

Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

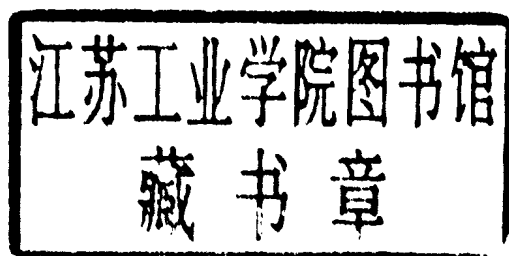
23

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

VOLUME 23

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Preface

A Comprehensive Information Source on World Poetry

P*oetry Criticism (PC)* provides substantial critical excerpts and biographical information on poets throughout the world who are most frequently studied in high school and undergraduate college courses. Each **PC** entry is supplemented by biographical and bibliographical material to help guide the user to a fuller understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism Series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, **PC** offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by **PC** supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

Coverage

In order to reflect the influence of tradition as well as innovation, poets of various nationalities, eras, and movements are represented in every volume of **PC**. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work; the length of an entry reflects the amount of critical attention that the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Since many poets have inspired a prodigious amount of critical explication, **PC** is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most significant published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors will sometimes reprint essays that have appeared in previous volumes of Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds fifteen percent of a **PC** volume.

Organization

Each **PC** author entry consists of the following components:

- **Author Heading:** the name under which the author wrote appears at the beginning of the entry, followed by birth and death dates. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and his or her legal name given in parentheses in the lines immediately preceding the Introduction. Uncertainty as to birth or death dates is indicated by question marks.
- **Introduction:** a biographical and critical essay introduces readers to the author and the critical discussions surrounding his or her work.
- **Author Portrait:** a photograph or illustration of the author is included when available.
- **Principal Works:** the author's most important works are identified in a list ordered chronologically by first publication dates. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, original foreign-language publication information is provided, as well as the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.

- **Criticism:** critical excerpts chronologically arranged in each author entry provide perspective on changes in critical evaluation over the years. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type to enable a reader to ascertain without difficulty the works under discussion. For purposes of easy identification, the critic's name and the publication date of the essay are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the journal in which it originally appeared. Publication information (such as publisher names and book prices) and parenthetical numerical references (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of a work) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to enable smoother reading of the text.
- **Explanatory Notes:** introductory comments preface each critical excerpt, providing several types of useful information, including: the reputation of a critic, the importance of a work of criticism, and the specific type of criticism (biographical, psychoanalytic, historical, etc.).
- **Author Commentary:** insightful comments from the authors themselves and excerpts from author interviews are included when available.
- **Bibliographical Citations:** information preceding each piece of criticism guides the interested reader to the original essay or book.
- **Further Reading:** bibliographic references accompanied by descriptive notes at the end of each entry suggest additional materials for study of the author. Boxed material following the Further Reading provides references to other biographical and critical series published by Gale.

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- **Cumulative Author Index:** comprises all authors who have appeared in Gale's Literary Criticism Series, along with cross-references to such Gale biographical series as *Contemporary Authors* and *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. This cumulated index enables the user to locate an author within the various series.
- **Cumulative Nationality Index:** includes all authors featured in *PC*, arranged alphabetically under their respective nationalities.
- **Cumulative Title Index:** lists in alphabetical order all individual poems, book-length poems, and collection titles contained in the *PC* series. Titles of poetry collections and separately published poems are printed in italics, while titles of individual poems are printed in roman type with quotation marks. Each title is followed by the author's name and the volume and page number corresponding to the location of commentary on specific works. English-language translations of original foreign-language titles are cross-referenced to the foreign titles so that all references to discussion of a work are combined in one listing.

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When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume in the Literary Criticism Series may use the following general formats to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals,¹ the second to material reprinted from books:

¹David Daiches, "W. H. Auden: The Search for a Public," *Poetry* LIV (June 1939), 148-56; excerpted and reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*, Vol. 1, ed. Robyn V. Young (Detroit: Gale Research, 1990), pp. 7-9.

²Pamela J. Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (Greenwood Press, 1988); excerpted and reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*, Vol. 1, ed. Robyn V. Young (Detroit: Gale Research, 1990), pp. 410-14.

Comments Are Welcome

Readers who wish to suggest authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editors.

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John Clare

1793-1864

English poet and prose writer.

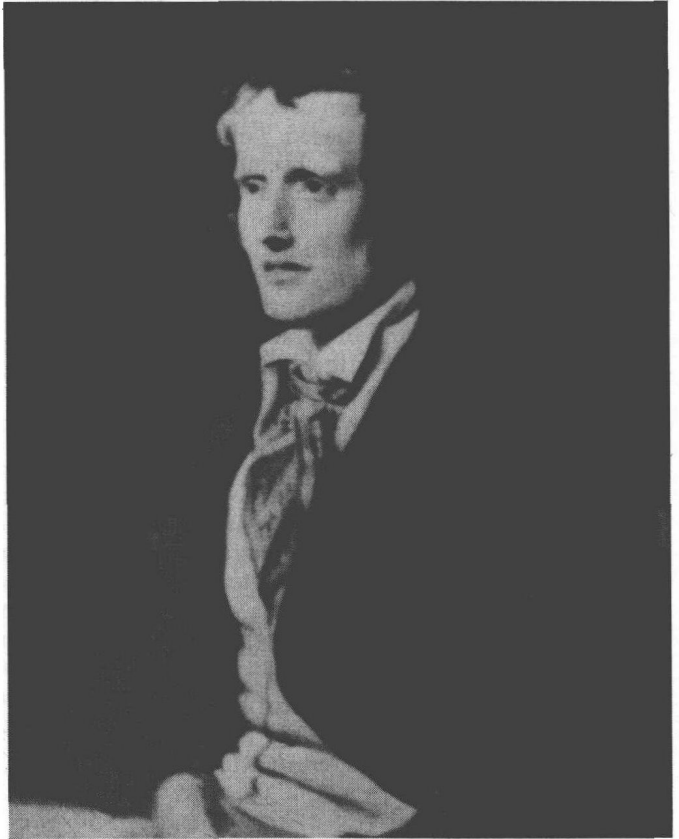
INTRODUCTION

For his vivid and exact descriptions of rural life and scenery, Clare is ranked with the foremost English nature poets. Attempts, however, to place him stylistically within the context of the first half of the nineteenth century have led to critical debate. While some commentators define Clare's importance with reference to the tradition of eighteenth-century descriptive verse, others emphasize the Romantic qualities of his poetry. Most recently, attention has been paid to the works of John Clare as unique poetic expressions in their own right.

Biographical Information

Clare grew up in the Northamptonshire village of Helpston, England, where the rustic countryside was to provide him with inspiration for most of his poetry. As the only son of impoverished field laborers, Clare spent his childhood on the farm working to help support his family. Consequently, his formal education was limited to three months a year, first at a small school in his native village and later at a school in nearby Glinton. Clare's poetic talent was nourished by his parents' knowledge of folk ballads as well as by his own reading of the works of the eighteenth-century poet James Thomson, whose long poem, *The Seasons*, inspired Clare to write verse. At age fourteen, Clare's formal education ended when financial hardship obliged him to obtain permanent employment outside his family. In 1809, while working at the Blue Bell Inn in Helpston, Clare fell in love with Mary Joyce, the daughter of a wealthy farmer. Mary's father quickly broke off the relationship because of Clare's inferior social status. Clare rebounded from this disappointment, eventually meeting, marrying, and having children with Martha ("Patty") Turner. However, the memory of his first love never left him, and Mary Joyce became the subject of many of Clare's poems.

In 1818 Clare tried to publish a volume of poems by subscription. Although the scheme proved unsuccessful, it attracted the attention of the influential London publisher John Taylor, who ultimately published Clare's first volume, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820). Despite this work's enormous popular success, the contemporary literary reaction to *Poems* was largely patronizing. While Clare's peasant background and minute descriptions of nature were favorably compared with those of Robert Burns and Robert Bloomfield, commentators criticized his grammatical inaccuracies and



provincial expressions. By the time Clare published his second volume of poetry, *The Village Minstrel, and Other Poems* (1821), the vogue for rural verse which had been responsible for the great success of *Poems* had diminished, and *The Village Minstrel, and Other Poems*, sold poorly, as did Clare's third work, *The Shepherd's Calendar; with Village Stories, and Other Poems* (1827).

During these years, Clare struggled to support his growing family on a small annuity from his earlier poems, augmented by seasonal gardening and field work. In 1832 under the auspices of a benevolent patron, Clare and his family moved from their small, crowded home in Helpston to a larger cottage in nearby Northborough. Although grateful to his patron for this new home, Clare profoundly missed the village of his childhood. With the failure in 1835 of his fourth volume, *The Rural Muse*, Clare's mental health collapsed. He began to believe that he was the poet Lord Byron or the famous boxer Jack Randall. He also grew convinced that his first love, Mary Joyce, was in fact his wife and that he lived in bigamy with his real wife, Martha Turner. In 1837 he was confined to a private asylum in High Beech. He escaped four years later and returned to Northborough. His physical health improved

but his delusions persisted, and in 1841 he was taken to Northampton General County Lunatic Asylum, where he spent the remaining twenty-three years of his life.

Major Works

Clare's popular first publication, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, is a nostalgic lament for the open fields and common meadowlands of his boyhood: This common land, which had been used for centuries by peasants and farmers, was "enclosed," or fenced off, by an 1809 Act of Parliament and subsequently available only to those who owned it. His second volume, *The Village Minstrel, and Other Poems*, was similarly inspired by the countryside where he was born and raised: Clare's most famous work is *The Shepherd's Calendar*—a poem which vividly unfolds the months as they are lived and worked in the villages and farms of rural England. "Don Juan" and "Child Harold" were written after his mental collapse in 1835 and are derivative of Lord Byron's poems of the same names. In fact Clare wrote numerous poems during his asylum years, but only after his death did they receive close attention and serious critical scrutiny.

Critical Reception

The history of Clare criticism is marked by controversy and contention. Several key issues dominate the commentary, including: whether Clare's early or late work is his most distinguished; the influence of the Romantic poetic tradition on his work; and whether he was merely a descriptive poet or was also interested in conveying ideas. To add to the confusion, most of the work published in Clare's lifetime was heavily edited to reflect standard grammar and dialect. What is more, Clare's asylum poems—some of which are deemed his most powerful work—elicited little or no attention during his lifetime. Not until the twentieth century, for example, did poems such as "A Vision" and "Invite to Eternity" receive close study. While scholars continue to disagree over the merits of his early and late poetry and the relationship between his works and those of his predecessors and contemporaries, Clare's reputation as a leading nature poet has been firmly established.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

- Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* 1820
- The Village Minstrel, and Other Poems* 1821
- The Shepherd's Calendar; with Village Stories, and Other Poems* 1827
- The Rural Muse* 1835
- Poems by John Clare* 1908
- John Clare: Poems Chiefly from Manuscript* 1920
- Madrigals and Chronicles: Being Newly Found Poems Written by John Clare* 1924

- The Poems of John Clare* 1935
- Poems of John Clare's Madness* 1949
- The Midsummer Cushion* 1979
- The Later Poems of John Clare, 1837-1864* 1984
- The Parish* 1985
- The Early Poems of John Clare, 1804-1822* 1989

Other Major Works

- Sketches in the Life of John Clare, Written by Himself* (autobiography and sketches) 1931
- The Letters of John Clare* (letters) 1951
- The Prose of John Clare* (autobiography, journal, and essays) 1951

CRITICISM

Janet M. Todd (essay date 1974)

SOURCE: "'Very copys of nature': John Clare's Descriptive Poetry", in *Philological Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 1, January, 1974, pp. 84-99.

[In the following excerpt, Todd argues that unlike the Romantic poets, who focused on humanity's spiritual response to nature, Clare described the pure or Edenic qualities of nature and the manner in which it falls victim to humanity's cruelty.]

In the early nineteenth century, there were two main poetic modes of presenting nature. The first was developed from the Georgic poetry of the eighteenth century and provided close, usually visual descriptions of natural things, without any explicit judgment or emotional response by the poet; this type of poetry can be called descriptive. The second mode is a combination of idealized presentations of natural objects and the poet's response to them. His own judgment and emotion not only affect the natural presentation, but also become the partial or main subject of the poem. This sort of poetry, practised often by Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats, for example, may be called Romantic.

John Clare's most distinctive pre-asylum verse evidences most of the characteristics associated with the descriptive mode. Although inevitably colored to some extent by the poet's emotions, his descriptions clearly exist for their own sake and not for any insight they might provide into the mental states of the poet. If Clare appears at all in the poem, it is as a perceiver and physical guide rather than as a feeling and imaginative creator.

By the time of Clare's second book of poems in 1821, however, and more obviously by his third in 1827, the descriptive poem was past its heyday, and the Romantic mode of presenting nature was clearly dominant. The descriptive poem thus came to seem anachronistic to the reading public; yet Clare, in spite of the growing evidence of its critical defeat, continued in this mode, which helps to explain the sudden loss of public acclaim he experienced between 1820 and 1827.

The change in taste can be clearly seen in the different poetic fates of Keats and Clare, both published by John Taylor at about the same time. Where Keats, after an initial failure, grew tremendously in popularity, Clare's poetic fate was the reverse. In spite of high regard for each other, Keats and Clare seem to have been aware they were writing in essentially different modes. Of Keats, Clare wrote: "He often described Nature as she appeared to his fancies, and not as he would have described her had he witnessed the things he describes." Clare is, furthermore, clearly doubtful about the "mystical" part of Romantic poetry—by which he would seem to mean the intrusion of the poet's subjective states into his verse—elements of which he found in Keats's work and later in Wordsworth's.

Keats, on the other hand, was criticizing Clare from the Romantic standpoint when he told Taylor that, in Clare's poetry, the "Description too much prevailed over the Sentiment." This criticism is based on an essential tenet of Romantic poetry, but would hardly have been a fault in descriptive verse. A passage from Coleridge will serve to illustrate the Romantic belief, although one could just as easily be found in Wordsworth, Hazlitt, or De Quincey:

Images, however beautiful, though faithfully copied from nature, and as accurately represented in words, do not of themselves characterize the poet. They become proofs of original genius only as far as they are modified by a predominant passion . . . or lastly, when a human and intellectual life is transferred to them from the poet's own spirit. . . .

In this passage, Coleridge ignores the essential strength of the other type of poetry, the descriptive, which makes the reader see, almost by the naming of what is indeed there but was until then unnoticed. In his pre-asylum poetry it is in this ability that Clare is preeminent, as H. F. Cary noted in his letter to the poet: "What you most excel in is the description of such natural objects as you have yourself had the opportunity of observing, and which none before you have noticed, though every one instantly recognises their truth." In addition to enlarging the reader's visual perception, however, Clare manages in the best of his descriptions without losing any of the appearance of factual truthfulness to convey to the attentive reader a unique view of nature and to suggest the human drama that is related to it. It is this capacity to expand descriptive poetry, without losing the close, truthful copying of nature, that I wish to examine in this essay.

For Clare, nature was primarily an aggregate of plants and small animals. This vital nature became, within a dramatic scheme of innocence and the fall, the unequal antagonist of man. Where man was fallen, nature was innocent; it was in addition eternal through its selflessness and regenerative power, beautiful and sensitive to beauty. Having experienced no fall, it was on earth still Edenic. Man on the other hand was mortal and, through materialism and cruelty, frequently insensitive to beauty and thus to Edenic nature. The human fall Clare regarded more as a process than as a single event; starting from the Biblical expulsion from Eden when death entered the

world and man first tilled the soil to live, it was in Clare's youth still incomplete because selected men, including the poet himself, could to some extent experience Eden through reverent communion with Edenic nature. In Clare's later maturity, however, the human degenerative process quickened and man lost his ability to perceive the Eden of nature; thus he was deprived of any possibility of regeneration through communion with prelapsarian nature. Driven from Eden, he eventually lost sight of it completely, and it is this loss that Clare regards as the ultimate fall.

Although, then, the depravity of man seems the background of Clare's early Edenic nature poems where man's potential destructiveness and his contrast with nature's innocence both indicate he has fallen and been separated from nature, the depravity is not complete, for in the poems the poet at least can perceive the harmony and beauty of nature, even if he cannot see the qualities reflected in himself. In the later pre-asylum poems, it is the loss of this Edenic perception by all men, himself included, that Clare most bitterly laments.

The cause of symptom of this perceptual fall in Clare's view was the enclosure movement, which, through the extension of cultivated land, expanded man's dominion over nature. It expressed and developed the cruelty, selfishness, and materialism of man, and it destroyed the beauty and freedom of nature and thus any possibility of man's appreciation of it. Instead of a state of deferential respect between man and nature, the new relationship consisted of prideful human mastery over the enslaved natural world; man thus lost his vision of Edenic nature and firmly shut the gate against his own return to Eden.

The philosophy of nature and man outlined above is explicitly stated in a few assertive poems of the 1820's and 1830's. [There is as yet no complete text of Clare's poetry. I have in this article used two selections: *Selected Poems and Prose of John Clare*, ed. Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield (Oxford U. Press, 1967), hereafter cited as *SP*; and *The Poems of John Clare*, ed. J. W. Tibble, 2 vols. (London: Dent, 1933), hereafter cited by volume and page. The former text prints Clare's poems without emendation and additional punctuation.] "The Eternity of Nature" (*SP*, p. 109), for example, ascribes to small natural things, here represented by the daisy, Edenic innocence, eternity, and beauty:

centurys may come
And pass away into the silent tomb
And still the child hid in the womb of time
Shall smile and pluck them

(*SP*, p. 109)

Formerly, the daisy's beauty might have won

. . . Eve to stoop adown and show
Her partner Adam in the silky grass
This little gem that smiled where pleasure was
And loving Eve from eden followed ill
And bloomed with sorrow and lives smiling still
As once in eden under heavens breath

Well wade right through—it is a likely nook
 In such like spots and often on the ground
 They'll build where rude boys never think to look
 Aye as I live her secret nest is here
 Upon this white thorn stulp—I've searched about
 For hours in vain—there put that bramble bye
 Nay trample on its branches and get near

(*SP*, p. 74)

This passage from "The Nightingales Nest" illustrates the relationship between the poet and the reader. The latter is included in the joint "we," while the poet uses the singular for his own reminiscences and speculations. The reader is told to listen, to move, and to look as the speaker directs. Together with this physical direction, the poet also provides mental guidance. In the dramatic monologue, most obviously in Browning's, the recipient of the speech is often characterized by the speaker; in Clare's poems, the implied reader is developed into the character the poet would wish. He is acquiescent to the speaker and learns to see the birds through his eyes; thus he comes to appreciate the otherness of nature and the secrecy of her ways. In addition, he learns from the speaker's caution that man is potentially destructive, but he learns also to perceive this potential in himself and to restrain it. Ultimately, then, he is persuaded to the poet's pacific actions, as well as to his view of nature, for the poet speaks for both in his joint "we." In "The Nightingales Nest," for example, the reader is led by the speaker as his walking companion to the secret nest of the nightingale, which, unaided, he could not find. In the sequestered spot he must submit to the poet's awe toward nature's sanctity and learn his attitude, in the same way as he learned the path. So he must agree with his guide who says: "We will not plunder music of its dower / Nor turn this spot of happiness to thrall." Again, in "The Pettichap's Nest" (II, 219), the reader accompanies the poet on his walk and, with the help of his perceptions, sees the secrecy and security of nature he could not have noticed alone. Here too he must submit to the reverent attitude of his mentor: "We'll let them be, and safety guard them well." The same caution is addressed to the reader in "The Yellow Hammer's Nest" (II, 220), where he is warned not to intrude on nature's Eden and so destroy its beauty and happiness: "Let's leave it still / A happy home of sunshine, flowers, and streams."

The relationship of the speaker and reader in the bird poems is unusual in Clare. In the majority of his nature poems, the speaker either relates his observations and actions directly or allows the reader to overhear his ruminations; the imagined involvement and persuasion of the implied reader in the bird poems allow Clare to gain some of the persuasiveness of the assertive poems, while retaining the essentially descriptive nature of his verse. They are, then, like the assertive poems, ultimately didactic in intention, for, while the reader contemplates the described image, he must learn its correct appreciation.

In all these poems, although there are few incidents given of man's cruelty to nature and no explicit statements of his radical difference from it, it is clear that natural things fear man. The existence of that fear is implied in

the actions of the birds, as well as in the caution of the speaker. In "The Yellow Hammer's Nest" and "The Pettichap's Nest," the birds' fear of man is revealed in the initial circumstances of each poem. In the former, the bird is first seen when it is frightened by a cowboy; in the latter, the fear is of the poet and his companion, whose footsteps alert the bird to the alien presence of man. To enter nature at all, even the reverent poet of "The Nightingales Nest," must trample the leaves and branches of trees, and his action indicates his distinction from the creatures he would approach. In "The Yellow-Hammer's Nest," too, the cruelty of man is further hinted at in the similar cruelty of snakes, another kind of creature who is not a part of the Eden of small animals because of his destructiveness, and possibly because of his part in the traditional expulsion of man from Eden.

The potential cruelty of man is a mark of the difference between man and nature, a difference that often prevents man from perceiving nature correctly. Two poems in particular portray the human misunderstanding of nature, and hint at the dangerous result of it. The first is "Sand Martin" (*SP*, p. 69), an address to the bird rather than to the reader, which results not in the usual poetic analogy between the poet and the bird but in a partial sharing by the poet of the ineffable feeling of nature, its "lone seclusion and a hermit joy." The innovation in this poem is the speaker's apparent distance from Clare, for, where the speaker of most of the bird poems reveals his assent to Clare's stated philosophy, the speaker here perceives nature correctly at one stage, but apparently not throughout the poem. A measure of this vacillation is the repeated word "lone":

I've seen thee far away from all thy tribe
 Flirting about the unfrequented sky
 And felt a feeling that I cant describe
 Of lone seclusion and a hermit joy
 To see thee circle round nor go beyond
 That lone heath and its melancholly pond

(*SP*, p. 69)

The first time "lone" is used it helps to describe the empathetic feeling the poet has with nature; it is thus an appreciative adjective. The second time it occurs, it aids the process of distancing the speaker, and therefore the reader, from the natural object, so that, as a description of merely human perception at this stage, it has a pejorative association. "Lone" also echoes the opening of the poem, which presents the human view of the sand martin's home;

Thou hermit haunter of the lonely glen
 And common wild and heath—the desolate face
 Of rude waste landscapes far away from men

(*SP*, p. 69)

This view is only transformed as the poet comes to feel "the desolate face" of nature as "a hermit joy." At the end, the desolate place is once again "that lone heath and its melancholly pond." Earlier coupled with joy, "lone" is now linked with melancholy; so there seems to be a movement within the speaker of the poem from the solely

human regard of nature to the joy-producing human contact with nature and then back to the merely human perception of the wasteland. Nature's reality and man's response to it are therefore contrasted within the changing attitude of the speaker as he moves near to nature and then away from it. The bird's joy in the wasteland is felt for a moment by the poet, and his perception is doubled, but the melancholy loneliness intrudes, and he returns to his single human perception.

In the second poem, "The Sky Lark" (*SP*, p. 77), it is not the speaker who is deficient in perception but the school boys. The reader is exhorted to watch as if he were a bystander as the skylark flies up from the nest. The scene of this poem is set not through a broad description of the countryside and sky, but through a selection of small details that suggest the overall scene, almost as if Clare were immediately reminding the reader that nature is a collection of the small details of the earth:

The rolls and harrows lies at rest beside
The battered road and spreading far and wide
Above the russet clods the corn is seen
Sprouting its spirey points of tender green
Where squats the hare to terrors wide awake
Like some brown clod the harrows failed to break
(*SP*, p. 77)

The focus moves here through the cornfield to the hare, who has the terror of all small things of nature, as well as their kinship with the earth, the clods of the field. The hare becomes an epitome of all frightened animals, then, and when the skylark is introduced one can assume her characteristics from this description of her fellow creature. After this setting of the scene, the schoolboys enter, the human element coming to raid nature. They surprise the skylark, whose subsequent flight and joy in the sky they see, but not her fall:

the sky lark flies
And o'er her half formed nest with happy wings
Winnows the air till in the clouds she sings
Then hangs a dust spot in the sunny skies
And drops and drops till in her nest she lies
(*SP*, p. 77)

The rest of the poem concentrates on the typical reaction of the boys to the bird. Not understanding her harelike characteristics, they cannot believe in her earthliness, but consider her "free from danger as the heavens are free / From pain and toil." They imagine her going "about the world to scenes unheard / Of and unseen":

O where they but a bird
So think they while they listen to its song
And smile and fancy and so pass along
While its low nest moist with the dews of morn
Lies safely with the leveret in the corn
(*SP*, pp. 77-78)

Through his speaker who has seen the hare and the bird and the clods of earth, Clare seems to be contrasting two

ways of perceiving nature. With the first, the poet realizes its otherness, its fear of man; and in the "low" nest of the skylark he understands the earthliness and vulnerability of the bird and of all natural things. The second is a purely human, man-centered notion of the animal world, and this the boys show when they unsubstantialize the bird because they do not really see her. In fact they have "unheeding past" the skylark on her nest, and they are thus only seeing the bird partially when they see her in flight. Even then, she becomes not a bird above her nest, but their own aspirations materialized; their "fancy" ignores the real terror and vulnerability of the bird, as well as the careful joy in her nest. This sort of joy, it is implied, they could not understand, for, although they have come merely to pluck the buttercups, it is the same urge that motivates boys in other poems to plunder birds' eggs, and, finally, men to destroy trees and hedges for enclosure.

"The Sky Lark" is very close in its description of the boys' response to Shelley's "To a Skylark," in which the bird becomes an insubstantial symbol of the poet's emotions, and, like the schoolboys' bird in Clare's poem, a creature divorced from earthly fear and pain. By the side of Shelley's poem, then, and many similar examples of Wordsworth's poetry, such as "To the Cuckoo," it is hard to avoid seeing "The Sky Lark" as in some way answering the Romantic tendency to regard the human response to, and not the reality of, an object, and, at the same time, to avoid acknowledging in this response man's insensitivity to real nature and his cruelty to it.

In Clare's bird poems it is not our understanding of nature's Eden that is most extended but our realization of man's proper relationship to it. The poems present his correct attitude of joyful contemplation and reverence, and at the same time show his man-centered view and his destructiveness, which are threats to Eden. The potential loss of both nature and man is then one meaning of the bird poems, for not all human intruders into nature will be as cautious and as reverent as Clare's speakers.

During the next decade, Clare's hatred of man's destructiveness became even deeper than it appeared in the bird poems. His sorrow at the uprooting of plants and animals for the enclosure of fields was augmented by his own uprooting from his native village partly owing to the poverty that the enclosure movement brought to many peasants. In addition, as he became convinced of the absolute separation of man and nature, and of the universal human fall from Edenic vision, Clare became most keenly aware of his own loss, and in the 1830's it is this personal loss of Edenic perception that he most frequently laments; the resultant un-Edenic vision, recorded in the descriptive sonnets of 1835 to 1837, implies this perceptual loss.

In the poems concerning the destruction of Eden written before 1835, Clare had conveyed the prelapsarian world through memories and contrasts, for his subject had been mainly the dramatic process of the fall. In the animal sonnets of 1835 to 1837, however, Clare describes only

the wintry scene after the fall. Nature's otherness, always stressed as its characteristic, is now its dominant quality for man, and, as a result, the world becomes the scene of the civil war Clare had feared as early as 1821 and had implicitly warned against in the bird poems. The wintry world is conveyed through the speaker who looks at the natural things minutely, neither identifying with them nor personifying them. Here, then, the descriptive method of plain statement without intrusive emotional bias is used to convey a vision that is shocking, but the economy, abruptness, and detail of the poems make it somehow impossible that this vision should be doubted.

"The Badger," "The Marten," "The Hedgehog," and "The Fox" are all similar in form, being groups of sonnets that make up single poems. Throughout the pre-asylum years, the sonnet is one of Clare's most popular forms. A typical sonnet of the 1820's is descriptive, presenting precisely and particularly one or more visual images, rarely with any overt human significance or symbolic connotation. Early in his poetic career, however, Clare seems to have found the form restrictive, and, in a letter of 1820, he scoffs at those who would make "readers believe a Sonnet cannot be a Sonnet unless it be precisely 14 lines." To avoid the brevity of the descriptive sonnet, while keeping its particularity and conciseness, Clare evolved the sonnet group. Each sonnet can to some extent stand alone, but the connection between them remains closer than is usual in a sonnet sequence. In the animal sonnets of the 1830's there is sometimes an incipient narrative line that seems to require their continuous reading, but there is no conclusion in the final sonnet beyond the particulars presented, and each sonnet can be regarded as a whole descriptive incident.

The animals described in the sonnet groups are comparable in their lack of most of the usual Edenic qualities, although a certain bravery and secrecy remain to them. The poems show the invasion of this secrecy by man. "The Badger" (SP, p. 84) is a description of badger-baiting, in which the animal is treated with extended human cruelty; the people "bait him all the day with many dogs." He fights fiercely and well, escaping from the crowd of his persecutors. But man's cruelty is persistent; the badger is chased with dogs and men until finally he is overcome:

He turns agen and drives the noisy crowd
And beats the many dogs in noises loud
He drives away and beats them every one
And then they loose them all and set them on
He falls as dead and kicked by boys and men
Then starts and grins and drives the crowd agen
Till kicked and torn and beaten out he lies
And leaves his hold and cackles groans and dies
(SP, p. 86)

There is no explicit moral judgment in "The Badger," although it is implied in the description of the badger as "dimute and small," and in the presentation of man's savage joy in cruelty. In addition, no clear emotional bias emerges; even during the badger's persecution and death

there is no intrusive pity, for the verbs are unadorned, and his death is robbed of our immediate sympathy by the unattractive word "cackles." Again, the energetic bravery of the badger is undercut by the last sonnet which describes a tamed badger who "licks the patting hand and trys to play / And never trys to bite or run away": nature is not only beaten, but humiliated.

In the endless civil war of the fallen world, man, the overall winner, is not always the conqueror in incidental battles. In "The Marten" (SP, p. 86), the hunters invade the animal's secrecy in a way Clare had warned against in his bird poems. But here the owl wins the contest, and so leaves the marten free for the time being:

When the grey owl her young ones cloathed in down
Seizes the boldest boy and drives him down
They try agen and pelt to start the fray
The grey owl comes and drives them all away
And leaves the martin twisting round his den
Left free from boys and dogs and noise and men
(SP, p. 87)

So too the fox (SP, p. 87), in spite of persistent persecution, "lived to chase the hounds another day." Yet man's defeat never mitigates his cruelty. The fox may win, but the human attitude toward him has already been fully expressed. The ploughman

found a weary fox and beat him out
The ploughman laughed and would have ploughed him in
But the old shepherd took him for the skin
He lay upon the furrow stretched and dead
The old dog lay and licked the wounds that bled
The ploughman beat him till his ribs would crack
And then the shepherd slung him at his back
(SP, p. 87)

If the cruelty of man is pervasive in the poems, so too is nature's strangeness for man, almost its repulsiveness. These qualities are best conveyed in two poems, "Mouse's Nest" (II, 370) and "The Hedgehog" (SP, p. 88). In the former, a single sonnet, we see through the speaker, who makes no judgments on the natural image he presents and expresses no disgust at it beyond his statement of its grotesqueness. Yet he allows our contemplation of the image through his initial act of petty destruction, when, prodding a ball of grass, he invades the security and privacy of the mouse. In addition, his description allows the mouse to share the alien glitter of her surroundings, and there is none of the joyful lingering over the visual image revealed in the bird poems. The speaker, then, manages to convey the strangeness of his subject; the reader alone, with his memory of the earlier skylark and frightened hare, must see, together with the strangeness, the tenderness and careful secrecy of the mouse:

out an old mouse bolted in the wheats
With all her young ones hanging at her teats . . .
The young ones squeaked, and as I went away
She found her nest again among the hay.