "reason ....took away childhood's visions.". He also remembers that the venerable clock that used to disturb them into an awareness of the passing of time was located "behind the picture pasted screene" of Adam and Eve who had not yet succumbed to the temptation of "life's fatal apple tree." The symbol of man's perfect Garden that is quietly introduced into this poem complements all the other motifs of Paradise in Clare's poetry where he takes the Edenic setting of Genesis and the "reassuring precedents"[3] of writers such as Milton, Thomson, Cowper, and various Romantic writers and shapes the whole mythical framework to suit his own private and reassuring vision. Clare celebrates his own golden age of life's prime moments that once existed in a fresh and unspoiled earth before it was marred by adult cares and responsibilities. He desires always to keep those images of Eden between himself and the sense of clock time so that, throughout his troubled life, he can realize positively a haven of refuge in his timeless world in much the same way that the devout Christian seeks the divine "Rock" of an infinite Christ.[4] From the

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[3]Storey, op. cit., p. 13.

[4]I Corinthians 10:4. See also Deuteronomy 33:27.

disheartening uncertainties of life, Clare can find untroubled residence within the scope of his own creative powers where wonder and imagination always prevail over the harsh realities of the external world.

Clare places his own childhood village within the context of Eden in one of his earliest poems, "Helpstone" (I, 3-7), in which he envisions the small obscure hamlet of boyhood as an unblemished spot of "wanton plenty" in "those golden days" of illuminated "kingcups" and "daisies" and of all other beautiful growing things which "toil not"[5] in a bountiful atmosphere of easeful providence. This radiant spectacle of imagination contrasts sharply with the actual Helpston in which the poet writes - "a mean village" lifting "its lowly head", an "unknown" place "where useless ignorance slumbers life away." In this rude, unschooled setting Clare sees himself as the "low genius" endeavouring to rise "above the vulgar and the vain" through the sovereignty of the poetic imagination. The poem's conclusion illustrates his faith in the authenticity of his vision:

> Oh, happy Eden of those golden years
> Which memory cherishes, and use endears,
> Thou dear, beloved spot! may it be thine
> To add a comfort to my life's decline,
> When this vain world and I have nearly done,
> And Time's drain'd glass has little left to run;
> When all the hopes, that charm'd me once, are o'er,

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[5] St. Matthew 7:28-31.

> To warm my soul in ecstasy no more,
> By disappointments prov'd a foolish cheat,
> Each ending bitter, and beginning sweet;
> When weary age the grave, a rescue, seeks,
> And prints its image on my wrinkled cheeks--
> Those charms of youth, that I again may see,
> May it be mine to meet my end in thee;
> And, as reward for all my troubles past,
> Find one hope true--to die at home at last!
> (I, 6-7)

Clare hopes that, away from all the worries of aging, vain endeavours, the passing of time, ruined hopes, "the grave", and other discouragements, the landscape of "hope" might still be with him at the end of life. He anticipates that, in his timeless vision of Paradise, the worlds of youth and old age will coalesce into a blessed existence that is both home and heaven. His wish "to die at home at last" is not a desire to return to a commonplace Helpstone where labouring men do not understand the sensitive artist. Clare's hope is that the child and the old man shall be one in that glorious day when his visionary world is the only reality and he has ceased living in a toilsome, imperfect condition. For the poet, true home is far from any "mean" village of man; that is why he feels that it is very important for people to think positively and to attune their minds to happy thoughts and feelings if genuine "perfection" is to be "ever with us."[6] Clare never lets his mind stray far from the blissful moments

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[6] The Prose of John Clare, J.W. and A. Tibble, eds., London, 1951, pp. 224-225. Hereafter cited as Prose.

of his childhood when a sensitive soul was awakening to the primal joys of nature's infinite world.

Clare's Eden is frequently associated with his first roots and his initial responses to natural objects in his locality. In this respect his Paradise differs from those of writers such as Rousseau with his perfect haven on the Isle of St. Peter[7] and Herman Melville with his children of nature on the island of Typee.[8] Clare's noble savage walks as a child in fields of visionary light against a background of the poet's first home on earth; his Eden blooms for him because of his own special way of viewing nature's wonders. Thus his Edenic landscape does not need the stimulation of actual travel to unspoiled, exotic shores. In this aspect Clare is akin to a writer such as Thoreau who sees an evocative connection between the clear waters of the pond by his cabin and the crystal springs of the Garden of Eden.[9] In his visions of an unspoiled Eden, Clare does share with all these Romantics, however, a number of qualities; for example, an appreciation of nature's inspirational qualities, isolation from the noise and

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[7] Sir Gavin De Beer, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and His World, London, 1972, p. 71.

[8] Herman Melville, Typee (Excerpt in Reader, pp. 409-412).

[9] Henry David Thoreau, Walden, Modern Library Edition, New York, 1950, p. 162.

bustle of the world, confidence in the truth of the individual's own vision, and an ideal unity akin to the splendours of man's past. The unique perception of the poet transports him beyond the bounds of mundane existence to the visionary realms of infinite wonder and imagination. Secure in his fields of Paradise, Clare rejoices in the spiritual bliss of imagination's reality.

A number of Clare's early poems show the young poet recollecting "the days gone by" as if he himself were actually an aged person. His long autobiographical poem (which indicates his debt to James Beattie),[10] "The Village Minstrel", for example, presents young Lubin (Clare) recalling the supreme pleasures of the past and surveying the immediate traces of a "green" that was "no more". In the contours of the desolate land he finds himself "mourning to scenes that made him no reply" and realizing that his voice is the only one that laments the passing of the earth's innocent beauties. Assuring himself, however, that such beauty will never die because his memory will retain "strong accents" of the green's past glory, and because he will make

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[10] Clare and a number of the Romantics were influenced by "The Minstrel" of James Beattie (1735-1803). Clare's Lubin is the same type of figure as Beattie's Edwin. See: John and Ann Tibble, John Clare: His Life and Poetry, London, 1956, p. 84. (Hereafter cited as Life.) For a full discussion of Beattie's influence on the Romantic poets, see: E.H. King, "James Beattie's 'The Minstrel' and The Romantic Poets", Aberdeen University Review, Vol. XLVI, 3, No. 155, Spring, 1976, pp. 273-287.

it live again in his poetry, he is still beset by doubts and fears as he contemplates his poetic future. Lubin wonders if there will be joys ahead for him or only the grim prospect of "'whelming pain" (I, 162). On occasions like this it seems that the world or external reality is too much with Clare and consequently, it diminishes the energy of his Edenic vision; he is the melancholy swain depressed by the prospect of "misty kingdoms" before him; like a Christian who has lost his belief "in the light",[11] or one who cannot feel "the holy fire which animates all Nature",[12] he has no guide through the oppressive mists of the future. At this stage Lubin resembles the typical Romantic hero who, in the end, after isolation, sadness, and despair "must go down before the collective onslaughts of his fellow men."[13]

Another poem which illustrates the poet's despair of the world and its retardation of the visionary process is "Native Scenes" (I, 123). In this early sonnet, as in "The Village Minstrel", the poet also speaks in a voice that seems well beyond his years; he is overpowered by the grim realization of a wide gap between himself and his "beloved scenes"; a sense of loss that is "cutting and severe".

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[11] St. John 12:35-36.

[12] Goethe. See Reader, p. 405.

[13] See: "Introduction", Reader, p. 11.

torments him. In a moment of self-pity he starts to voice his agony; he feels marked by the hand of a sadistic "fate" that has doomed him to a state of abject alienation. Now he sees the land before him just as depressed Lubin had, through misty "swimming eyes" that are flooded by images of "vanish'd pleasures" and "past bliss"; for the Edenic view is out of focus for him. The sad, melancholy Romantic figure, however, is not really prevalent within Clare's poetry; in fact, the role of the pensive Romantic hero is sometimes attributed to Clare himself who, misunderstood even by friends and family, suffered throughout his life in his search for the Garden, and who died in lonely obscurity. He records his resignation to despair in the moving poem, "I Am" (II, 523). When Clare died on Friday, May 20th, 1864 in the Northampton Asylum, his body was sent back to Helpston. But "none of the family from Northborough came to look at the dead."[14] Such a community of indifferent, insensitive people was certainly not the true home of this pilgrim.

It is in his poetry, apart from the facts of his unfortunate life, that Clare often rises above the level of the doomed artist. In his work he many times dispels his negative musings and, with the strength of a disciplined imagination, he insists on only a positive image of the past.

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[14] Life, p. 200.

"Joys of Youth" (I, 278), for example, shows him drawing aesthetic pleasure from the very pain of grief itself when he is involved with the delightful diversion that emanates from a deliberate "cultivation of the mind ... enjoyed only by the few."[15] He shapes an artistic order from his emotional chaos of affectionate "recollections", as he celebrates the bliss "of youth's wild track"; giving the summer landscape a dreamy, ethereal quality in a fusion of water, meadow and sky, Clare sees tools of labour on "the sweeping rack" become fanciful forms of sheep or "wool-flocks" moving on the white clouds. This lends a gentle pastoral element to the poem. On the whole, however, the poem is a fine example of the prominence of an Edenic-type, leisure-filled, engaging climate that dispels the routine, chore-filled pace of a working day. Clare is fortunate to feel such profound ecstasy in the tranquil recollection of "such simple joys". Because of his rich, fanciful insight he converts what could otherwise be an abject sense of loss into a creation of genuine, abiding pleasure.

Clare asserts the same type of imaginative control in "Childish Recollections" (I, 238-240) where, initially, he is depressed at the sight of altered nature and objects that bring to his anxious mind another "regretting" of

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[15] Prose, p. 227.

"pleasures gone". But he soon converts his pain into pleasure when he envisions an Edenic world where "the thistles quaking in the wind", "the rushes nodding o'er the green" and other simple, natural objects convey a truly "expressive language" to the young poet as Wordsworth's "presences of nature" do in "The Prelude". Under the influence of nature's faithful voice, Clare has a vision of Paradise again; he even feels that he is actually in the landscape of benign illumination before external reality intervenes and reminds him that he is no longer a child:

> And everything shines round me just as then,
> Mole hills, and trees, and bushes speckling wild,
> That freshens all those pastimes up agen ---
> Oh, grievous day that chang'd me from a child!

Clare does not, however, sink into grief with the sharp realization of his own mortality. Instead, he celebrates that joyous hope that memory and imagination keep alive for him with their provision of genuine refuge, "snug cots to cheer despair" though "fate" mock from a "distance" and calls the poet's visions "castles in the air". Ignoring this mocking voice that sounds also like a non-poetic, pragmatic member of society, Clare employs two definite images of refuge in the conclusion of his poem:

> Life owns no joy so pleasant as the past,
> That banish'd pleasure, wrapt in memory's womb:
> It leaves a flavour sweet to every taste,
> Like the sweet substance of the honeycomb.

It is significant in the context of "Childish Recollections" that the "womb" and the "honeycomb", both associated in nature with security and protection, could also be regarded as sheltered caves of growth; and these are also relative to Clare's Garden since it could be said that his fond memories frequently grow into ample visions of delight that shield the poet from the erosions of the harsh facts of the external world. The poet often seeks the sanctuary of "memory's womb"; from this cavity which is never dark he is "born again"[16] into the realms of light where there are never any of the cold mists feared by young Lubin in "The Village Minstrel". Clare associates the poetic process that elevates him above the dull routine of village toil with an effort towards illumination or a struggle "into light" (I, vi). The truly creative poet must keep returning to the radiant solace of his imagination to be strengthened by "the joy of elevated thoughts" as Wordsworth was in his "Tintern Abbey" poem when he experienced "a sense sublime" of a presence "whose dwelling is the light of setting suns."

In poems such as "Pastoral Poesy" (II, 49-50), Clare again relates poetry and light when he refers to poetry as "a language that is ever green" with its "power" employing

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[16] St. John 3:3.

"varied lights"; he feels that poetry becomes its own light "of self-creating joy". In "The Yellow-Hammer's Nest" (II, 220-221) the realm of light and "nature's poesy" exists around the area of the bird's home where the creature herself is "most poet-like". The landscape of Eden itself, before reason caused the Fall, was one of pure inspiration and poetry before "the meddling intellect impeded the possibility of true vision."[17] This is why Clare often sees the past in a shining setting, and he claims in one of his later poems, "Sighing for Retirement" (II, 383-384), that he "found the poems in the fields/ And only wrote them down." The same Edenic qualities of light, undefiled nature, and pure poetry are also blended in poems such as "To Poesy" (I, 234), and the later, Northborough sonnet, "Pleasures of Poesy" (II, 303).

Within the biblical framework, Eden is many times associated with light through the spirit of Christ[18] who is the Second Adam. And the whole myth of Genesis is based on the light of creation that brought form out of the darkness and chaos.[19] The Garden which the Romantic poets celebrate

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[17] See "Introduction", Reader, p. 18.

[18] See: Isaiah 49:6, 60:20, Matthew 5:14-16, John 8:12, 12:35-36, Acts 13:47, I Corinthians 4:5.

[19] Genesis I.

is consequently linked with similar companion motifs of first light, the dawn of man, the "glow"[20] of nature's children, the shining freshness of grass, flowers, trees and waters, and the season of spring which always represents a new beginning, another genesis for the poet weighed down by the chill of harsh winter. Clare rejoices over the promise of spring in many of his poems; he derives abundant joy in watching for the initial signs of life in the dull sod, and victory over death in the assurance of a renewed world. It is interesting that Thoreau[21] also associates the new hope and freshness of spring with the Garden of Eden, and Wordsworth mourns for "what man has made of man" when he senses "Nature's holy plan" in the prime landscape of "Lines Written In Early Spring" (1798).

It is significant that a number of Clare's spring poems are found in his later work when he had resigned himself to the deep, wintry reality of his failure as a poet. "The Winter's Spring", for example, written in the Northampton Asylum sometime between 1842 and 1864, is a true indication that Clare has faith in the power of his vision to keep springtime eternally unjaded for him:

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[20] Melville's Typee (Excerpt, Reader, p. 411).

[21] Thoreau, op. cit., p. 162.

The winter comes; I walk alone,
 I want no birds to sing;
To those who keep their hearts their own,
 The winter is the spring.
No flowers to please -- no bees to hum --
The coming spring's already come.

I never want the Christmas rose
 To come before its time;
The seasons, each as God bestows,
 Are simple and sublime.
I love to see the snowstorm hing:
'Tis but the winter garb of spring.

I never want the grass to bloom:
 The snowstorm's best in white.
I love to see the tempest come
 And love its piercing light.
The dazzled eyes that love to cling
O'er snow-white meadows see the spring.
(II, 517)

In the confinement of the hospital, Clare can still experience the bountiful compensations of a spring landscape; he can feel peacefully secure in one timeless, benevolent season not specifically indicated by man's calendar or dependant upon any object of external inspiration. This poem is a good example of the Romantic's visionary reality that triumphs over the material world; such poems represent the creation of art's refuge out of a sense of melancholy and loneliness. The immediate storm cannot blot out the perpetual glow of spring because the poet has kept his heart his own as Goethe does when he makes young Werther say:

"All the knowledge I possess everyone else can acquire, but my heart is all my own."[22] This statement and Clare's poem are both confident utterances by Romantic writers who have in common the traits of "acute emotional sensibility, which raises them above their less sensitive brothers, and an awareness of not belonging to the existing social order."[23] Even as the snow drifts outside the hospital walls Clare is at ease in his gentle, radiant society of nature where no blight dulls the grasses or the chromatic flowers, and where the soothing, melodious birds' songs are never silenced.

Throughout Clare's work such titles as "Approach of Spring" (I, 124), "Early Spring" (I, 267), "First Sight of Spring" (II, 136), and "Spring's Messengers" (II, 312), all praise the crowning promise of spring with its connotations of genesis, seed, bud, birth, nativity, dawn, morning, and the alpha of innocence. Poems such as "The Early Daisy" (II, 286), with its associations of "Christ Child's innocence",[24] and "Young Lambs" (II, 309), also akin to

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[22] Reader, p. 81.

[23] See: "Introduction", Reader, p. 5.

[24] E.S. Whittlesey, Symbols and Legends in Western Art, New York, 1972, p. 77.

Christ-symbols and blameless innocence, are further examples of Clare's commemoration of "bright days" in his own special landscape. There is always a triumphant simplicity in such spring poems; they assert, even in their humility, a victory of light over darkness as the poet seeks his Garden of "sweet, untroubled rest/ That poets oft' have sung!" (II, 525).

In a number of his writings Clare deals directly with the theme of children and their place in his Edenic framework. As he thinks back to his old country life of "sheep-shearing", benevolent "old shepherds", and "harvest home", in his prose essay, "The Autobiography", for example, he equates the stage of early childhood with Paradise before the Fall and the adult's "knowledge of the world"[25] with its subsequent emphasis on reason over feeling and the imagination. Later in his essay Clare attributes to life's earliest moments those qualities that constitute poetry, "real simple soul-moving poetry laughter and joy of poetry & not its philosophy."[26] In mankind's initial Paradise there was no place for "philosophy" until man ignored his Creator's warning and ate from "the tree of knowledge",[27] thus ceasing

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[25] Prose, pp. 17-18.

[26] Ibid., pp. 44-45.

[27] Genesis 2:9.

to be nature's special child. Clare is not interested in abstract theories or dry, intellectual discussions about the nature of poetry; he is more comfortable with the simple, wonderful child's view of the world, as a veritable Adam secure in his possession of "every living thing".[28] In this prime sphere he is not bothered by issues of right and wrong or any uneasy sense of clock-time; he does not look towards the temptation of philosophy's tree. As a child, he can accept every day as a new beginning in an atmosphere of "play-prolonging", joyful "ignorance". He wants to shut from his mind all thoughts of adult experience because, with it, he feels that genuine security is destroyed and "matter-of-fact existences & weary occupations"[29] oppress the soul.

A poem which expresses poignantly Clare's heavy sense of loss at his growing into the adult world far from the child's guiltless existence is "The Sleep of Spring" (II, 525-526), another of his Northampton Asylum poems. Pondering the trials of his past life, the poet strives for meaning in it all; he searches for a pattern to counteract the engulfing chaos he feels all around him. He questions whether he will ever again experience that Paradise encased somewhere in "Sweet nature's garb of verdant green". In the

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[28] Ibid., 1-28

[29] Prose, p. 45.

present he sees only a "prison" that "injures health". When he looks back to boyhood he envisions a dream-like existence of "endearing liberty" and soon the reality of the hospital walls fades away and he longs for that eternal home where there is a blessed harmony of man and beast and the immaculate child is safe in the arms of his mother just as the young bird is tucked into the safeguard of its parent's wing.

The images of sleep in this poem are also significant to Clare's poetic thoughts. "The heart asleep without a pain" seems to beat in the whole atmosphere of peace where the "larks" sing "in the thistle shield", the baby sleeps, and other creatures participate in nature's great "untroubled rest". Adam and Eve were blessed in a dream-like state analogous to blissful slumber before "the eyes of them both were opened"[30] with the Fall, after which their "happy dreams" were over and Adam was given the command "to till the ground from whence he was taken."[31] In the dream world before the Fall, Clare feels there were no sharp distinctions made between toil and play, joy and sorrow, and weed and flower. For the blessed child "even toil itself was play" and tears were only those of joy;

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[30]Genesis 3:7.

[31]Genesis 3:23.

there, even the lowly weed and thistle, not yet symbols of the Fall,[32] were "more sweet than garden flowers". He concludes the poem in a mood of sad longing as he wonders if he will ever experience that consecrated slumber again and live in a setting where the bright days are one unbroken thread of "happy dreams".

As well as these late poems, Clare's early verses such as "Childish Recollections" (I, 238-240), "Native Scenes" (I, 123), and "Joys of Youth" (I, 278), all depict the undefiled child who is guided by his heart and who seems to be the person best suited to observe nature. In his special regard for children, Clare is like many of the Romantics, for example, the American philosopher, Emerson, who writes: "The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood."[33] Blake also is quite serious about the voices of his special children in poems such as "The Little Black Boy", "Infant Joy", "Laughing Song", "Spring", "A Cradle Song", and others. In all his "Songs of Innocence" Blake describes the Eden of prime childhood with its perfect existence of unity and what Clare would probably call a

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[32] Genesis 3:18.

[33] Reader, p. 387.

condition of "self-creating joy" (II, 50) before experience and the Fall. Wordsworth, in his "Intimations Ode", claims that "Heaven lies about us in our infancy." Clare's poems about little children support such a claim.

Sometimes Clare considers the theme of the tragic child who dies in babyhood and is therefore taken "before its time". The poet sees no sorrow in this because he is happy that the child is now enclosed by the certain veil of death before it has had a chance to participate in experience and the Fall. This positive attitude can be seen in the early poem, "On an Infant's Grave":

> Beneath the sod where smiling creep
> The daisies into view,
> The ashes of an infant sleep,
> Whose soul's as smiling too;
> Ah! doubly happy, doubly blest
> (Had I so happy been!),
> Recall'd to heaven's eternal rest,
> Ere it knew how to sin.
>
> Thrice happy infant! great the bliss
> Alone reserv'd for thee;
> Such joy 'twas my sad fate to miss,
> And thy good luck to see;
> For oh! when all must rise again,
> And sentence then shall have,
> What crowds will wish with me, in vain,
> They'd fill'd an infant's grave.
>
> (I, 78-79)

In dying this infant has retained all of its initial innocence, and nature blesses the transformation into "ashes" because a beautiful glory still lives beyond any stages of bodily decay. In simple splendor, the small daisies on the mound

of earth smile at the passing world, and also mirror the soul of the child. Clare rejoices that the baby is "recall'd to heaven's eternal rest" before the blight of any knowledge has spoiled its Edenic repose. This infant reminds one of Wordsworth's child who comes into the world from the home of God, shining, and "trailing clouds of glory" in its wake. Clare is happy that his dead child will never experience what Wordsworth calls the closing "shades of the prison house".

The phrase "thrice happy" is significant in Clare's poem since astrologers have often used the number three to indicate completeness; they reckon all time in terms of past, present, and future. Now the fortunate baby is secure within a protective circle bound by the three related states of grandeur: Heaven, Eden, and Heaven-Regained. Within this blessed sphere the child cannot become a victim of the Fall; consequently it can escape the "sentence" of a coming Day of Judgement. A number of Christian motifs are used in this poem with its victory of life over death, the assurance of afterlife and the Resurrection, and the use of "thrice" with a hint of the Holy Trinity. Also, the daisy is again used as a symbol of the Christ Child, the Second Adam.[34]

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[34] See footnote #24.

Clare maintains the same enviable attitude toward the dead child in his later poetry; for example, his asylum poem, "Graves of Infants" (II, 466), labels the graves as "steps of angels", and celebrates once again the triumph of the innocent spirit over clay. These babies who are "earth's brighest gems of innocence" are smiled on by the sunshine as they pass away; they require no church services, "no prayers", nor "beads", for nature herself expresses their sinless condition. This poem has echoes of the early "To an Infant Sister" (I, 516), a sonnet written at Helpstone sometime between 1821 and 1824. The poet wishes here that Bessy and he could have died together, but she has left him "growing up to sin and shame"; because she has kept her "innocence unstained and free", she is destined for "joy" while he is left to "years of sorrow." Thus, in a letter to his publisher, John Taylor, on June 9, 1821, Clare referred to this poem as "To An Infant Sister In Heaven."[35]

The sick child, to Clare, however, is a more unfortunate creature than the dead child. In "To Anna Three Years Old" (I, 423-424), for example, he tries to visualize the suffering child not on her present "bed of pain", but in the Eden of a past summer landscape when she walked by his

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[35] The Letters of John Clare, J. W. and Anne Tibble, eds., London, 1951, p. 118. (Hereafter cited as Letters.)

side and was almost as blessed as those creatures who are the permanent residents of Paradise. He has a lovely vision of her reaching out to "catch at each object" of natural wonder. He recalls holding the small hand which is his link with the magic world of wonder. But sad reality soon severs this connection and the child leaves him to find experiences on her own. Disaster now beckons to her in a death trap by the "deepest waters"; her sick bed is foreshadowed. Clare is mournful that she has to suffer so much; she is not fortunate like those infants who died in the blessed state of innocent sleep. She is left to suffer the toilsome pains of life as she grows away from Eden with the passing of each day. She is not as fortunate as the one in "The Dying Child" (II, 467) who is esteemed by nature and who expires with the leaves and flowers when the gentle summer goes to sleep.

Often, when his own children were sick, Clare comforted himself with the thought of a child's innocent disregard for the passing of time; he reminded himself about the young child's advantage over an adult who suffers in the present while dreading the future. Thus, he comments on "the death of a child" in an entry in his prose "Journal", Friday, 24 September, 1824, and displays once again his positive outlook toward the dead innocent:

> Tryd to walk out & coud not have read nothing this week my mind almost overweights me with its upbraidings & miseries my children very ill night & morning with a fever makes me disconsolate & yet how happy must be the death of a child it bears its suffering with an innocent patience that maketh man ashamed & with it the future is nothing but returning to sleep with the thoughts no doubt of waking to be with its playthings again[36]

These poems and such excerpts all indicate Clare's fascination with states of blissful ignorance, sleep, and the Romantics' refuge of death.[37] Because the baby has no knowledge of mutability and death, it bears its sickness with no fuss or dread; in fact, it cannot distinguish between sleep and death. There is no dread of any future damnation because Eden is always present to the dying child who expects to wake up and play in the sunshine again. Clare strives to retain for himself the faith of a child; though the poet is often immersed in the grief of seeing the "weakling flower fast fading in the bud",[38] he can find refuge in his visionary world where the child is always present despite the winter reality of the external world.

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[36] Prose, p. 108.

[37] See: "Introduction", Reader, p. 19.

[38] Prose, p. 151.

Clare advocates the vision of the child that Christ always indicated when he told men to become as little children if they wished to gain eternal life; in his teachings Jesus stressed that the way to salvation is through the things of the spirit.[39] Goethe reminds his readers of this same attitude of "the Great Teacher of mankind" towards the "models" of little children.[40] Clare contemplates his own salvation in his own Garden, a timeless covert somewhere in the wilds of nature's bounty, where the true child is never in want. Clare himself longs to be such a favoured child in his early sonnet, "The Happiness of Ignorance" (I, 520):

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

In this poem Clare again demonstrates his enthusiasm for the blissful, solitary spots of nature's children as well as his dread of man's commonplace world with its "knowledge" and pragmatic philosophy. He welcomes

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[39] St. Matthew 18:1-14.

[40] Reader, p. 413.

the protective mantle of unenlightenment that is akin to those other barriers of sleep, dream, and benign death that close out "the dread" of routine life. His wish to have been "emparadised in ignorance of sin" is an obvious allusion to Eden before the Fall. The poet here desires a completely passive state in a verdant refuge. Such passivity was a definite characteristic of Adam and Eve before the Fall when the Almighty promised to supply all their needs. God even came down to the Garden to talk with them in a direct personal relationship. Clare, in his framework, envisions for himself this same close contact with the Infinite, as he sees the divinity of Nature caring for "her favourite child" and even watching his face "like tender nurse" trying "to win" his "careless smiles." The poet, though he laments his place in the world of "troubling man" and grieves that he is a victim of the Fall, draws comfort, throughout his life, from the reassuring thought that, with his child-like vision, he can always take refuge in the bosom of nature, his "tender nurse."

There are many other poems in which Clare reveals his interest in the child's refuge of blessed ignorance. In the sonnet "Providence (II)" (I, 523), he claims that ignorance is often a benevolent condition; for example he concludes that "blessed ignorance is half the sum of providence." And in the children's landscape of "Holywell"

(I, 163-167), he is so inspired by the dream-like, "witching" scene before him that he forgets the realities of his life of labour on earth with his shoeless feet and ragged clothes; rather he sees himself back in the days of "the daisy's earliest prime." Similar visionary settings are described in "Childish Recollections")I, 238-240) and "The Wild-Flower Nosegay" (I, 225-227). In the latter, the sleep and dream motifs recur again as the poet regards the adult stage of life as an awakening "from a vision sweet" with a thirsty longing to be a child once more and "dream it o'er agen." The same dream setting is depicted also in "A Daydream In Summer" (I, 424-429) where Clare, borrowing a phrase from Beattie's "Minstrel"[41] calls himself the "lone enthusiast" and regains for a few moments the pure feelings of childhood, "all the glee/ Of life's first fairy infancy." In this vision, he forgets all "care and strife" and the "dull fields and woods" of his immediate surroundings. Here in the refuge of his imagination he experiences a portion of the greater glory of the child's original Eden.

Another aspect of the Garden theme in Clare's work is the way he views the pre-enclosure land of his native area as a bountiful Paradise. He often recalls the aesthetic features of these wide common areas and open fields around

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[41] See: footnote # 10.

Helpstone as they existed before government authority enclosed them and thereby shut out the country folk who had been freely using them for centuries.[42] That act of Parliament in 1809, while Clare was still a teenager, marked the end of the free, accessible green where the shepherd could let his flocks graze and the humble cottager could gather firewood and hunt small game for his table. With growing populations in the cities now demanding more food, the government planned a system that would regulate the use of agricultural land so that it could be employed in maximum production.

According to Clare, the enclosure authorities were grossly insensitive to the plight of the small farmers and cottagers who would lose not only their lands but also their traditional rights to such areas. In an early poem, "Helpstone Green", Clare protests the ruination and injustice caused by the system:

> Ye injur'd fields, ye once were gay,
> When nature's hand display'd
> Long waving rows of willows grey,
> And clumps of hawthorn shade;
> But now, alas! your hawthorn bowers
> All desolate we see,
> The spoilers' axe their shade devours,
> And cuts down every tree.
>
> (I, 35)

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[42] See: Life, pp. 13, 25, and 36.

With a "definite political stand"[43] characteristic of many Romantics, Clare attacks the "spoilers" of the common man's freedom. He feels that there was a perfect, wild order in those areas where everything was arranged by "nature's hand" before the coming of the government's axe.

In subsequent stanzas, Clare alludes to the "flowery pastures plough'd" and the sanctuary of "whole woods" that are gone where insensitive man has even altered the "rivulet's course." As he surveys the remaining wasteland, the poet retreats to a vision of Eden again and its special landmarks are illuminated "in fancy's eye". Though he draws comfort from the fact that he can still "tell" of the green's "delightful plain", the spoiled land before him keeps informing him that Eden can never be whole again for "Enclosure has spoiled all."[44]

The spirits of the natural landscape keep informing Clare of the special place he once had before enclosure raped his land. In "The Lamentations of Round Oak Waters" (I, 70-74), for example, the stream has been stripped "naked" along its banks. Thus the poet has a vision in which the "genius of the brook" mournfully tells him of the uncommon

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[43] See "Introduction", Reader, p. 20.

[44] Prose, p. 145.

favour he once had in the lush solitude before enclosure took the shade away. Now Clare feels that nature's spirit laments with him at the sight of all the restrictive "posts" and "rails", symbols of materialistic possession, in "dire nakedness" across a land where iron ploughs have overturned the shepherd's paths. He scorns those people of "plenty" who, while favouring enclosure's laws, have never themselves taken "a tool in hand." He does not blame the sweating men who were actually forced to swing the axes but those affluent "foes" and "greedy souls" who, for their sins, will have to answer to heaven.

The poet is also the favoured child of nature in a pre-enclosure Paradise in "The Village Minstrel" (I, 133-163) where the young bard, Lubin, with imagination and "wild enthusiasm" that sets him apart from the other village children, is deeply anguished that "inclosure" has wiped a glorious haven from the earth. His grief goes deeper than language can express; mourning over the damage done to "sequester'd nature", Clare labels his sorrows as "unavailing woes" as he remembers the Edenic glories and all the prime objects that "had made it sacred to the view." He expresses this abject sense of loss also in "Enclosure" (I, 419) where the arrival of the "blundering plough", a symbol of toil after the Fall, has turned under all the delicate blossoms of the "one eternal green", that place of

"unbounded freedom" enclosed by only the "circling sky". Here all the personified beauties of Eden are "banished" from the Garden as Adam and Eve were exiled from original Paradise.[45]

Other poems that protest the curse of enclosure are "The Lament of Swordy Well" (I, 420-422), and "A Favourite Nook Destroyed" (I, 531) in which the poet sees the homeless creatures being banished from the Edenic landscape because of the sin of man's hungry greed. Clare calls the creatures "poor outcast refugees of mother earth [who are] forced from the wilds ... by vile invasions of encroaching men." He expresses the same moods of frustration, anger, concern, and pity in other poems such as, "Round Oak Spring" (I, 536), "The Fallen Elm" (II, 18-20) and "Langley Bush" (II, 101).

In 1832 Clare moved with his family to Northborough[46] where he wrote "The Flitting", a moving poem which indicates that the geographical shift from Helpstone only intensified his visions of an Edenic home in the pre-enclosure days of "green", careless existence:

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[45]Genesis 3:23-24.

[46]See: Life, pp. 147-160.

I've 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 hazel's happy green,
The bluebell's quiet hanging blooms,
Where envy's sneer was never seen,
Where staring malice never comes.
(II, 251)

What Clare really misses is not the society of his home village of Helpstone where there was certainly "envy's sneer" and "staring malice", but the quiet security of his familiar nooks in the countryside surrounding the tiny village. He finds it difficult to feel at home in any place that is not related to his special hiding places where all the living things exist in an aura of peace, harmony, and ever-welcoming joy.

Clare cannot even recognize summer in the new setting of Northborough though pleasant "bird music" flows incessantly "from hawthorn hedge and orchard." Even as the immediate scene shines before him, Clare cannot concentrate on it: "his heart goes far away to dream", and his visionary scene comes into focus for him afresh. Once again he views the old haunts of his pre-enclosure landscape with the clear brook, the lowly mosses, the shining pebbles, and all other natural entities in a pattern that relates to Eden; Clare realizes that all these lovely objects are "tenants of an ancient place":

And heirs of noble heritage,
Coeval they with Adam's race
And blest with more substantial age.
For when the world first saw the sun
These little flowers beheld him too,
And when his love for earth begun
They were the first his smiles to woo.
(II, 254)

In "these little flowers" Clare sees the evidence of timeless beauty; to him, they are representative of everlasting life because they "never seem to die." Their same bright glory graced the earth in the time of "Abel"[47] and "the firstlings of his little flock", before Cain and the "heedless scorn" of enclosure's axe. To the poet they are fitting examples of what Keats, in "Endymion", calls an infinite "thing of beauty", in his claim that "they always must be with us or we die." They are always with Clare, for in their prime, visionary atmosphere he truly lives. They will always, in Keats' words, "keep a bower quiet" for the poet.

Clare concludes the poem, however, by taking a closer look at Northborough as his vision fades; he is now determined to draw whatever comfort he can from the beauties of this alien scenery because he believes that, though enclosure has ruined all the old spots of innocent glory, "nature can still make amends." Now he feels such a close affection for even the lowly weed and "every thing", that he cannot bring himself to cut a plant, for he is unable to

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[47] See: Genesis 4.

perform, even on a very minute scale, what the axe of the enclosure did across the whole countryside. He hopes that nature will always be able to renew what man has so thoughtlessly destroyed. Clare hopes that here in Northborough something akin to his visionary Eden, something "eternal" can still be seen, for he has no refuge at all if he cannot feel that somewhere "still the grass eternal springs."

A fine example of Clare's unspoiled, pre-enclosure landscape is described in another of his Northborough poems, "On Visiting A Favourite Place" (II, 259-261). This poem is also a positive assertion of Edenic vision over time, place, the Fall, enclosure, and other real anxieties of the poet. Clare is over-joyed that he can still feel the energy of Eden all around him; he can rejoice again in "the possibility of true vision."[48] The poet loses himself in the intensity of the bliss that descends or "falls" upon him:

> There is a breath--indeed there is--
> Of Eden left--I feel it now--
> Of something more than earthly bliss,
> That falls and cheers my sullen brow;
> I gaze about upon the trees,
> I view the sweep of distant hills;
> More high than sources such as these
> Comes joy that in my heart distils;
> I view the sky--away despair!
> There falls the joy, 'tis only there.
> (II, 259-60)

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[48] Reader, p. 18.

Like some spirit falling from heaven,[49] the power of Eden sweeps away all mundane "despair", and with the "breath" of Paradise on his face, the poet sees the brook[50] flowing fresh and clean again. The "power divine" electrifies the setting all around him as Clare welcomes "joy's own rapture":

> I felt from all the world away
> But old affections and esteems
> While on the short brown sward I lay,
> And joys as something more than dreams;
> I viewed the trees and bushes near,
> And distance till it grew to grey;
> A power divine seemed everywhere
> And joy's own rapture where I lay;
> The furze clumps in their golden flowers
> Made Edens in these golden hours.
>
> (II, 261)

In this vision which transports Clare to the comforts of "old affections and esteems", the poet resembles some biblical or ancient prophet who sees the view or object in front of him transformed into some point of communication with the Almighty.[51] He experiences the prime light of Eden again as both the close-up and the distant prospect change "to grey" and fade into a spectacle charged with

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[49] See: St. John 24:49, Acts I:8, St. Mark 1:10.

[50] Genesis 2:10.

[51] See: Amos 8.

infinite power.

Since Clare often uses words such as "divine", and "blessed" in alluding to his Garden, it is in keeping with this pattern that he is intrigued by various forms of the Sabbath as a break from the soul-killing drudgery of common labour. For him, any period of time away from physical work, however brief that break may be, is akin to man's original freedom and leisure before the Fall. Genesis, after the Creator's labours, was a complete, anti-labour state of existence in which man was a happy child of his infinite Father. Harsh toil and labour became man's lot after the Fall.[52] The poet laments man's fallen state when he complains of the harsh reality of the peasant's labour. Often, according to Clare, the peasant's only chance to appreciate the finer aspects of life is found in the welcomed pauses spread through the long, dull routine of village toil.

For Clare, Sunday seems the most appealing pause of all, as this special day provides more free time than any other away from the curse of labour's bounds. In "Sunday Walks" (I, 215-218), for example, man is free to walk peacefully in a garden-like setting of solitude; his dread of toil has been put aside in this day that has been

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[52] Genesis 3:19.

"blessed" and "sanctified"[53] by God. Now the labourer can pause and admire simple things of beauty; he can truly feel near "the fount of nature whence all causes flow." In this Edenic atmosphere he needs no "philosophic reasoning."

The "weary thresher" also partakes of the Sabbath's blessings:

> A six-day's prisoner, life's support to earn
> From dusty cobwebs and the murky barn,
> The weary thresher meets the rest that's given,
> And thankful soothes him in the boon of heaven;
> But happier still in Sabbath-walks he feels,
> With love's sweet pledges poddling at his heels,
> That oft divert him with their childish glee
> In fruitless chases after bird and bee;
> And, eager gathering every flower they pass
> Of yellow lambtoe and the totter-grass,
> Oft whimper round him disappointment's sigh
> At sight of blossom that's in bloom too high,
> And twitch his sleeve with all their coaxing powers
> To urge his hand to reach the tempting flowers:
> (I, 216-17)

His "Sabbath-walks" entail all the paradisial elements of restful repose, refuge, love, innocence, natural harmony, and freedom. Here the thresher is closer to the world of children and all their blameless, "coaxing powers"; away from the cares and responsibilities of labouring for his bread, he becomes a child again, free in his enjoyment of Eden's portion. Clare concludes the poem with thanks to the "Lord of Sabbaths" for all the benevolent "leisure dropt in labour's rugged way."

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[53] Genesis 2:3.

A similar connection between the Sabbath and Eden can be seen in "Sunday" (I, 188-190) where "labour has no claim" on a man who relaxes in "bliss, from labour freed." Another poem linking labour with confinement and restriction is "Rustic Fishing" (I, 213-215) where the poet equates formal religion with village labour by calling the church service the "hard employ" of drudgery for the boy who wants to be free "to seek the brook." In "Insects" (II, 17), the happy, free "loiterers", the playful insects in the sun are outside the web of toil's care; indeed, "no kin they bear to labour's drudgery", as they exist in one continuous Sabbath. They are like the children of "Pastoral Fancies" (II, 15-16), in the atmosphere of a "higher joy"; they play on the green with the sky glowing all around them in "heavenly light". The poet wishes this Sabbath time did not have to be interrupted; though he is aware of the sad truth found in Blake's "The Echoing Green", he wishes it was possible "to make the whole year round one Sabbath-day."

Clare is joyful at any sign of rest, leisure, play, and labour's-ceasing in the countryside. In one of his many bird poems, "The Yellow Wagtail's Nest" (II, 223-224), he rejoices at the sight of a "broken plough", a symbol of man's release from the dusty drills of toil:

> A broken plough as leisure's partner lay,
> A pleasant bench among the grass and flowers
> For merry weeders in their dinner hours,
> From fallow fields released and hot turmoil;
> It nestled like a thought, forgot by toil,
> (II, 223)

He is happy now that the iron tool of enclosure has been transformed into an instrument of leisure and relaxation. He even sees a Sabbath aura around the plough in winter of The Shepherd's Calendar[54] where he is moved at the spectacle of the inanimate utensil of labour enjoying "its frozen sabbath now."

Clare often associates the rest of evening at the end of labour's day with a Sabbath break. Even when he speaks favourably of his own labour in the fields, it is because he anticipates blessed relief from sweaty toil when the sun goes down. Another of his Northborough poems, "Labour's Leisure", looks forward to a contemplative break so essential to the poet's spiritual life:

> Oh, for the feelings and the careless health
> That found me toiling in the fields, the joy
> I felt at eve with not a wish for wealth,
> When, labour done and in the hedge put by
> My delving spade, I homeward used to hie
> With thoughts of books I often read by stealth
> Beneath the blackthorn clumps at dinner-hour;
> It urged my weary feet with eager speed
> To hasten home where winter fire did shower
> Scant light, now felt as beautiful indeed
> Where bending o'er my knees I used to read
> With earnest heed all books that had the power

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[54] Robinson and Summerfield, op. cit., p. 3.

To give me joy in most delicious ways
And rest my spirits after weary days.
(II, 308)

After the companion of the plough, the "delving spade" has been dropped, the poet is free to head home to comfort; from Northborough he envisions this Sabbath spell so full of ease and time to participate in the "delicious" joys of imagination. The same theme is used in "Approaching Night" (II, 263) and also in "Rural Evening" (I, 209-212), a poem that labels the placid evening hour as "the truce of toil."

The only part of the day that matches the Sabbath atmosphere of evening, according to Clare, is the early morning before any traces of labour are moving in the landscape. He lauds the "sweet peace", in "Rural Morning" (I, 206), before labour "once more devours/ The soothing peace of morning's early hours." In such pauses, everything seems to rest in a Paradise of freshness before the wind blows and changes the scene back "into a common spring morning."[55] In his "Autobiography", some of Clare's happiest memories are of Sabbath mornings "out before the sun".[56]

In "A Pleasant Place" (I, 535), the poet is a pilgrim on the road to the refuge of the summer's Sabbath,

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[55] Prose, p. 252.

[56] Ibid., p. 16.

a place that includes so many characteristics of his visionary Eden:

> Now summer comes, and I with staff in hand
> Will hie me to the sabbath of her joys,
> To healthy spots and the unbroken land
> Of woodland heritage, unknown to noise
> And toil, save many a playful band
> Of dancing insects, that well understand
> The sweets of life, and with attuned voice
> Sing in sweet concert to the pleasant May.
> There by a little bush I'll listening rest
> To hear the nightingale a lover's lay
> Chaunt to his mate, who builds her careless nest
> Of oaken leaves on thorn-stumps, mossed and grey;
> Feeling, with them, I too am truly blest
> By making sabbaths of each common day.

In this Paradise one can see the features of pre-enclosure Helpstone in the "unbroken land" where the poet is favoured by nature and "truly blest" in her refuge. Here all living things are in harmony and the world is a "playful" place of childhood innocence. This is the Sabbath cell far from the "noise and toil" of the commonplace world. With his vision, the poet rests in the assurance that he can create "sabbaths of each common day."

The Edenic, Sunday-atmosphere motif is scattered widely throughout Clare's poetry, for example, in early works such as "Sabbath Walks" (I, 279), where the working creatures, the bee, spider, and ant are engaged in labour that is "free", with bountiful time for "curious pausing"; they are blessed to work at a pace inspired "by careful nature." Another poem, "Boys At Play" (II, 134), praises the Sabbath as

"sunshine's outdoor holiday." Later poems such as "Round Oak and Eastwell" (II, 297) and "Footpaths" (II, 322), also extol the virtues of the Sabbath break when the curse of toil is absent from the Garden.

For John Clare, as with other Romantic writers, "the primacy of the imagination"[57] is a major element in his poetry. In his adaption of the biblical myth of Eden and Romantic tradition to his own unique, personal vision, Clare sets himself apart from an insensitive, pragmatic society. To this society he replies in the manner of Alfred De Vigny's "Chatterton" who asks the question "Is physical work all there is for man?" The "Quaker", to whom he asks this question, counters that "Imagination and contemplation are two ailments for which no one has pity!"[58] Clare does not ask for anybody's pity; despite his setbacks in life he is faithful to his own Edenic vision throughout his poetry; he is one of "those who keep their hearts their own" (II, 517).

In his celebration of the power of vision to retain the timeless truths of the Garden and its related motifs of childhood, the bountiful nature of pre-enclosure days, and the victory of the Sabbath over labour's curse, Clare creates

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[57] See: "Introduction", Reader, p. 22.

[58] Reader, p. 594.

his refuge here on earth. Within this covert he implies that it is possible for a person to find his own personal Eden in his own time if he can honestly say "I know the feelings of my heart, and I know men. I am not made like any of those I have seen; I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those who are in existence."[59] Such a person will not have to wait for some far-off, future bliss in the afterlife promised by a dogmatic church because he can say, like Clare, "I make myself heaven."[60]

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[59] J. Jacques Rousseau, Confessions, quoted in Reader, p. 85.

[60] J. W. and Anne Tibble, "Introduction", John Clare: Selected Poems, London, 1965, p. xxvii.

CHAPTER TWO

MARY

Mary, a figure who appears frequently in Clare's poetry, is intimately related to his recurring themes of Edenic refuge. In one of his asylum poems, "The Fall of the Year" (II, 410-411), for example, she is linked with the tranquility "of the sabbath in the summer of the year"; now that she is gone, "the summer's voice is still" and the only sounds in the autumn landscape are the harsh grind of labour's wheel, "the clacking of the mill," and "the lowly-muttered thunder of the flood." Without her, the poet realizes that "the nightingale is vanished from the woods." Though "she is nowhere to be seen", however, he still has faith that her infinite spirit will return and make the earth anew for him again. Investing his Mary with qualities befitting a goddess of spring, Clare assures himself that she is coming back again "when the happy spring is near," and that her reappearance will bring back "love's pleasures" as the "monarchy of green" blooms in splendour all around him.

Mary Joyce, the prototype of Clare's ideal, visionary woman, was actually the poet's first love of his childhood when innocent "children wandered by brook and

hedgerow, watching for moth, bird, and flower."[1] In his "Autobiography" Clare tells of the singular place she occupied in his affections right from their earliest moments together when they were both happy and blessedly oblivious to the adult world of toil and care:

> I was a lover very early in life my first attachment being a schoolboy affection was for Mary who cost me more ballads than sighs & was belovd with a romantic or Platonic sort of feeling if I coud but gaze on her face or fancy a smile on her countenance it was sufficient I went away satisfyd we played with each other but named nothing of love yet I fancyd her eyes told me her affections we walked together as school-companions in leisure hours but our talk was of play & our actions the wanton nonsense of children yet young as my heart was it woud turn chill when I touchd her hand & tremble & I fancyd her feelings were the same for as I gazed earnestly in her face a tear would hang in her smiling eye & she would turn to wipe it away her heart was as tender as a birds[2]

In the Edenic world "of play" and the child's "leisure hours", the boy Clare lived in the glory of Mary's smile; he was contented that she reflected his own unspoken love that embraced also all the living things in their innocent retreat. When he actually "touchd her hand", he was affected in the manner of the faithful courtly lover who sighed and trembled and regarded his mistress with deep veneration. This was the beginning of Clare's religion of love.

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[1] Life, p. 15.

[2] Prose, p. 44.

A Glinton farmer's daughter, Mary Joyce, grew up and moved away from young Clare's silent worship of her; from her viewpoint as an adult, as Clare records, she saw the poet in a different light:

> . . but when she grew to womanhood she felt her station above mine at least I felt that she thought so for her parents were farmers, & farmers had great pretentions to something then so my passion coold with my reason & contented itself with another tho I felt a hopeful tenderness that I might one day renew the acquaintance & disclose the smotherd passion 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[3]

A significant aspect of these prose excerpts is the way Clare emphasizes Mary's child-like qualities; for example, he relates her affections to the heart of a little bird as the epitome of tenderness. He associates her also with the child's world of pure imagination with its fantasy of "playful fairy" shapes and "witching" influences. In her the worlds of fairy tale, wonder, magic, play, and all their related motifs are represented. Mary remains fresh and secure in Clare's world of "dream" in that visionary landscape where beauty abides constant and unspoiled by the ugly facts of life. She resides there as his timeless playmate, his stay against loneliness, mutability and death. He remains faithful to the Edenic vision of her prime

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[3] Prose, p. 44.

companionship even though the loss of fickle, socially-conscious Mary Joyce continued to cause him much pain and disappointment. But in his poetry, she would continue to be his Blessed Virgin.

In July, 1841, Clare decided to escape from the asylum at High Beech, Epping, where he had been a patient for four years. Alone, with thoughts of his home fields beckoning to him, he eluded the hospital attendants and started his long journey homeward for three days with no money or food except for a pint of beer and a small gift of tobacco from a person along the eighty-mile trek. The ordeal is described vividly in his essay, "Journey out of Essex".[4] He was going home to Mary. In the essay he makes several references to her. Once he dreamed that she was sleeping by his side as he slumbered on piles of clover in a "shed or hovel" but somebody took her away from him. As he awoke he thought that he heard somebody utter her name in the darkness, but when he investigated further, "nobody was near." Later, at the end of his exhausting walk, when he arrived at Northborough, "Mary was not there", and people tried to tell him the truth "of her being dead six years ago." But Clare would not listen to them:

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[4] Robinson and Summerfield, eds., op. cit., pp. 207-216.

> ... I took no notice of the blarney having seen her myself about a twelve month ago alive and well and as young as ever --- so here I am homeless at home and half gratified to feel that I can be happy anywhere

Though he tries to assure himself that the lovely playmate of his childhood, pre-enclosure Eden must still be actually "alive and well and as young as ever", he concludes the account of his journey on a negative note as stern reality confronts him: there was "no Mary" in Northborough and he faced the fact that she and her family were "nothing" to him, though "she herself was once the dearest of all." He would never, in fact, be able to go home again to their Platonic days in the blissful, Helpstone fields. Clare, however, could not accept the prospect of such nothingness in his life so, four days later, July 27, 1841, he wrote this letter to Mary:

> My Dear Wife
> I have written an account of my journey or rather escape from Essex for your amusement & hope it may divert your leisure hours --- I would have told you before now that I got here to Northborough last Friday night but not being able to see you or hear where you were I soon began to feel homeless at home & shall bye & bye feel nearly hopeless but not so lonely as I did in Essex for here I can see Glinton Church & feeling that Mary is safe if not happy I am gratified Though my home is no home to me my hopes are not entirely hopeless while even the memory of Mary lives so near me God bless you my dear Mary and give my love to your dear beautifull family & to your Mother ---& believe me as I ever have been & ever shall be
>
> My dearest Mary
> Your affectionate Husband
> John Clare [5]

[5] Letters, p. 293.

In his refusal to forget Mary, the poet again asserts the positive refuge of his visionary world against his sense of feeling "homeless at home". The letter stresses that things are "not entirely hopeless" as long as "even the memory of Mary lives" within him. With her as the wife of his vision Clare can always regain, in his Sabbath moments, portions of Edenic glory; he can still experience what Wordsworth in his "Intimations Ode" calls "splendour in the grass" and "glory in the flower." Clare's belief in the reality of Mary does indeed provide him with that "faith that looks through death." With her he does not need the Mary Joyce who felt "above" his peasant "station"; though he calls Mary Joyce "the first creator of my warm passions"[6] she was finally lost in a multitude of "other Marys".[7] Only the Mary of his imagination lives on.

One of Clare's letters addressed to Dr. Matthew Allen, head of the High Beech asylum, August, 1841, refers to Mary as "one whom I am always thinking of" and adds that "almost every song I write has some sighs or wishes in Ink about Mary."[8] Again he regards his feminine ideal as a

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[6] Life, p. 36.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Letters, pp. 294-295.

figure akin to the inspiration of beauty, love and pure poetry; his celebration of the Garden cannot be divorced from his praise of her timeless loveliness. Though he does not name her in all of his love poems, what the paragon of Mary represents still appears in the forms of special maidens of elegance and beauty, muses, charmers, divine figures like guardian angels, goddesses, enchantresses, and various, benign spirits of nature. In "Child Harold", for example, a poem from his late mental asylum period when Clare sometimes thought that he himself was Byron,[9] the poet calls his Mary "the muse of every song I write":

> That form from boyhood loved and still loved on
> That voice --- that look --- that face of one delight
> Loves register for years, months, weeks —— time past and gone
> Her looks was ne'er forgot or out of sight
> --- Mary the muse of every song I write
> Thy cherished memory never leaves my own
> Though cares chill winter doth my manhood blight
> And freeze like Niobe my thoughts to stone ---
> Our lives are two --- our end and aim is one.[10]

Her "form", so relative to the innocent freshness of childhood, is a timeless figure outside the curse of sin with its subsequent mortality. Hers is a shape the actual Mary Joyce could never assume above the race of women, an immaculate virgin above even the Virgin Mary who, though

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[9] Life, p. 196.

[10] Robinson and Summerfield, eds., op. cit., pp. 217-218.

"blessed", was still "among women."[11] With Mary's presence close to him Clare feels secure against "cares chill winter" and the "blight" of "manhood". Though Mary Joyce, the farmer's daughter, has gone her separate way, the spirit of Platonic Mary, the tender child of nature, the eiptome of first love, remains with him in a true and meaningful marriage; he can address her always, asserting positively that "our end and aim is one."

Since the original Eve of Genesis experienced a close relationship with her Creator, it is fitting in Clare's poetry that his Eve, Mary, is also near the spirit of divine influence. Indeed, for Clare, Mary herself is often the epitome of a power of light and energy not unlike that of the divinity found in the Christian, biblical tradition. In "To an Early Cowslip" (I, 244), for example, the poet sees her in association with the life force of the sun as her "eyes like any suns" have the power to warm all the fragile flowers. In Clare's Garden she is the source, refuge, and protection of all the growing things and the poet even wishes that he himself had the life of a "cowslip bud" so that he could be near her "station so divine", and live in Platonic glory in the safety of her bosom.

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[11] Luke 1:28.

Her benevolent spirit assumes a greater intensity in a later poem, "With Garments Flowing" (II, 269-271), where her appearance and "voice divine" seems to over-power the poet, a mortal not suited for gazing directly at the Divine Visage. She is akin with the "rapture glowing" around a special "bush" where their first meeting took place. The whole area is charged with her spirit each year when spring pulses in the landscape and the poet joyfully anticipates her return. He waits in an atmosphere of Easter for the vision of her coming, "down the lane with garments flowing"; he looks to her resurrection in the awakening earth. Her spirit is celebrated also in the autumn poem,"Mary" (II, 397-398), where, though the blossoms are gone from the landscape and the wide spectacle is bleak, Clare is confident that Mary lives within his heart, as "love is an eternal flower." She becomes, as Christ is to the Christian, a promise of infinite life:

> Just as the summer keeps the flower
> Which spring concealed in hoods of gold,
> Or unripe harvest met the shower
> And made earth's blessings manifold;
> Just so my Mary lives for me,
> A silent thought for months and years;
> The world may live in revelry,
> Her name my lonely quiet cheers;
> And cheer it will, whate'er may be,
> While Mary lives in bloom for me.
>
> (II, 398)

With Mary the poet can shun the common "world" and its "revelry" because she "lives in bloom" as long as something still grows in nature. It is significant that Clare uses the word "bloom" to equate his sweetheart with nature's prime loveliness in the same way that he uses this word to indicate Eden's flowering in poems such as "Helpstone" (I, 5) and "The Flitting" (II, 255). She is the poet's timeless saviour who walks in his Garden; she is "love's register for years, months, weeks, time past and gone" (II, 394).

A poem which illustrates very well Mary's timeless benevolence, for Clare, is the asylum poem, "Love for Everything" (II, 492-493):

I would not pull a weed away
Where she stooped down to see,
I would not pull a bunch of may
Where she admired the tree.
Like any child, her quiet mind
Had love for everything,
The dangerous or the reptile kind,
She never feared a sting.

Upon a worm I would not tread,
Nor even crush the snake,
For she would stroke its spotted head
And leave it in the brake.
I would not wrong the meanest thing
That she had deigned to touch,
To every flower my eyes would cling,
I loved her smiles so much.

I'd love for all she looked upon
And love for all she did,
The roads looked love where she had gone
As stranger's paths ne'er did.
I saw her by the river sedge
In green gown floating gay;
The may-bloom winnowed from the hedge
And whitened all the way.

In these devotional lines Clare's innocent childhood sweetheart is also the true Eve of his Garden before the Fall. She is the supreme female who loves "everything" in Paradise before any of the "reptile kind" was associated with man's temptation and sin; she is gentle with all the creatures of the bountiful earth in an atmosphere of the "quiet mind" away from the adult emphasis on philosophy and reason. The poet is married to this tender spirit as he too loves everything in the innocent setting, even the lowest reptile and the crawling worm. It is significant that the worm, snake, and weed, all symbols of man's Fall and mortality, are also components of the poet's Garden, the refuge where Mary's "smiles" are shining in "every flower". Again, as in "With Garments Flowing" (II, 269-271), she is the very green life of all that grows as the poet sees her splendid gown in the verdant reflections on the stream, and traces of love on all those paths "where she had gone."

Mary is the benign spirit of growing things in poems such as "Love and the Flowers" (II, 493), another of the asylum poems in which, despite the reality of prison walls around him, the poet experiences a landscape of fresh air and freedom. In his "fancy warm as love" he can see Mary's assuring form regardless of any external setting. In "Mary" (II, 498) the "spirit of her" whispers "stores of sweet visions" to the poet; and though "Mary is absent" in "The Exile" (II, 387), the "forest queen, Nature" stands in

her place as a fitting substitute to inspire the poet. Though Clare seems, like many of the Romantics, to create more than one goddess, and experiences visions of a number of beautiful, female apparitions,[12] they all have the magical, charming, inspirational qualities of ideal Mary. They invariably offer him links with a higher plane of existence, a better world far above the toils and sorrows of a dull, ordinary, clock-watching life.

Occasionally the spiritual force of Mary is so intense that Clare is struck down or almost blinded. Such incidents use connotations of biblical figures who were rendered powerless by the brilliance of the Almighty or the falling of power from heaven, for example, Saul's experience on the Damascus road.[13] In "First Love" (II, 504), for example, Clare cannot stare directly into the potent force of love blooming on Mary's face. Here he is almost slain by the spirit as he loses his sight and the landscape is wonderfully transformed all around him, with the setting appearing like "midnight at noonday." As he stands in the energy of her glorious presence he realizes that his heart will always be Mary's; it will never be able to return to its old "dwelling place again." A similar electric

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[12] See: "The Fountain" (I, 88-89), "Solitude" (I, 190-198), "To the Rural Muse" (I, 240-241), "To the Rural Muse" (I, 449-454), and "The Backward Spring" (II, 86-87).

[13] Acts 9:1-9.

atmosphere is found in "On Visiting a Favourite Place" (II, 259-261) where power falls from the heavens and changes the area into a special, visionary place for the poet.

One of Clare's last poems, "Secret Love" (II, 513), describes his "love" as a visage so glorious that he dares not "gaze upon" her; this countenance is like the sun or the blinding flame of an Almighty not meant to be seen directly by any mortal eye. The light of Mary assumes no human form at all in these lines, but the poet is shaken by the charge of her spirit within the summer retreat in "the greenest dells" away from the skeptical world of labouring man. As she cannot be separated from this deep recess of wild splendour, the "secret" of her existence rests with the poet; he cannot tell others in simple terms of this high-souled force in his life. He does not want to proclaim his refuge to the whole world so her significance to him remains "secret as the wild bee's song":

I HID my love when young till I
Couldn't bear the buzzing of a fly;
I hid my love to my despite
Till I could not bear to look at light:
I dare not gaze upon her face
But left her memory in each place;
Where'er I saw a wild flower lie
I kissed and bade my love good-bye.

I met her in the greenest dells,
Where dewdrops pearl the wood bluebells;
The lost breeze kissed her bright blue eye,
The bee kissed and went singing by,
A sunbeam found a passage there,
A gold chain round her neck so fair;
As secret as the wild bee's song
She lay there all the summer long.

I hid my love in field and town
Till e'en the breeze would knock me down;
The bees seemed singing ballads o'er,
The fly's bass turned a lion's roar;
And even silence found a tongue,
To haunt me all the summer long;
The riddle nature could not prove
Was nothing else but secret love.

Clare's hidden lady causes nature to be attuned to the highest pitch for him so that even "the buzzing of a fly" is magnified into "a lion's roar." As for Blake in his poem, "The Fly", the common house-fly is vested with special significance for Clare who, in his growing-up, regarded them as "things of mind" or "fairy familiars",[14] somewhat human and, at the same time, cryptic and mysterious. They are not mere pests to be blotted out of existence by the swat of a human hand. When the fly buzzes, the poet feels as if an attendant spirit speaks to him; perhaps it even speaks of Mary in a voice that makes the poet uneasy. Because the bee, the breeze, the sunbeam, and other entities of nature have all touched the retreat of his "love", they are special components of the visionary setting. Clare trembles in the intensity of Mary's power; he who is blessed by a goddess is also weakened somewhat by the brilliancy of her magnificent spirit. The poet's strength often resides in his celebration of such weakness.

[14] Prose, p. 251.

More often, however, Clare regards Mary as the manifestation of loveliness that is the most ornate of nature's wonders. In "Her I Love" (I, 24), for example, her "superior charms" are more beautiful than nature's finest art; she is "sweeter far" than the flowers, many of whom will fall to the gardener's scythe. In Clare's Garden, she who will bloom forever always ensures him of "A World for Love" (II, 76), a place of "paradise" far from the "rude world" of "much ado and care." She who is not suited for life in man's work-a-day world resides with "Love", her constant companion where summer is "ever green":

> And there to seek a cot unknown to any care and pain,
> And there to shut the door alone on singing wind and rain --
> Far, far away from all the world, more rude than rain or wind,
> Oh, who could wish a sweeter home, or better rest to find?
>
> Than thus to love and live with thee, thou beautiful delight!
> Than thus to live and love with thee the summer day and night!
> The Earth itself, where thou hadst rest, would surely smile to see
> Herself grow Eden once again, possest of Love and thee.

In this isolated, safe retreat, in relation to the motifs of Love and Mary, there are connotations of life's prime moments of innocence as Eden is restored to earth again; Paradise is regained, for Clare, in the nook where his "beautiful delight" abides.

Occasionally, in moods of depression, Clare is not enthusiastic about a perfect "world for Love"; in those periods he feels that Mary is lost from him. Feeling alone in a "rude world", he becomes very bitter about all women, and life in general in a world subjected to the Fall. In

poems such as "Ballad" (II, 76-77), concluding each stanza on a farewell to Mary, and "Ballad" (II, 79-80), asking where she has gone and scorning "woman's cold perverted will", his keen sense of loss predominates. This mood prevails also in "First Love's Recollections" (II, 83-85), concluding with an image of dying buds that will never become flowers. He tries to rise above his melancholy in "Song" (I, 258), and is skeptically brisk in bidding "false Mary adieu" now that others have "defil'd" the "sweets" of her lips and taken away her innocence. With bitter memories of Mary Joyce, Clare mourns the fact that he and she are no longer children. Strangers have invaded his Edenic "cell", and the adult stage of life is fully upon the children of Paradise. Now he bids "all that was Mary farewell."

Fortunately for Clare, however, timeless, ideal Mary can still raise him above such depression. She still inspires him to keep his heart true to the world of imagination and vision. Though he might not see it in this way, Clare's task as a poet seems to have a Wordsworthian quality, placing the "beautiful delight" that was and is Mary, into the order and pattern of his created Eden, an order that counteracts chaos and darkness and all the painful losses and disappointments that press around him in the world of external reality.

Although Clare is devoted to the spiritual image of Mary, he is still sexually attracted to women in the flesh.

He often admires the physical attributes of an attractive woman: a full bosom, slender waist, or well-turned ankle, in a spirit that could hardly be termed Platonic. Lubin, "The Village Minstrel", for example, "could not pass" the physical charms of a pretty girl "without admiring" them. He is grateful that the "swelling bosom", the "downcast eye" and "blush of shanny lass" can still enhance the world despite the "failings" and the "fall" of woman. Though such sexual beauties are far below the station of ideal Mary, Clare still sees them as part of an attractive picture "in nature's glass". Clare also uses a number of sexual allusions in The Shepherd's Calendar; in fact, his publisher, John Taylor would not publish the first version of the "July" chapter because of its vivid description of buxom girls working in sultry hay-fields and blushing at the talk of lusty young men.[15] Clare seems to enjoy the rustic charms of these "maidens", descendants of the Fall who have to face the sweaty fields of labour day after day and "drag the rake behind" while putting up with the "clowns rude jokes" and sneering. These girls are not like innocent Mary; they listen to the "smutty song and story" and blush in the realization of what the lads are saying. The poet even uses an image of pregnancy in his description of the hay-stacks

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[15] Robinson and Summerfield, eds., op. cit., p. 71.

that those girls are shaping as they pike them up "swelled bellying round". By contrast, when Clare invites Mary to share the fields with him, there are no such "smutty" implications at all. In "Song" (I, 257), for example, he invites her to the idyllic banks of Broomsgrove, a wild, beautiful place where she can be his "fairy"; she is "the only thing wanting here" to make the scene "shine" for him:

> The woodbine may nauntle here,
> In blossoms so fine,
> The wild roses mantling near
> In blushes may shine;
> Mary queen of each blossom proves,
> She's the blossom I love,
> She's the all that my bosom loves
> 'Mong the sweets of Broomsgrove.
> (I, 257)

In these lines there is a significant linking pattern in the alliteration as "blossom" and "blushes", with connotations of prime flowering and freshness, are related to the "bosom" or the poet's heart, and "Broomsgrove", the place where Mary is the undisputed "queen of each blossom." She has more in common with the "blushes" of the wild flowers than with the blushing of those boy-conscious hay girls in "July". There is a great contrast between the use of "bosom" in "Song" as the seat of the poet's fond affections, and the "swelling bosom" that tempts Lubin, "The Village Minstrel".

In a later poem, "Stanzas" (II, 473), Clare makes the point that the highest form of love is attuned to the

spirit of nature, not mere sexual pleasures: "Love lives with nature, not with lust"; those who seek real love will "find her in the flowers". The poet finds his Mary in the atmosphere "where nature clings", a place of "first love's face". In this setting he finds a beautiful truth "that cannot pass away." As long as he can "seek nature in the fields" where love in its truest sense abides, he will never be bereft of hope and comfort. He feels communication with Mary whenever he addresses various personifications of wild nature and tells his love to the leaves, the flowers, the grass, and the summer breeze, in his moments of outdoor solitude. In "The Progress of Rhyme" (I, 433-442), Clare senses her presence so strongly in his Garden that he fears to "pull the blossoms" lest he should damage some part of her. All that Mary represents can be realized by the poet in his "cheer in after toils", those leisure moments given over to things of imagination when hard labour is over.

Clare also shows his communication with Mary through natural objects in "Love" (II, 77-78) where the "idol of his musing mind" cannot be approached in any bold, aggressive manner; the love he feels for her is a "gentle love" akin to the atmosphere of a "timid dream". It is an affection "for which no words are found" and is related to no "daring bird" but the "little timid wren" seeking refuge "from the sight of men." Here Clare can tell Mary's name "to every flower."

He feels unable to tell his love to Mary if he should meet her in the flesh. In "I Pass By In Silence" (II, 507), he sees her face in "a wild flower" and talks "to the birds" and "the zephyr-like breezes", but he feels lost when he is near her physically. He must retreat to the bosom of nature and talk to her through his dialogue with the birds, the wind, the rain and the flowers. "The Shy Lover" (II, 374) shows the same type of gentle, timid, unsociable approach toward his love. Several other poems[16] deal with Mary's quiet presence in the benign landscape indicating a spirit of true love and poetic inspiration.

Clare often relates his Mary to a definite local spot, a small nook of refuge where they once shared special moments together; for example, the "bush" in "Song" (I, 259) where they met once and to which she will be returning again. In "How Can I Forget?" (II, 510-511), Mary's farewell is linked with a spot the poet will always remember; he sees it as a place where every flower, tree, and blade of grass is whispering of her. In "Where She Told Her Love" (II, 491), the poet kisses the bush where he once "saw her crop a rose" in the Sabbath stillness of early morning. He traces her to that "small green place" covered by an oak, a retreat where "all her love" can be told. He also seeks her in "The Lost One" (II, 502), in the "shady grove", the "silent stream",

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[16] See also: "Early Love" (II, 501-502) and "The Shepherd's Song" (II, 75).

or "a happy spot" painted in his "thoughts". In "To Mary" (II, 497), Clare feels that the very universe will not let him forget her, as "every place" in nature whispers "pleasant tales" of her.

It is significant that so many of Clare's poems about Mary were fondly composed within the walls of Northampton Asylum. Still looking back to the fields of home and childhood, the lonely poet retains her in this visionary landscape where innocence reigns, enclosure has not occurred; and labour's din is never heard. He invites her back there, in "The Invitation" (II, 480), to that spot where they can "be happy again" in "walking the meadows" of Paradise. He gives her a similar invitation to his Garden in "The Lover's Invitation" (II, 481) where the poet asks Mary to walk with him in the Sabbath setting at the "dewy close o' day" where the dove of peace is secure in its sleep "among the ivy", a plant with associations of timelessness and immortality "because it is always green."[17] He cries out for her to leave the dull world of labour, the "cottage of toil" and join him in his "snug place" in the heart of a benign, natural setting:

> While thy footfall lightly prest tramples by the skylark's nest,
> And the cockle's streaky eyes mark the snug place where it lies,
> Mary, put thy work away, and walk at dewy close o' day
> With me to kiss and love thee.

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[17] Whittlesey, op. cit., p. 164.

There's something in the time so sweet, when lovers in the evening meet,
The air so still, the sky so mild, like slumbers of the cradled child,
The moon looks over fields of love, among the ivy sleeps the dove:
To see thee is to love thee.

So come, my Mary, now's the hour to feel the evening's soothing power,
The ladybird has sought repose on golden pillows in the rose,
The white moth's round the hawthorn bush, on its blue eggs sits the thrush:
And I'll ever after love thee.

Labour has no place in this merging of the worlds of child-like innocence and true love; toil has no sway in this clockless world of "lovers" and peaceful "slumbers of the cradled child"; their whole setting is pervaded by images of security and protection. This same type of Edenic setting is depicted also in another asylum poem, "I'll Meet Thee on the Heather" (II, 495), where two lovers can meet in blissful solitude "when all the place is quiet and labour gone away", in the Sabbath atmosphere of evening. Though he addresses a "Bonny Jane" in this poem, and is using a Scottish setting reminiscent of Robert Burns, Clare still invokes the spirit of Mary in an unspoiled setting away from man. Though her name appears directly in the titles of at least ten of Clare's asylum poems (1842-1864), she is found in many more where lovers meet in a Paradise outside the social world.

There is one poem in Clare's work that provides a sharp contrast to, and a departure from, the ideal Mary; in this early poem, "My Mary" (I, 94-97), Clare pokes fun at his beloved. A parody of William Cowper's poem of the same title, this work hardly flatters his lady; in fact, it uses language that "offended the taste of some of Clare's

patrons" (I, 94). He offers Mary a blunt and earthy tribute, seeing her as a "rough" farm maid nearly as "thick" as she is "tall"; she is "fat", "silly", and "clumsy", waddling "like a duck" across the yard in her "humdrum life" of hard labour. This ignorant dolt of a girl, this "low kindred stump of Eve", is at an opposite pole from the Eve of Genesis, the Romantics' spiritual ladies, and Clare's ideal Mary.

Clare's poking fun at his barnyard girl gives the poem a rollicking humour not the least of which results from his demeaning of himself in the poem as well with the idea that she is good enough for him no matter what the rest of the world thinks. Clare can be heard laughing in these lines in an uncharacteristic, devil-may-care tone:

> And though thy nose hooks down too much,
> And prophesies thy chin to touch,
> I'm not so nice to look at such,
> My Mary.
>
> No, no; about thy nose and chin,
> Its hooking out, or bending in,
> I never heed or care a pin,
> My Mary.
>
> And though thy skin is brown and rough,
> And form'd by nature hard and tough,
> All suiteth me! so that's enough,
> My Mary.
> (I, 97)

Perhaps there is more of the real Mary Joyce, the Glinton farmer's daughter, in this poem than the perfect innocent Mary, as he turns her rejection of him into banter. Or

perhaps it is an attempt by Clare to counteract "his tendency to sentimentalize",[18] for he could, on occasion, be skeptical of any sentimental literature; for example, on Wednesday, 23 March, 1825, he records in his journal:

> Recievd a parcel from Holbeach with a Letter & the Scientific Receptacle from J. Savage --- they have inserted my poems & have been lavish with branding every corner with 'J. Clares' --- How absurd are the serious meant images or attempts at fine writing in these young writers one of them concludes a theme on a dead schoolmaster with a very pathetic & sublime wish as he fancys perhaps 'wishing that the tear he leaves on his grave may grow up a marble monument to his memory' ---This is the first crop of tears I have ever heard of sown with an intention to grow[19]

Clare may have parodied Cowper's "My Mary" to poke fun at all literature that is created as a "monument" to "tears". Or probably he is jokingly saying that what Mary means to him transcends any obvious sexual beauty. In any case, Clare appears to enjoy this exercise in rhyming, and perhaps, just this once, he cannot resist smearing barnyard mud on the farmer's daughter who felt so superior to him and his family. She is truly the Mary of a fallen Eden, a girl of sweaty toil with "hogs", "grease and muck", and "all catch jobs"; she cheats on her employer and engages in other mean activities. She resembles, in name only, Clare's visionary mistress who is worlds away from this place of labour "where

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[18]Paul Schwaber, Stays Against Confusion: The Poems of John Clare, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia U., New York, 1966, p. 27.

[19]Prose, p. 141.

noises never cease."

Without his visionary Mary, Clare can visualize only the consequences of the Fall for him; he sees hell and damnation in his future. There are a few occasions in his work when the awful reality of separation from Mary seems to dominate the poet and crowd his mind with the very opposite of Eden - the hell, chaos and utter darkness of fallen man. In the poem, "The Nightmare" (I, 404-408), for example, written after Clare's reading of Thomas DeQuincey's Confessions of an English Opium-Eater (I, 408), the poet is left in utter chaos, a place of ugly fiends and lost, tormented human souls. Here is an indication of what a life without Mary really means for him. It opens with the uncertain poet groping his way across a strange, unearthly landscape "like eternity"; he wanders to a place where large crowds of people are gathering in "one spot". As he watches the multitudes, he is confused and seems to recognize some of them for only a moment as they seem to be vainly trying to re-live their past lives again. Then, though he does not recognize her at first, Mary appears as one with "face divine" and "flowing robes" to lead him to the "mansion" where the rest of the throng seem to be going. Upon recognizing her, Clare calls her his "all companion, friend, and guide"; she leads him away from the common destiny of mankind and soothes his fears about the future

soon to be revealed in the great hall of souls. In the midst of this great mystery, rising music, and the "humming of a mighty crowd", she comforts him as her divinity becomes more apparent with each anxious moment:

> Fears grew within me, and I fain had tried
> To search the purpose of my angel guide.
> Anxiety turned on her quiet face,
> And recollections would (old) memories trace,
> As one I'd witnessed once or else the same,
> The looks of one I had not power to name;
> She seemed at first as living beauty seems,
> Then changed more lovely in the shade of dreams;
> Then faded dim, confused, and hurrying by
> Like memory waning into vacancy.
>
> (I, 406)

Just as she seems close to the poet, she fades again into the chaotic din, leaving him "giddy, reeling, sinking" into the darkness. Soon, however, she returns to his side "offering mercy's plea" for his salvation in that gap between "hell and life's eternity." When she withdraws from him again, a hellish creature stands in her place. Without Mary, the "foul fiend" of hell waits to drag him away with all the masses of fallen man, away from the prime glory and "music of the past":

> '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;
> But she was blest and I alone was cast;
> My dangers dimmed the glory of her eyes,
> And turned her smiling and her hopes to sighs.

Before he awakens from his nightmare, the poet is presented with a scene as terrible as any viewed by Coleridge's mariner; he stares at the doom of a fallen world,

a sphere of death and suffering without the positive vision of Edenic Mary. Just before he awakens, the poet finds himself in the fiend's power, with no Mary to plead his cause, no Christ-like intercessor[20] "offering mercy's plea." She is Clare's saviour, his "mediator between God and men",[21] the poet's stay against all that is anti-Edenic and "death's dark hell."

The same atmosphere of doom is portrayed also in the poem, "The Dream" (I, 399-403), which abounds with doomsday imagery as the elements rage, graves open up and demons erupt from the fumes of hell. Again, with no Mary by his side, Clare sees himself in "universal death"; and before this dream ends, he feels all the "terrors of the damned." With all the doomed masses he cries out for mercy as many of nature's beauties are destroyed all around him. Like "The Ancient Mariner", who is happy to return to his own country after his voyage through nightmare, Clare is glad to hear "the cock crow", and he blesses "the sound".[22]

The spirit of Mary and all that she represents for Clare can be seen also in his prose work, "The Dream".[23]

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[20] See: Hebrews 7:25, Romans 8:26.

[21] I Timothy 2:5.

[22] Similarity also pointed out by Schwaber, op. cit., p. 92.

[23] Prose, pp. 231-233.

In this essay he refers to her as his "Guardian spirit in the shape of a soul stirring beauty." She appears to him, he writes, "with the very same countanance in which she appeared many years ago & in which she has since appeared at intervals & moved my ideas into exstacy - I cannot doubt her existence."

In the midst of a great crowd she comes to Clare as a beautiful woman, her eyes speaking "more beauty than earth inherits." He recognizes her as that "good genius" who took him, when he was just a child, away from the insensitive crowds, and showed him a vision of a bookstore where his own works were displayed. Years later she returns in a dream with a setting like that of "The Nightmare", as "all the people in the village" are walking past Clare to be "called to judgment." He follows them, "feeling great depressions & rather uneasiness of mind", as they enter a large church. Inside there is trembling and the "loud humming as of the undertones of an organ." Frightened, the poet tries to find refuge in his "reccolections of home" as the beautiful lady comes to his side with her "white garments beautifully disordered". She leads him towards a "light" where "the final decision of man's actions in life" is being made. She stays by his side as his name is called and utters something of his future happiness. Now Clare knows that all is "right" as she leads him out "again into the open air." He states

that he can "no longer doubt" the reality of his own "lady divinity". When he writes about her it gives him comfort and assurance; this creation in his poetry serves to "prolong the happiness" of the visionary experience.

With Mary's company, Clare can return to his refuge of Eden; for him she is what Shelley called his Emily in "Epipsychidion": "Youth's vision thus made perfect." Mary is the light of Clare's world and the inspiration that lives in his faithful heart. Though this light sometimes blinds the poet, it always shines along his path to lead the way.

CHAPTER THREE

OTHER RETREATS

Even when he is not dealing expressly with the themes of Eden and Mary and their visionary asylum, John Clare's poetry still exhibits a fascination with all retreats away from the world of man. His early poem, "Fragment" (I, 242), offers a definite statement on his philosophy of the dream refuge:

> How eager doth he eddy round
> To seek his peace and rest,
> And blest to know where peace is found
> Drops happy in his nest.
>
> Ah, pleasure's but in vain display'd
> My lot to discommode,
> Where hope but checkers of the shade
> To show my gloomy road.
>
> Alas, to me no home belongs
> But what my dreams create;
> Vain cuckoo-like, I sing my songs,
> And leave the rest to fate.

As he watches a bird settle into the haven of its nest, the poet envies this creature which is "blest to know where peace is found", in contrast to himself who, at this moment, feels homeless and bereft of "pleasure". In a bout of self-pity, Clare asserts that his real home is not an actual place on earth but a creation of his imagination. He never fails, however, to be moved and inspired by his close

observation and contemplation of simple creatures secure in the protective bosom of nature. In these quiet, solitary moments the poet often imagines a cell of sanctuary for himself as he wanders out into the fields and woods to search out places where even the smallest and most delicate living things are safe from man. These are the same settings that his "dreams create" for Eden and Mary's special blooming; these are the contours of the poet's real home.

The image of the sheltered nook is a recurring motif in Clare's poetry. In these coverts enclosed by the bounty of wild nature, all beautiful and fragile things are safe from the dangers of man's society. The poet seeks such a haven in "Cowper Green" (I, 174-180) where he himself is the "world-shunning pilgrim" who finds his nest in an atmosphere of benevolent spirituality in "some sacred lonely spot." In such places, Clare imagines, "hermits" may have kept pleasant cottages deep in mossy seclusion miles away from any "worldly care." Here the blessed hermit lives on pure "herbs" and other natural foods that have no connection at all with "the plague of worldly men." His home is "wood-encircled" in a peaceful setting that shuts out "the din of labour" and "the spoiling axe." The poem, "Solitude" (I, 190-198), also has many allusions to a safe spot away from the world; "from labour free", the

poet follows the sheep paths into an area where the "mole" hides in the heart of the "crumbling hill" and where the timid mouse builds her nest from "the dead weed". Though the threat of man is represented here by "the plough's unfeeling share", the retreat is dominant because the lark of peace builds its nest in the shelter of "the big clod" thrown up by man's plough. Nearby, creatures such as "the black snail" and a chain of other animal forms seek the privacy of their nests.

A similar emphasis on a whole chain of retreats is found in "Rustic Fishing" (I, 213-215) as the poet watches a "mischievous young boy" burrow into the sanctity of the worm's nest and dig with a cruel knife for his fishing bait. Here by the brook the deep banks offer security and nesting grounds for various birds:

> Where hanging thorns, the roots wash'd bare, appear,
> That shield the moor-hen's nest from year to year;
> While crowding osiers mingling wild among
> Prove snug asylums to her brood when young,
> Who, when surpris'd by foes approaching near,
> Plunge neath the weeping boughs and disappear.
> (I, 213)

Even the boys who seek this river for a Sunday's fishing find their own Sabbath refuge from the "terrors" of man's organized religion; by this river they are safe from any threats "that the parson brings"; now they move with nature's pace in nooks "half-hid in meadow-sweet and keck's high flowers." Away from parish obligations, they are free to

partake of the pleasures of solitude in "lonely sport" where the river is hidden in the tall weeds, the "choice retirement of the snake and toad." Further on, the water deepens into "some gulled hole" where the fish gather in their own safe retreat. After fishing this spot for most of the day and not really disturbing the fish, the boys wander away. As evening falls the fish now "lunge from night in sheltering flag-retreat." The boys, on their way homeward, continue to disturb other creatures' nests; they turn up stones in shallow water "where gudgeons hide" and "minnows" swim by "a rude oak-bridge .... half hid in rustling reeds and scrambling grass." Clare is concerned about these intrusions into the nests of the wild creatures; he never participates in the manner of the eager boys who drive knives, sticks, and probing arms into the innocent homes. The poet watches and is happy that the boys have their outdoor freedom; he hopes that what these children are doing can always be labelled "harmless treachery."

There are numerous other poems in which Clare gives strong emphasis to the idea of the wild, sheltered retreat. In "The Old Willow" (I, 524), for example "an ancient dwelling place" protects the poet from the rain so completely that he feels as if he is comfortable in his cottage reading a book. As he stares out from this shelter, living things "in all their sunny liveries appear" and "summer's lustre" makes the scenery beautiful in

"unnumbered dyes". Here the poet can forget about the "claim" of "troublous care" far off somewhere in the work-a-day world. He finds such a retreat also in "Wanderings In June" (I, 341-348), in a spot "shut out from day" by the leaves and ivy in a nook where there is no "tumult" or "alarm", and "health breathes in every wind." In this "narrowest bound" the poet can peacefully engage in his pleasures of contemplation and read new worlds of wonder in a close-up view of "things small as dust", as Blake did when he saw "a world in a grain of sand." Clare lets his mind voyage into the spheres of fantasy suggested by the "different shapes in leaves", and soon loses himself into delicious "musing dreams." Once again he shuts out the reality of the working world, and claims that "Nature mocks the toil" of "threat'ning ploughs". The retreat he describes in "Summer Images" (I, 380-382) also gives him shelter from the rain; this time the poet watches all the other retreats in the area of his own; for example, the frog is safe "underneath the swath"; a "bird boy" is peeping "from out of the corn" where he is hiding, and the "laughing sky" is a great roof of sanctuary above the whole happy scene.

Clare realizes that the ordinary world of man does not understand the poet's love of freedom and solitude. He knows that the world will never recognize the friends of

his imagination because a great many people see only external realities; they laugh at the young man who is so strange in his fanatical desire for solitude. In "The Fate of Genius" (I, 497-500), Clare even imagines what the people of his village will say about him after he is dead. He fancies that they will all note how he used to keep to himself away from their "normal" society, how he sought refuge "neath lone bushes dropt about the field" or under "peaceful hedges that would shelter yield." He imagines they will say "he'd fancy friends in everything he found," grass, leaves, flowers, butterflies, and all entities of benign nature. These labourers of the village will say that he was crazy in his lazy idleness spent in haunts far from their cultivated fields; they will never see him for what he really is, one "too warm for this unfeeling earth." They will never be able to respond to the invitation issued by Clare in his sonnet, "Sudden Shower" (I, 517-518), when he invites a companion to seek with him a refuge provided by benevolent nature:

> Black grows the southern sky, betokening rain,
> And humming hive-bees homeward hurry by:
> They feel the change; so let us shun the grain,
> And take the broad road while our feet are dry.
> Ay, there some dropples moistened on my face,
> And pattered on my hat --'tis coming nigh!
> Let's look about, and find a sheltering place.
> The little things around, like you and I,
> Are hurrying through the grass to shun the shower.
> Here stoops an ash-tree --hark! the wind gets high,

But never mind; this ivy, for an hour,
Rain as it may, will keep us dryly here:
That little wren knows well his sheltering bower,
Nor leaves his dry house though we come so near.

In this shelter of "the little things" man need never feel himself to be an intruder because here he can feel close to the spirit of infinite nature and forget about the dark sky outside. In this "sheltering place" he shares his precious solitude with the "little wren"; all man has to do is follow the example of such creatures because "they feel the change" in atmosphere and know what direction to take. During these few moments of shelter, the poet can experience again his Edenic break; to him, it is not a matter of merely keeping dry, for he draws aesthetic pleasure from the natural forms all around him; he is in blessed harmony with everything in the verdant cell while the outside world is battered by the wind and rain.

It is easy to see Clare, a lover of the fresh outdoors, as a poet of sunlight. However, though critics such as Andrew Young[1] stress Clare's love of the sun, it should also be noted that Clare has a strong affection for the shade. He loves the deep shadows of all his woodland retreats as they are closer to his favourite moments of early morning and late evening than the harsh, blazing sun of mid-day. As the sun shines in its bright, sweating

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[1] Andrew Young, The Poet and the Landscape, Philadelphia, 1963, pp. 176-181.

intensity, the poet loves to feel the comforting shadows below the fragrant leaves grow deeper all aroung him. He writes of those shady retreats away from harsh sun in The Shepherd's Calendar; in the "July"[2] chapter there are some fine descriptions of a midsummer day in the Helpstone countryside. The sun pervades the atmosphere as the breeze dies and the air seems "oven-heated"; not a breath moves over the landscape to stir even the "spiders threads"; only the "restless heat" seems to be moving as it "swims twittering by." Soon all living things start searching for relief, a place of shady retreat from the merciless sun. The pigs, for example, rush for "some pond or ditch" and "linnets seek the twiggs that lye/ Close to the brook" to wash their feathers and cool themselves before they head for the "cooling sheds" of the "dark woods". The sweating boys, labouring behind their horses, also long to be free from the dead heat; later their horses will rush for the shadows near the edge of the brook. When their noon break comes the boys head for their retreats in "green lanes" where they feel that they have a pleasant "half holiday." Later, in the twilight, all creatures are comfortable in anticipation of night's deepest shade.

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[2]Robinson and Summerfield, eds., op. cit., pp. 70-94.

In "August"[3] of The Shepherd's Calendar, the empty village is quiet as if all is locked in a spell of "wood wandering dreams". All the people are away working in the fields. Out there in the sweating landscape of toil a child wishes he could be one of the insects who can hide "in the grass from the days burning eye." But his mother calls him back and warns him to stay close-by; soon the child wishes the "rushes" could "hide him from her sight." As man intrudes into the homes of the wild creatures and the swishing scythes mow down the fields, "turning swaths to wither in the sun", partridge and mice are frightened out from the security of their comfortable shades. As the hot sun strikes into the nests of the exposed creatures, man follows suit as boys rush in to kill the helpless baby mice. Later in the afternoon, the labourers seek their own retreats in "the coolest shadows" where they drink their ale and look forward to the deeper shades of night. Clare, in a number of poems,[4] celebrates such shady retreats that draw all men and beasts away from the oppressive suns of labour.

Open places are, in fact, never as appealing to Clare as the shadowy retreats. "In Hilly Wood" (I, 269),

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[3] Ibid., pp. 95-103.

[4] See also: "Noon" (I, 14), "Evening" (I, 16), "The Harvest Morning" (I, 56), and "A Lair at Noon" (I, 276).

for example, shows him "nestling deep in boughs" and listening to "the ploughmen" at their work in the distant fields. In his leafy asylum he can state that "the sunbeams scarce molest me" as he comfortably studies the "leafy shadows dancing on the ground." Even in winter when these leaves are gone, Clare still looks to a shady refuge; in "A Copse in Winter", for instance, he writes:

> Shades, still I love you better than the plain,
> For here I find the earliest flowers that blow,
> While on the bare blea bank do yet remain
> Old winter's traces, little heaps of snow.
> Beneath your ashen roots, primroses grow
> From dead grass tufts and matted moss, once more
> Sweet beds of violets dare again be seen
> In their deep purple pride; and gay display'd,
> The crow-flowers, creeping from the naked green,
> Add early beauties to your sheltering shade.

The poet is inspired by the "sheltering shade" afforded by even the winter trees because they harbour the earliest signs of summer growth, while out in the open spaces the harsh reality of winter dominates all. In such shades, Clare feels that the eternal promise of spring is protected in a special reserve, an atmosphere of life that always triumphs over death.

In "The Fen" (II, 361), Clare also regards the open spaces as inferior to nature's covered spots; the fens are "dreary" and "lonely" with a sense of threat from man, as "lonely lodges scattered miles away" have their doors locked "from fear and robbers all the day." Even the girl

on her way to get water "hurries wildly from the face of men". What a contrast Clare finds in the setting of "Wanderings in June" (I, 341-348) where he senses no uneasy fear in a retreat secure in "darksome woodlands" in the bosom of summer's "darker bowers". Here he can peacefully contemplate all the myriad life existing in shades that "rear" various flowers; in the "many shades" of colour the poet can drift into his visionary world again as he feels "Nature's wond'rous mystery" and sees fanciful, "different shapes in leaves." He feels the same delightful shadows in "Pastime in Summer" (I, 365) where he notes how a tree's shade keeps the grass green because it checks "intrusions of the summer suns", and boys, walking homeward from fishing, are refreshed because the sun is gone and they can walk in a comfortable landscape of "blue cool haziness."

Because Clare can associate the shadows of his retreat with life and natural beauty, the ivy that hangs over ancient ruins becomes "dear" to him. In the opening of "To the Ivy" (I, 263), he first views the dark growth "with fearful eye", and moves away from it. But soon, however, he realizes that this "bloom of ruins" is "far from danger's way", and he lauds the protection it affords "from summer suns"; he wishes that he too could be overshadowed by its "green darkness". Clare admires another dark refuge in

"Sunday Walks" (I, 215-218) in the woodlands of "sweet hermit nature" where he views plants that never see the sun yet "bud in their snug retreat .... without one notice of a passing eye." The poet admires these "nameless flowers" as he rests in the ivy canopy overhanging them.

For Clare, health and a special kind of light resides in his shady retreats. In "To Health" (I, 30-31), for example, he finds "the woodland shade" where health is the poet's companion. In such coverts Clare identifies himself with hidden flowers like the violet, "that lone dweller in the pathless shade" in "To the Violet" (I, 37-38). He seeks their "cave" when he is depressed by the demands of "this labouring life." Though this little grotto resides in shadows, the poet sees a special light here where the violet is nurtured; it could be related to his visionary Edenic landscape, as the blooming flower is also linked with the hope of a new day, a prime, fresh morning, in the conclusion of Clare's address to the violet:

> To spring return, with all thy train
> Of flow'rets cloth'd in varied hue,
> I long to see that morn again
> Which brings to light the violet blue.
> (I, 38)

Clare also employs the motifs of life, growth, health, and other benign qualities of the shade in "Ballads" (I, 93), in some early stanzas of "The Village Minstrel" (I, 136), in "Rural Morning" (I, 207), in "The Woodland Stile" (II, 127), and in "Impulses of Spring" (I, 429-433) where

the poet sees just as much life in the shade as in the sunshine and he realizes "No sunless place is found too mean/ Spring's blushing gems to wear." Clare believes that "hope lives green" ("Shadows", I, 529) in many places that people usually regard as desolate. He loves those "sudden showers" that drive him to the leafy shelters where all things, even a weed among "a host of flowers", have an aura of Edenic loveliness. The shades are peopled, for him, with the eternal spirit of nature and the benevolent souls of her myriad living things. In the woodland shadows, the tiniest elements of life speak to the poet as well as the larger forces such as sun, wind, and rain. Like the Creator in Genesis, the poet draws light and life out of the shadows so that darkness can never again be a totality.

The creative imagination of Clare even sees the shade as blessed territory in poems such as "Langly Bush" (I, 236) where the bush becomes "the shepherd's sacred shade" and the poet is uneasy that it may soon be gone as its "mouldering trunk is nearly rotten through." In "Bushy Close" (II, 62), he is aware that "memory makes divine" all his retreats of "sweet woodland shadows." Despite all his troubles, Clare can still maintain the spiritual reality of these exclusive places, as he does with his visions of Eden and Mary. In asserting his refuge of poetic imagination he celebrates timeless beauty; he can say: "I dream

of happiness and call it mine." The fox, the nightingale, and all other creatures of the shadowy havens, have nothing to fear from this man who, throughout his life, "crept full many hours away" into the deep, consecrated bosom of nature where he always felt that his "boyish heart was living."

Perhaps the most frequent image of refuge in Clare's poetry is the bird's nest, the perfect little cell of privacy away from the dangers of man. The poet finds a creature like the snipe (I, 377-379) very appealing because, though it lives in swamps "where fear encamps", it is still safe in its "mystic nest" on ground where no man can put his foot:

> Mystic indeed;
> For isles that oceans make
> Are scarcely more secure for birds to build
> Than this flag-hidden lake.
> (I, 378)

The snipe is safe because of nature's designed protection for its own who can live uninterrupted in a setting where "security pervades." Various birds who flee from "man's dreaded sight" also build their shelters here on the "stagnant floods" and "are frightened not." It is man and his rude intrusions that bring chaos into these natural sanctuaries; in "The Wryneck's Nest" (I, 524), for example, the arrival of man transforms the spot into "a serpent's nest." The wryneck strikes fear into the heart of foolish people who are intent on "plundering" her nest. In the

mind of "the clown" the mother bird becomes a serpent, so he runs away from the tree in terror:

> That summer bird its oft-repeated note
> Chirps from the dotterel ash, and in the hole
> The green woodpecker made in years remote,
> It makes its nest.—When peeping idlers stroll
> In anxious plundering moods, they by and by
> The wryneck's curious eggs, as white as snow,
> While squinting in the hollow tree, espy.
> The sitting bird looks up with jetty eye,
> And waves her head in terror to and fro,
> Speckled and veined with various shades of brown;
> And then a hissing noise assails the clown.
> Quickly, with hasty terror in his breast,
> From the tree's knotty trunk he sluthers down,
> And thinks the strange bird guards a serpent's nest.

The significant fact here is that the serpent resides in man's imagination. The creature was harmless in guarding her "curious eggs, as white as snow" before man took on "anxious plundering moods" and made her hiss.

Man is also the disturber of nests and the initiator of discord in the sonnet, "Summer" (II, 126), that concludes with a partridge being flushed from its shelter by the "schoolboy". Here also "the woodman's axe" destroys the shade, and "barkmen" rip the covering from the fallen trees. Though the sweating "haymaker" and his boys seek their own relief in the shady grove, they are not as concerned about the ruined bird's nest as Clare seems to be.

A keen and accurate observer of nature, Clare always gives good specific description of the birds' nests that he discovers on his rambles. Often, however, these

poems contain more than description, as the poet's close-up view emphasizes an atmosphere of perfect peace and solitude, a poetic world akin to the visionary setting of Eden and Mary. In "The Nightingale's Nest" (II, 213-216), for example, the poet is amazed that this creature, so often romantically associated with poetry and spiritual presence, should have its nest right out in the open, an obvious place "where rude boys never think to look." Perhaps these boys are like many people who fail to see what Clare knows: poetry resides in the common things around them. The poet is joyful that the nightingale's solitude is not disturbed by man; in her "home of love" the bird is akin to something spiritual, and Clare even feels that "she lived on song". He cannot put into words the feeling he experiences in the area of her nest, so he is content to leave the pure poetry unsaid and residing in that shelter where "all seemed as hidden as a thought unborn." In this sacred setting, Clare calls the bird one of "solitude's disciples", with her "curious eggs" further protected by the "old prickly thorn bush." In a context that is Blakean, the thorn, so often linked with the Fall, now becomes a guardian of this disciple secure in her Eden "still unknown to wrong."

In "Kingfishers" (II, 226-227) Clare is amazed that the bird can "make a hole" in the riverbank "as well as ever did the mole", and from this mud still emerge with

"splendid" feathers, a "plumage" even finer than the peacock's. At least half of the poem is devoted to the nest deep in the hole and "turned at the last with sudden bend" so that the knives of boys will never reach inside. Clare is happy to observe such natural protection for the innocent birds, as he is also in "The Redcap" (II, 231) where he spies a nest "hid in a bunch of lilac flowers." Seeking refuge from the rain, he makes this pleasant discovery and devotes twelve of the poem's sixteen lines to a consideration of the nest itself. The same delightful type of retreat is found by the poet also in "The Willow Biper" (II, 231), and in "The Lark's Nest" (II, 232) where the bird makes its home "behind a clod" in the hoof-mark of a horse, roofed over by the flowing blades of wheat; here in the lovely atmosphere of morning a new egg gleams with a promise of new life and "the wheat surrounds it like a bower."

"The Moor-Hen's Nest" (II, 233) depicts a refuge in the roots of an old tree, a nest "hung just to touch the stream" so that the young birds can leave for water when they are old enough; here they are completely innocent of the threat that comes but "cannot reach their homes." In "The Red Bird" (II, 244) the poet envies all such nests where innocence still reigns in blissful asylums that "man can seldom share":

A little slender bird of reddish brown
With frequent haste pops in and out the reeds,
And on the river frequent flutters down
As if for food; and so securely feeds
Her little brood, that in their ambush needs
Her frequent journeys, hid in thickest shade
Where danger never finds a path to throw
A fear on comfort's nest, securely made
In woods of reeds round which the waters flow;
Save by a jilted stone that boys will throw,
Or passing rustle of the fisher's boat.
It is the reed-bird, prized for pleasant note.
Ah, happy songster, man can seldom share
A spot so hidden from the haunts of care.

Unlike man in his clock-watching society of toil, the innocent creature enjoys the "thickest shade" in a home immune to "the haunts of care." It is oblivious to even the harmless, not-so-accurate "stone that boys will throw", and the gentle wave "or passing rustle of the fisher's boat."

It is not surprising that the bird's nest is a frequent image in the poetry of John Clare, for he sought, throughout his life, his own Edenic nest away from the noisy world of insensitive man and his sweaty labour. All of his bird poems fit into the framework of retreat and refuge motifs found throughout his writings. To the sensitive Clare, the bird's nest is a kindred aspect of Eden's cell, the child's haven in its cradle or its mother's arms, eternal springtime, the pre-enclosure sanctuary in nature's bosom, the Sabbath break from labour, the grotto of Mary's benign spirit, the blessed shade, and all other themes of visionary asylum. Clare is always concerned about getting away from the village confines, away to nature and her

primary joys where he never feels outside the unity of things that are infinitely benign and beautiful. Though he feels sorrowful at the condition of fallen mankind, and pities his own misfortunate state in life, Clare can seek the comforts of his visionary world, his own nest of creative energy and imagination away from those masses of people who are satisfied to exist only in a pragmatic, external world with no real sense of wonder or poetic elevation.

As an indication of Clare's interest in the bird's nest, his "List of Northamptonshire Birds"[5] contains at least seventy entries which have details on particular nests. Furthermore, the 1935 Tibble selection of Clare's poems contains a section entitled "Poems About Birds" (II, 213-247). Of the forty-two poems in this section, "grouped together because most of them belong to a series of rough drafts written in a separate notebook, 1825-30" (II, 213), thirty-five contain Clare's observations about the nest. In only a few poems, such as "The Flight of Birds" (II, 239), "The Wren" (II, 245), and "The Happy Bird" (II, 246), is he content to observe birds in flight or alighting on trees, and not to make any allusion at all to a particular nest. The last poem in this section is the sonnet, "Birds' Nests"

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[5] Prose, pp. 261-291.

(II, 247), which has the same title as the seven lines of verse (II, 426) supposed to be Clare's last poem:[6]

> How fresh the air, the birds how busy now!
> In every walk if I but peep I find
> Nests newly made or finished all and lined
> With hair and thistle down, and in the bough
> Of little hawthorn, huddled up in green,
> The leaves still thickening as the spring gets age,
> The pink's, quiet round and snug and closely laid,
> And linnet's of materials loose and rough;
> And still hedge-sparrow, moping in the shade
> Near the hedge-bottom, weaves of homely stuff,
> Dead grass and mosses green, an hermitage,
> For secrecy and shelter rightly made;
> And beautiful it is to walk beside
> The lanes and hedges where their homes abide.
> (II, 247)

In his observations about the birds' homes in the security of a pure and wholesome atmosphere, Clare is truly at home in his own "hermitage" of "secrecy and shelter" where he again celebrates the abiding truths of innocence, freshness, harmony, love, and benevolent sanctuary. His walk in "lanes and hedges where their homes abide" must truly make Eden bloom for him again. In many poems[7] such as this Clare identifies himself with those creatures who are threatened by man as society moves further away from a life close to nature and the simple virtues. As man heeds less and less

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[6] Life, pp. 180 and 200.

[7] See: Birds Nest: Poems by John Clare, A. Tibble, ed., Northumberland, 1973. (This recent, slim collection of Clare's bird poetry contains twenty poems, nineteen of which are here published for the first time.)

the primary, basic poetry of earth's voices, Clare seeks comfort in the contemplation of nature's infinite wonders, not the least of which is the mystic, yet natural, asylum of the bird's nest. For him, his poetry becomes a kind of nest in itself, a simple structured creation enclosing and preserving his special thoughts, emotions, ideas, and truths, from the eroding reality of time and mutability.

Another aspect of the retreat theme in Clare's poetry is the poet's desire for a comfortable, peaceful cottage to enclose him from the elements while he reads and enjoys the pleasures of imagination. In this love of the contemplative life Clare is similar to the poet, William Cowper; though each praises the beauties of nature in the fresh outdoors, he can also appreciate the haven of the quiet cottage nestled away from the bustle of life. It appears, however, that such satisfying, domestic peace was more actually realized in Cowper's life than in Clare's. Clare faced chronic poverty and the burdening responsibilities of marriage and family. Cowper had more privacy and physical comforts at home in his retreat of books, slippers, easy chairs, and singing kettles. Clare, it appears, often had to seek his quiet cottage in a hollow tree, an arbor, or some other natural covert where he often dreamed of a home with rows of books where all his other needs might be provided for him.

Clare admired the poetry of Cowper and mentioned him as one of his favourite poets.[8] In fact, he displays almost a religious reverence for the earlier poet in one of his Northampton Asylum poems, "Cowper":

Cowper, the poet of the fields
Who found the muse on common ground--
The homesteads that each cottage shields
He loved -- and made them classic ground.

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.

Who has not read the 'Winter Storm,'
And does not feel the falling snow
And woodman keeping noses warm
With pipes wherever forests grow?

The 'Winter Walk' and 'Summer's Noon' --
We meet together by the fire
And think the walks are o'er too soon
When books are read and we retire.

Who travels o'er those sweet fields now
And brings not Cowper to his mind?
Birds sing his name in every bough,
Nature repeats it in the wind.

And every place the poet trod
And every place the poet sung
Are like the Holy Land of God,
In every mouth, on every tongue.
(II, 423-424)

It is sad to read these lines and think of John Clare within the walls of a mental hospital paying tribute to a dead fellow poet who, from experience, also knew what it was really like to suffer from melancholy, loneliness, and

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[8] Prose, pp. 39-40, 79-80, 175.

and depression. Apart from what the world calls their "madness", Clare and Cowper deal with a number of similar themes. Each, for example, favours the life of the recluse, as in Cowper's "Retirement", although Cowper seems to ask for a more social life with a few friends around his fireside. Both poets are in tune with the simple things of nature and have a keen dislike for anything artificial. There is a strong theme of protest in the work of each against man's wanton destruction of the countryside. Cowper, however, makes more specific allusions to God than Clare does; for example, in "The Sofa" he sets up a dichotomy between town and country, and throughout this poem the idea persists that God creates while man destroys. Though Clare does not praise God in the way Cowper does, in his retreat to nature away from the annoying demands of labour, Clare sets up a similar dichotomy between town and country.

Both Clare and Cowper look to the past as a more Edenic, virtuous, and simpler time. Cowper's "The Garden", for example, stresses the eternal truths of nature and sees the poet himself as the "stricken deer"[9] who is so depressed and weary in man's insensitive society that he retires to a life of religious contemplation which is linked closely with

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[9] Brian Spiller, ed., Cowper. Verse and Letters, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968, p. 444.

nature and the past. Clare's poetry, though less dogmatically Christian than Cowper's, also celebrates the virtues of a religious, meditative, peaceful contemplation with nature as the guiding spirit. "The Garden" further shows Cowper praising family life and domestic happiness and comfort in a manner that Clare later emulates in his celebration of the tranquil, domestic retreat.

In his poem, "Cowper", Clare is enthusiastic in his praise of one who loved the same things he does now: "the fields", "the rural walk", singing birds, the voices of nature, and other common delights of the outdoors. But Clare's poem also emphasizes the domestic retreat, the snug, cosy cottage where books can be read in comfort by the solace of the fireplace. In this warmth the poet delights in experiencing winter vicariously; indeed the fire seems to fuse the poles of heat and cold and his imagination is fully employed in one fanciful, elevating season inside the "shields" of the cottage walls.

Clare extols the compact domestic retreat in "January: A Cottage Evening":

> The shutter closd the lamp alight
> The faggot chopt and blazing bright
> The shepherd from his labour free
> Dancing his children on his knee
> Or toasting sloe boughs sputtering ripe
> Or smoaking glad his puthering pipe
> While underneath his masters seat
> The tired dog lies in slumbers sweet
> Startled and whimpering in his sleep
> Chasing still the straying sheep

> The cat rolld' round in vacant chair
> Or leaping childerns knees to lair
> Or purring on the warmer hearth
> Sweet chorus to the crickets mirth
> The redcap hanging over head
> In cage of wire is perchd abed
> Slumbering in his painted feathers
> Unconscious of the outdoor weathers
> And things wi out the cottage walls
> Meet comfort as the evening falls[.]

In these lines[10] from the second chapter of The Shepherd's Calendar, both man and animal are comfortable in an anchorage of domestic peace; "the shepherd from his labour free" now has time to play with his children while the animals slumber "unconscious of the outdoor weathers" or any threat in the world beyond the refuge of the cottage walls. This harmony of man and creature behind closed shutters is an Edenic moment for Clare, a Sabbath spell in the welcomed shadows of evening with the wider world of man kept far off in the distance. Cowper celebrates this kind of retreat in "The Task" when he gleefully anticipates stirring up the fire and closing the shutters as he welcomes "peaceful evening in",[11] and is glad that the din of "the crowd" is barely audible:

> 'Tis pleasant through the loop-holes of retreat
> To peep at such a world. To see the stir
> Of the great Babel and not feel the crowd.
> To hear the roar she sends through all her gates,

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[10] Robinson and Summerfield, eds., op. cit., p. 10.

[11] Brian Spiller, ed., op. cit., p. 466.

> At a safe distance, where the dying sound
> Falls a soft murmur on th' uninjured ear.[12]

Cowper rejoices that something of Eden still survives in this world as he addresses "domestic happiness" as the "only bliss of Paradise that has survived the fall."[13] Clare also appreciates this bliss even more when he contemplates the many miseries of the outside world. In "January", for example, he is vividly aware of the cruel frost and the pressing chill that is locked out by the warm cottage walls. An earlier poem "Evening Pastime" (I, 517) shows the poet happy that "the cares of life" can be left outside the evening's domestic circle with its "crackling fire", "singing kettle", "tales of laughing children", and all other things that "cheer the spirits." Here Clare mentions Cowper, with Thomson and Bloomfield, as appropriate reading material in such a cosy setting. With reading and "the muse's voice" to entertain him, Clare is further enriched in the Edenic atmosphere of innocent children and "their artless talk" so far from the adult world of "sturdy reason."

Though Cowper would have found the cottage in which Clare was born (and which later became very dear to Clare)

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[12] Ibid., p. 468.

[13] Ibid., p. 442.

"supremely uncomfortable",[14] both poets, from a distance, see such cottages as ideal nests for the meditative man. Each poet is a Romantic in his insistence on a visionary spot that transcends the harsher, practical facts of existence. This is why, throughout his life, Clare acknowledges the influence of Cowper on his poetry[15] and, from the gloom of his cell in Northampton, flies on the wings of imagination in ardent praise of "Cowper" (II, 423-424) and all things that Cowper celebrated.

"The Wood-Cutter's Night Song" (I, 41-42) is also a celebration of Clare's vision of the domestic retreat. Though the wood-cutter takes pleasure in his work in the forest where the "little birds" sing, he also derives pleasure from imagining the domestic cot that awaits him at the end of the day:

> All day long I love the oaks,
> But, at nights, yon little cot,
> Where I see the chimney smokes,
> Is by far the prettiest spot.
>
> Wife and children all are there,
> To revive with pleasant looks,
> Table ready set, and chair,
> Supper hanging on the hooks.
>
> Soon as ever I get in,
> When my faggot down I fling,
> Little prattlers they begin
> Teasing me to talk and sing.

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[14] Life, p. 4.

[15] See footnote #8.

Welcome, red and roundy sun,
  Dropping lowly in the west;
Now my hard day's work is done,
  I'm as happy as the best.

Joyful are the thoughts of home,
  Now I'm ready for my chair,
So, till morrow-morning's come,
  Bill and mittens, lie ye there!

This poem compares with "The Woodman" (I, 203) where "the labourer drowns his care" in his evening cottage with his wife and children and offers prayers of thanks to God for the domestic nook where "heaven exists on earth." "The Cottager" (I, 384-387) depicts a contented man in his home in a "sheltered valley" where he feels safe from the "strife" of the world and any "mountain storm". From his nest he can watch the "lamb" and the "lark" frolic across the Edenic landscape where "care" never enters "to steal a single joy"; this man is fortunate in that he has retained the blessed innocent joys of "a child at play." Clare asks for his own domestic retreat in his "Address To Plenty" (I, 45-52) but he is disappointed, however, that "want and poverty" keep such a shelter away from him. He realizes that he can dream of "one snug room" ("The Poet's Wish" I, 58), a place he calls "a little garret warm and high" as if he were contemplating a bird's nest again; but his ideal cot where he can "read and study" as he pleases never becomes a reality. He is left to seek his visionary refuge.

Away from the reality of the present, Clare can focus on a small spot in his past, the visionary setting in a chimney corner of childhood. Here in poems such as "To My Cottage" (I, 128), the poet sees himself happy and listening to the wind's voices in the chimney while his mother spins "her whirring spool". This scene compares with a section in "The Village Minstrel" (I, 134) where the poet is cosy in "the long dark night" by a fire that flickers "tales of fairy land" on the warm cottage walls. A number of poems[16] such as "A Fireside Sketch" (II, 288-292), answer the question, "Where is comfort?" It is by the cottage fire with a good book, a jug of ale, and an active imagination, as snowflakes blow across the dark opening of the chimney top and the poet "smokes earth's troubles into peace."

Clare's domestic retreat is often linked with some natural object that offers him companionship just outside the walls and an assuring sense of presence out there in the wind and darkness. His vision of a special tree by the cottage, for example, dispels fear and depression. In "The Fallen Elm" (II, 18-20) Clare remembers that the sound of the old tree murmuring in the chimney top used to comfort him with a peace beyond words:

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[16] See: "Winter" (I, 272), "Winter" (I, 357-365), "Home Happiness" (II, 89), "Snowstorm (I)" (II, 213), "Happiness of Evening" (II, 327), and "The Winter's Come" (II, 416).

We felt thy kind protection like a friend
And edged our chairs up closer to the fire,
Enjoying comfort that was never penned.
(II, 19)

But enclosure came and took away the poet's "friend" and his comforting voice, that "language by which hearts are stirred." For Clare, however, this tree will always speak to him in his imagination as "the sweetest anthem autumn ever made."

In "Pastoral Fancies" (II, 15-16), the tree becomes the poet's cottage when he seeks a retreat "from noontide"; he searches for "a hollow oak" or "the hut of shepherd swain, with rushes lined", and here he finds "life's gentlest joys". In this cot where Clare combines his love of the domestic retreat with that of the "gentle spot" in wild nature, a lost moment of Eden can be "as if 'twere found agen":

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;
Here would I live and die, and only crave
The home I chose might also be my grave.
(II, 16)

The sonnet, "Early Morning" (II, 321) is a similar example of the merging of the domestic and the wild retreat; the cottage, "hidden like a nest", is surrounded by the tiny homes of creatures such as the lark.

Clare always extends an invitation to the wild creatures to share his domestic retreat with him. In "On Seeing Two Swallows Late in October (11)" (II, 241-242), for example, he wishes the birds could "find a dwelling" above his fireplace. When the swallows "brave the chilly air" and the "skies grow dull with winter's heavy rains", Clare reminds the innocent creatures that his old chimney and "russet thatch" still offers them a shelter:

> I wish ye well to find a dwelling here,
> For in the unsocial weather ye would fling
> Gleanings of comfort through the winter wide,
> Twittering as wont above the old fireside,
> And cheat the surly winter into spring.

In their co-operative atmosphere of blissful harmony, man and creature can be oblivious to time's winter reality. The poet offers a similar invitation to "The Robin" (I, 23) and warns the bird to keep away from all houses "where the peasant makes use of a gun." Clare invites the bird to come to his cottage and eat the crumbs from his table; he even offers to take a pane out of the window to make a passage for the robin into a benign and safe refuge.

The haven of a small cottage away from society is just another variation on the prevailing themes of refuge in John Clare's poetry. This cell of perfect peace related to all the other private settings of the poetic imagination, the blessed shade, the mystic nest, the nook where the voices of nature are heard, and the timeless Garden where Mary walks in everlasting loveliness.

CONCLUSION

John Clare suffered a number of losses and setbacks throughout his unfortunate life; for example, he often lamented his loss of childhood happiness and the bountiful scenery of the commons around his native village where he used to walk with his first love, Mary Joyce, the girl who left him and eventually married somebody else. He sometimes regretted his having to toil for long hours of manual labour in the fields to support his growing family. He saw his hope of becoming a successful poet disappear after the initial popularity[1] of his first book, Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery, published in 1820. He lost his native Helpston, family and friends when he was forced to spend the last twenty years of his life in the mental asylum at Northampton. From the severe reality of his life, however, Clare could turn to the refuge of his visionary world. Throughout his life, in poetry that often echoed the Pre-Romantic and Romantic writers, he was faithful to the ideals of pure childhood innocence and the Edenic glory from which all men grow away; he sought his visionary Garden

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[1] Life, p. 56.

and the landscape of true home; he celebrated love in the widest spiritual sense; and took comfort in the thought that Nature protected her own.

Though he used the Garden symbol of biblical, Christian and Romantic tradition, Clare adapted it to his own poetic vision; his was still an essentially unique voice in that his home landscape, childhood, Mary, and so many other aspects of his personal experience and taste, were all incorporated into his visionary world. Clare, in many of his poems, sought the refuge of this special world's timeless truths.

In what many people would regard as lonely places, Clare was never lonely. Away from man's labouring and gossipy din, he peopled his retreats with fancy's bright forms and hosts of nature's friends, and they all spoke true poetry to him. Thus, he could joyfully claim: "I found the poems in the fields,/ And only wrote them down." (II, 384). Nature spoke more meaningfully to Clare than to the majority of people in his village who were "insensible of everything but toiling & talking of it & that to no purpose."[2] As J. Middleton Murry[3] implies, Clare was more

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[2] Criticism, p. 190.

[3] Ibid., p. 331.

a creature of wild nature than a toiling village labourer:

> With his plants and birds and bees and fields he was among his own people. The spiked thistle, the firetail, the hare, the white-nosed and the grand-father bee were his friends. Yet he hardly humanized them; he seems rather to have lived on the same level of existence as they, and to have known them as they know each other.

Undoubtedly, as W.K. Richmond writes, Clare often "suffered from a host of repressions like a linnet in a cage. Black melancholy was eating his heart away."[4] But Clare could escape from this cage by keeping his spirit free to find and experience that visionary landscape in which he was never an alien, a setting in which he feels truly at home and blessed with the prime days of childhood again. That is why J. Middleton Murry, aware of Clare's triumph, writes:

> When he was shut out by destiny and the hand of man from his own world, he lived within the memory of it.... though he was an outcast from his world, he was loyal to it.[5]

As long as Clare remained loyal to his peaceful refuge away from man and close to the benevolent influence of nature, he could always make Eden bloom for him again. His religion of "total immersion"[6] into his vast "pool of memories and

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[4] Criticism, p. 389.

[5] Ibid., p. 363.

[6] Kenneth Clark, Civilisation, New York, 1969, p. 291.

sensations"[7] of Edenic nature prevented the poet from being totally engulfed by doubts, troubles, sickness, poverty, and all the rest that constituted the dark chaos of fallen man. In the refuge of his imagaination, Clare could truly be called "a poet in defeat entirely undefeated."[8]

A poem which best illustrates many of the motifs of refuge in Clare's poetry is the often-anthologized "Clock-a-Clay" (II, 447-448). In this asylum poem, Clare escapes from the confining reality of hospital walls and once more goes home to his benevolent, natural retreat:

In the cowslip pips I lie
Hidden from the buzzing fly,
While green grass beneath me lies
Pearled with dew like fishes' eyes,
Here I lie, a clock-a-clay,
Waiting for the time of day.

While grassy forests quake surprise,
And the wild wind sobs and sighs,
My gold home rocks as like to fall
On its pillar green and tall;
When the parting rain drives by
Clock-a-clay keeps warm and dry.

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

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Geoffrey Grigson, Criticism, p. 413.

My home shakes in wind and showers;
Pale green pillar topped with flowers,
Bending at the wild wind's breath,
Till I touch the grass beneath;
Here I live, lone clock-a-clay,
Watching for the time of day.

Here the poet speaks from the point of view of the tiny, "hidden" creature, the ladybug or ladybird. With its emphasis on secrecy and security, and the image of "the buzzing fly", this poem reminds one of "Secret Love" (II, 513), Clare's strong, evocative sense of Mary's spirit in the benign heart of nature's bountiful and secluded places. Hidden away from the world of man, the cell or nest in "the cowslip pips" is a miniature world of the poet's vision. This landscape has all the features of Clare's Eden; the sense of a sheltered home in nature's bosom, the green, verdant lushness of shady "forests" before the coming of enclosure's axe, the Sabbath atmosphere of leisure away from the drudgery of toil and labour are all here.

The delicate, protected nest rocks as the wind blows and the rain parts the grass; it "shakes in wind and showers" and bends to touch the earth. This "home", however, does not fall or break; there is firmness and strength here represented in the image of the "pillar". Clare's world of visionary refuge rests on the pillar of nature, and it transcends the shallow world of mere description or picture painting. This pillar supports the

poet's refuge of "gold", a world of romantic fantasy and wonder that presents itself to the poet's close-up view; it is a realm of magic and child-like imagination with its glowing landscape "pearled with dew like fishes' eyes."

The timeless elements of Clare's special world are neatly depicted throughout this poem as there is no ordinary time-piece or clock mentioned; the ladybug, "waiting" and "watching for the time of day", is an allusion to the children's game of telling the hour by the number of taps it takes to make this bug fly off a person's hand. Clare himself used to play this game when he was a child, as he mentions in the sonnet "Sabbath Walks" (I, 279). Such a guileless time scheme of childhood games, wonder, innocent pleasures, outdoor fun, and the like is outside the bare statistics of calendar time, and more akin with all that Clare's Eden represents. For the poet, his infinite paradise resides even in the world of "cowslip pips", and, in such a world, there is no ticking of any metal clock.

The "lone clock-a-clay" is an appropriate symbol of both poetic isolation and Clare's timeless refuge with its components of home, childhood, pre-enclosure verdure, the Sabbath spell, the gentle, secret presence of ideal Mary, the safe retreat, the sacred, protective shade, the mystic security of the bird's nest, and the ideal domestic

retreat of the poet's cottage. In this sphere of fancy the poet waits oblivious of village clocks. He waits for a little child to ask the most significant questions.

In all his retreats, Clare is attempting to define his own poetic identity. Though he echoes various other poets when he talks about Eden's timeless beauty, nature's benign retreats, spiritual love, and other features of his imaginative solitude, Clare presents his own unique, personal vision. In this respect, he resembles eighteenth-century poets such as Thomson, Cowper, Beattie and Romantics such as Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and others who all display in their work an interest in the individual imagination that transcends the world of surface reality. Like them, Clare realizes that, in solitude, a person can best enjoy the pleasures of the imagination and view that glowing inner horizon that extends far into a meaningful infinity. Away from the dull bother and care of a pragmatic world Clare gives meaning to his life by celebrating those principles of visionary reality that incorporate a genuine sensitivity to the myriad wonders of nature, a creation of art out of sadness and melancholy, the energy and spirit of a perfect love that abides in benign nature, the unity of a golden, glorious past, and the voyage of imagination that leaves immediate landscapes far behind or transforms

their scenery into elevating contours of glory. This is why Clare claims, in his late poem, "Poets Love Nature" (II, 516), that he can rise above "scorn of fools", "mock of idle pride", "the vile in nature", "worthless deeds", "sorrow", and "prison". Even within the walls of the Northampton Asylum he can experience the "solace" of nature's refuge which is "like the calm of heaven"; here he can still see the flowers as nature's "very scriptures upon earth" and feel the presence of God. In his own asylum of vision, Clare finds himself, and is able to assert: "I am free."

Note on Bibliography

The following bibliography is divided into three sections:

I. Clare's Writings - his books of poetry, and edited editions of his poems, prose and letters. This section is arranged chronologically.

II. Books - including full-length works of biography, criticism, background, theses, relevant works of other poets, and important miscellanea. This section is arranged alphabetically by author (or editor).

III. Articles - briefer works of criticism, background, biography and relevant miscellanea. This section is also arranged alphabetically by author.

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