

‘This sad non-identity¹’: Clare, Cowper and ‘madness’

In the persona of Virgil Wigwam, Texan professor of creative writing and scourge of English poetic amateurism, the poet Edwin Morgan once noted the way that, in this country, we like to count up what Professor Wigwam calls ‘your rather large number of mad poets’. Prominent in all such audits, of course, are William Cowper and John Clare. Indeed there is a sense that what remains best-known about these two poets today is that they went mad, seemingly vindicating Shakespeare’s ‘The lunatic, the lover and the poet, are of imagination all compact’, and Wordsworth’s ‘We Poets in our youth begin in gladness; But thereof come in the end despondency and madness’. But what does it mean to say that they were ‘mad’? Why is ‘madness’ so important to the way we perceive them? And how does our sense of their ‘madness’ contribute to the way we read their poems?

One would think at least that the nature of these two poets’ mental illnesses would by now be clearly established, but in Clare’s case at least, there is no real consensus. Many theories have been aired, but they tend to reflect more on the temperament of the analyst or the spirit of the times than on our knowledge of Clare’s mental health. According to his Victorian biographer Frederick Martin, for example, Clare was dragged weeping from the bosom of his family at Christmastide and locked in an asylum for the last 23 years of his life as a punishment for having written poetry. The evidence for this conclusion is extremely modest: a questionnaire that forms part of the committal document includes the question, ‘Was the insanity preceded by any severe or long-continued mental emotion or exertion?’, in answer to which Clare’s physician, Dr Fenwick Skrimshire, has written, ‘after years addicted to Poetical prosing’. Martin was writing in 1865, just a year after Clare’s death from a stroke at the age of seventy. 130 years after Clare’s death Roy Porter, in an essay entitled ‘All Madness for Writing’, offered another sceptical reading, this time more strongly evidenced, employing classic 1960s counter-psychiatry to argue that the reason Clare was mad was precisely *because* he was put in an asylum, an argument ingeniously designed to reverse and subvert the supposed sequence of events on which the logic of asylums works. In the century or more between these two viewpoints many others were offered, including Geoffrey Grigson’s view that Clare suffered from schizophrenia, and the Tibbles’, endorsed by Russell Brain, that he suffered from manic depression. Jonathan Bate in his well-received 2003 biography of Clare revived the latter view under its modern name of ‘bipolar disorder’, but almost immediately this was challenged by the clinical neuropsychologist Sean Haldane, for whom Clare’s symptoms are best explained in terms of a very common nineteenth-century organic disorder: chronic meningovascular syphilis. (This had earlier been suggested by Kerith Trick, arguing that the progress of the disease could have been arrested by malaria, explaining Clare’s relative longevity.) If some diagnoses seem too neatly to fit the prejudices of their age, both Bate and Haldane are exemplary in their attempts to be objective and not ‘lean on’ the evidence in any way. I suspect neither will completely satisfy Clare enthusiasts for very long, however. Haldane offers persuasive evidence that his diagnosis more clinically and closely matches Clare’s symptoms than Bate’s ‘bipolar disorder’, but then Haldane in turn offers meagre explanation for the plentiful evidence of mental health problems in Clare’s childhood and young adulthood (syphilis would not have been contracted or shown itself before Clare was in his thirties).

One problem in attempting to unravel the story of Clare’s mental health is that there are just too many symptoms to pin things down to a simple diagnosis. He was born, the son of a humble village thresher and a town shepherd’s daughter, in 1793, one year after Shelley and two years before Keats, and his rich but fragmentary autobiography tells the story of an idyllic, loving childhood, though one that was clearly interspersed by strange mental states and traumas. He was, he says, ‘of a very timid disposition’, and when he saw a man fall from a haystack and die of a broken neck, it provoked a state of anxiety which he describes in detail:

the gastly palness of death struck such a terror on me that I could not forget it for years and my dreams was constantly wanderings in church yards, digging graves, seeing spirits in charnel houses etc etc in my fits I swooned away without a struggle and felt nothing more then if I’d been in a dreamless sleep after I came to my self but I was always warnd of their coming by a chillness and dithering that seemd to creep from ones toe ends till it got up to ones head, when I turnd senseless and fell; sparks as if fire often flashd from my eyes or seemd to do so when I dropt, which I layd to the fall

(By Himself, pp. 18-19)

¹ From Clare’s ‘Invitation to Eternity’, line 14.

Clare's 'swoonings' were treated by a Dr Arnold in Stamford but sometimes recurred, and a regular seasonal pattern of anxiety attacks was established by the trauma: 'every spring and autumn since the accident happened my fears are agitated to an extreme degree and the dread of death involves me in a stupor of chilling indisposition as usual'.

Haldane attributes any unusual mental manifestations in Clare's childhood to possible dietary disorders, so that for example his swooning fits might be put down to changes in blood-sugar levels caused by inadequate nutrition. But would such problems occur *seasonally*? And should we not give weight to Clare's own interpretations of them (if only as evidence of his general mental state)? Many of the childhood incidents he describes are indeed remarkable. Clare tells of a journey to find the 'worlds end', which he imagined was somewhere beyond Emmonsales Heath, and certainly within a day's walk. Instead, he finds himself in a 'new world':

I eagerly wandered on and rambled among the furze the whole day till I got out of my knowledge when the very wild flowers and birds seemed to forget me and I imagined they were the inhabitants of new countries the very sun seemed to be a new one and shining in a different quarter of the sky still I felt no fear my wonder seeking happiness had no room for it I was finding new wonders every minute and was walking in a new world often wondering to myself that I had not found the end of the old one

(By Himself, pp. 40-41)

Strange alterations in reality appear again when Clare, following the sudden success of his first volume of poems, published in 1820, finds himself on the London coach:

my mind was full of expectations all the way about the wonders of the town which I had often heard my parents tell stories about by the winter fire and when I turned to the recollections of the past by seeing people at my old occupations of ploughing and ditching in the fields by the road side while I was lolling in a coach the novelty created such strange feelings that I could almost fancy that my identity as well as my occupations had changed that I was not the same John Clare but that some stranger soul had jumped into my skin

(By Himself, p. 134)

Haldane calls for a distinction to be made between Clare's 'madness', which is a cultural or literary phenomenon, and the clinical diagnosis of his condition. The two things, as he says, are often muddled. What is most important to a literary critic may not perhaps be the precise diagnosis, but how Clare's mental condition, his 'madness' informs his writing. I am going to consider this a little further here.

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When Clare remembers the feeling he had on the coach that 'some stranger soul' had 'jumped into' his skin, it is a suggestive coincidence that the very next recollection he has of his first trip to London is of passing through Huntingdon, where his companion pointed out two interesting landmarks:

Mr G[ilchrist] showed me the House at this end of the town where Oliver Cromwell was born and the parsonage with its melancholy looking garden at the other where Cowper had lived which was far the most interesting remembrance to me though both were great men in the annals of fame I thought of his tame hares and Johnny Gilpin

(By Himself, p. 135)

Clare's special interest in the Unwins' house in Huntingdon where Cowper had lived may derive from the empathy of shared experiences as much as pure literary admiration, for Clare and Cowper had much in common. Both tried to engage with the public world of London but were unable to thrive in this world and retreated to the country. Both were sensitive, fearful men, with an acute sense of mortality, perhaps arising most strongly from early bereavement traumas: the death of Cowper's siblings and his beloved mother; the loss of Clare's twin sister Bessy who 'despite being a lively bonny wench' apparently lived 'but a few weeks'.

If I may briefly digress, an instructive parallel to Clare in this respect is the twentieth-century novelist Philip K. Dick, who also lost a twin sister in early infancy. Dick's novels, like Clare's poems, are filled with his sister's ghost, and with the pervasive idea that our reality may be snatched away at any

moment. Both writers habitually see the world strangely, both were infected with an overwhelming fear of what Dick called the ‘Tomb World’, which is to say death, understood in terms of the loss of meaning as much as the loss of life. When in Dick’s novel *Time Out of Joint* (1959) a hot dog stand dematerialises before the eyes of the central protagonist, leaving behind itself a fluttering scrap of paper bearing the words ‘hot dog stand’, Dick is wittily telling us not only that writing is a ‘paper illusion’, but that the world we perceive may not be ‘fixed’ or ‘real’ in the way it seems to be.

Clare was similarly suspicious as to whether writing could ‘fix’ anything into a comprehensible, communicable reality, for example in this gnomic couplet, unattached among the asylum manuscripts:

Language has not the power to speak what love indites
The soul lies buried in the Ink that writes

(*Later Poems*, p. 1015)

The ‘reality’ Clare does describe is often characterized (as John Barrell has noted) by its sense of profound strangeness, not only in descriptions of Clare’s own life in the autobiographical writings, but in many encounters with nature, perhaps most strikingly in the sonnet-in-couplets known as ‘The Mouse’s Nest’:

I found a ball of grass among the hay
& proged it as I passed & went away
& when I looked I fancied somthing stirred
& turned agen & hoped to catch the bird
When out an old mouse bolted in the wheat
With all her young ones hanging at her teats
She looked so odd & so grotesque to me
I ran & wondered what the thing could be
& pushed the knapweed bunches where I stood
When the mouse hurried from the crawling brood
The young ones squeaked & when I went away
She found her nest again among the hay
The water oer the pebbles scarce could run
& broad old cesspools glittered in the sun

(*Northborough Sonnets*, p. 54)

Seeing a mouse should be a common enough experience, yet this extraordinary poem describes something more like a science-fictional ‘first encounter’ with an alien life form. There is a description in Clare’s journal of another confrontation with a wary creature and her young. This time it is a fox, and the poet’s behaviour seems bizarre:

Friday 13 May 1825

Met with an extrodinary incident to day while Walking in Open wood to hunt a Nightingales nest—I popt unawares on an old Fox & her four young Cubs that were playing about she saw me & instantly approachd towards me growling like an angry dog I had no stick & tryd all I coud to fright her by imitating the bark of a fox hound which only irritated her the more & if I had not retreated a few paces back she woud have seized me when I set up an haloo she started

(*Natural History Prose Writings*, p. 239)

One thinks here of Cowper’s interactions with animals, particularly his pet hare ‘Tiney’, the ‘surliest of his kind’, who heroically resists all attempts at domestication:

Though duly from my hand he took
His pittance ev’ry night,
He did it with a jealous look,
And, when he could, would bite.

(*Epitaph on a Hare*)

Both poets are alert to the complex transactions between people and animals, especially the animals’ sense of the danger humans can represent. Clare writes unforgettably about the brutal communal killing of a badger in one of his better known poems (‘The Badger’), and precisely evokes the fragile world of the solitary snipe, where the ‘trembling grass’ of the marshes quakes at the approaching threat of ‘Freebooters...Intent to kill and slay’ (‘To the Snipe’). He describes too the ‘rude waste

landscapes far away from men' inhabited by the 'Sand Martin', and the hidden frailty of 'The Nightingales Nest', ever threatened by plundering 'rude boys'. Cowper's animal poems, his tributes to bullfinches, goldfinches, spaniels, cats, hares and others, may have been bracketed as 'light' or 'comic' verse and taken less seriously than Clare's bird and animal poems, but there is no mistaking the seriousness in Cowper's advocacy of animals' ways, and his questioning of man's role, for example in 'The Doves':

Reasoning at every step he treads
Man yet mistakes his way,
While meaner things, whom instinct leads,
Are rarely known to stray.

Both poets are attracted to nature as an alternative to the human world of 'reason'.

Clare's badger-baiters, freebooters and nest-raiders are all male figures, so it should be no surprise that he introduces into one of his poems, fairly dramatically, a crazed and victimized female character. So does Cowper, and indeed the two characters share the same name: Kate, suggesting that Clare borrowed from Cowper. I am grateful to Vincent Newey for drawing this connection to my attention. (Wordsworth in 'The Thorn' (1798) and Bloomfield in the 'Autumn' section of *The Farmer's Boy* (1800) also include such figures, and are no doubt similarly indebted to Cowper.) Clare's 'Kate' seems the more surprising, because her appearance comes in the midst of a carousing celebration of 'St Martin's Eve' (written c. 1823). Saint Martin being among other things the patron saint of drunkenness, Clare's villagers spare no effort in enjoying his feast day, playing 'all sports their memory could devise', including a series of rough and tough practical jokes, music played on home-made instruments, shadow-puppetmaking, dancing, drinking and storytelling. Only one person does not join in:

Yet mid this strife of joy—on corner stool
One sits all silent doomed to worst of fate
Who made one slip in love & played the fool
& since condemned to live without a mate
No youth again courts once beguiled Kate
Though hopes of sweethearts yet perplex her head
& charms to try by gipseys told of late
Beneath her pillow lays an onion red
To dream on this same night with whom she is to wed

& hopes that like to sunshine warming falls
Being all the solace of her fretting mind
When they for dancing rise old young & all
She in her corner musing stays behind
Her palid cheek upon her hand reclined
Nursing rude melancholy like a child
Who sighs its silence to the sobbing wind
That in the chimney roars with fury wild
While every other heart to joy is reconciled

(Poems of the Middle Period, III, p. 275)

Clare was especially pleased with his portrayal of 'poor Kate in the dumps', as he called her in a letter to his publisher, and there is no mistaking his tone of sympathy here. In an intensely superstitious society, Kate's attempts somehow to right things by a process of divination are charged with pathos, for the case is hopeless: Clare similarly has the female narrator of his poem 'The Cross Roads or Haymakers story' dwell ominously on the significance of bad signs in its doomed heroine's early attempts at fortune-telling:

& oft god rest her, in the fortune book
Which we at hay time in our pockets took
Our pins at blindfold on the wheel have stuck
When hers would always prick the worst of luck
For try poor thing as often as she might
Her point woud always on the blank alight
Which plainly shows the fortune ones to have
As such like go unwedded to the grave

& so it proved ...

(*Cottage Tales*, p. 19)

Equally interesting is Clare's analysis of Kate's childlike stillness and sorrow, emblematically caught between, and contrasting with, the two sides in the battle going on in the poem between the villagers determined to enjoy themselves and the grim weather outside, venting its 'fury' in an appropriate 'sobbing' sound.

Both Clare's and Cowper's 'Kate' are victims of misfortune in love, Clare's in an unspecified way (but one that is clear to the community, perhaps suggesting an illegitimate birth). Cowper's is almost too specific: his 'Kate' is seemingly a victim of desertion *and* bereavement (*and* possibly a class mismatch, if one attributes significance to the description of her in the first line):

A serving maid was she, and fell in love
With one who left her, went to sea and died.
Her fancy followed him through foaming waves
To distant shores, and she would sit and weep
At what a sailor suffers; fancy too,
Delusive most where warmest wishes are,
Would oft anticipate his glad return,
And dream of transports she was not to know.
She heard the doleful tidings of his death,
And never smil'd again. And now she roams
The dreary waste; there spends the livelong day,
And there, unless when charity forbids,
The livelong night. A tatter'd apron hides,
Worn as a cloak, and hardly hides, a gown
More tatter'd still; and both but ill conceal
A bosom heav'd with never-ceasing sighs.
She begs an idle pin of all she meets,
And hoards them in her sleeve; but needful food,
Though press'd with hunger oft, or comelier cloathes,
Though pinch'd with cold, asks never.—Kate is crazed.

(*'The Sofa'*, ll. 537-56)

With cruel irony, she is placed in the poem directly after the 'mariner' who is striding 'homeward' and 'in hope already there', but Cowper treats her rather more sympathetically than the gypsies he describes in the next verse-paragraph, whose 'Loud' begging and brutality contrast with Kate's begging for a mere 'idle pin'. Because she is 'crazed' she lacks the imperative of reason and the craft of getting, at which Cowper's gypsies excel. She is thus deprived of shelter, food, 'comelier clothes' and warmth.

We can see how early trauma and exposure to the toughness of the human jungle made Clare and Cowper sensitive in their poetry to society's animal and human victims. But what about their own plights? Cowper explicitly acknowledged his mental illness, for example in his 'Lines Written During a Period of Insanity', where he paints himself as an outcast at all levels: 'Man disavows, and Deity disowns me', leaving him in a 'fleshly tomb...Buried above ground'. This has much in common with Clare's most famous self-reflective poem, written in 1848 after seven years in the asylum:

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

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,—
Into the living sea of waking dreams,
Where there is neither sense of life nor joys,
But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems;
Even the dearest, that I loved the best—
Are strange—nay, rather stranger than the rest.

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

Both poets instinctively turn to an apocalyptic biblical language, though they do so in different ways. Clare's opening declaration that 'I am' is an extraordinary, defiant self-affirmation, echoing God's words to Moses in Exodus (3:14), 'I am that I am'. Where Cowper feels entombed in a 'fleshly' prison, Clare is troubled by empty, hostile voices (his 'nothingness of scorn and noise') and just wants to be left alone with his maker and the 'vaulted' fenland sky.

Of course it would be unjust to these two poets to focus exclusively on the misanthropy their mental illnesses triggered, for both were often sociable men, and greatly valued as such—Cowper with his gift for friendship and letter-writing, and 'Princely Clare' (as Lamb called him) equally appreciated at the dinner table of the *London Magazine* crowd and by friends and correspondents, from his fellow autodidacts Edmund Artis and Joseph Henderson to his patron-friends Marianne Marsh and Eliza Emmerson. Their very misanthropy is indeed indicative of a sensitivity towards their fellow creatures, human and otherwise, which can equally well manifest itself in empathy and sympathy. For Clare, as for Cowper, to record his own heightened feelings, his own 'madness', is also to record a response to the external world, however tenuous and strange that world sometimes seemed to be.

John Goodridge

Further Reading

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Kerith Trick, 'Clare's Asylum Experience', in *John Clare, A Bicentenary Celebration*, ed. Richard Foulkes (Northampton, 1994). (Dr Trick's theory of syphilis stopped by malaria was not put forward here, but was given in a talk at St Andrews Hospital given to the first conference of the John Clare Society, April 1987, as one of a number of possible explanations for Clare's mental health problems.)