‘A song in the night’: reconsidering John Clare’s later asylum poetry

‘John Clare has always been a poet known for his commitment to a particular place’, Simon Kövesi begins his recent monograph on Clare, reflecting keenly at length on the class politics, difficulties, and possibilities of the rhetoric of rural ‘placedness’ in Clare criticism to date.[1] However, Clare is also known for his *commitment* to another particular place: the asylum. The purpose of this chapter is to reflect briefly on the equally difficult topic of the place of the asylum in Clare studies, and to consider how the reading and critical discussion of Clare’s later poetry, the poetry from his many years in the asylum, might now be most fruitfully advanced. Ultimate interpretative questions for the study of late Clare may include: how should we read these poems, collectively as well as individually? Which is the most appropriate frame, or frames, for their poetics, and what assumptions or habits of interpretation might now be best avoided? Finally, to what extent do we need reading practices or expectations that allow or compensate for Clare’s mental health and situation in the asylum, and how should we develop these? Only the beginnings of answers to these difficult questions are attempted or suggested here, and the context for Clare’s asylum poetry is reconsidered in relation to one particular poem, his lyric ‘To Jenny Lind’ (1849).

In particular, I am interested here in the poetry produced by Clare after his committal at the end of 1841 to the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum.[2] Over two decades of Clare’s life remained, almost a third of it, and the poetry he wrote at Northampton constitutes a significant portion of his surviving poetic work, at least in terms of quantity; also roughly a quarter to a third, going by John Goodridge’s index.[3] Clare’s long final spell in the asylum also looms large in the popular perception of the poet, and accounts for much of the emotional appeal of some of his most well-loved work, such as ‘I Am’ (c. 1846), which even in 1949, when Geoffrey Grigson published the first separate edition of Clare’s asylum writing, was ‘of all his poems, the most celebrated.’[4] Yet the later poetry in the asylum has attracted much less critical, and creative, attention than the work of the High Beach period, from 1837 to 1841. ‘Don Juan’ and ‘Child Harold’ have now received quite extensive critical commentary, and Clare’s departure from Matthew Allen’s private asylum and moving account of his ‘Journey out of Essex’ has provoked several original acts of creative reinterpretation and adaptation. But Clare’s later poetry remains critically neglected, on the whole, or is quietly passed over: certainly, there have been few sustained treatments of the later asylum period, as such, in important recent monographs on Clare, or in the handful of landmark edited collections on him, excepting Roy Porter’s ebullient but largely biographical and medical historical account from 1994, now a quarter of a century ago.[5]

Indeed, Clare criticism has sometimes deliberately declared its exclusive concentration or focus on his ‘pre-asylum’ poetry, as if it were necessary to create a cordon sanitaire between early achievement and later decline.[6] The first order of business should be to suggest that this is really not necessary. Many of the recent modes that have been delineated and celebrated in Clare’s earlier poetics, especially the centrality of his sense of the ‘communitarian tradition’ (Goodridge), or ‘communitarian nodes’ (Kövesi) in his later writings more broadly, and his earlier modes of ‘repetitive creativity’ and sense of ‘sociable texts’ (Paul Chirico) as ‘friendship’s offerings’ (Bate), are crucial to understanding his later poetry too.[7] Part of the future work of reading and teaching the later poems will surely be to extend these critical frames to include the later work, *mutatis mutandis*. They are as much needed here, in the later poems, as redress to an earlier critical tradition that privileged isolation, visionary ‘unity’ or dissolution, or idiosyncratic explorations of mental heaven and hell, as they were to balance myths of solitary genius or green innocence in Clare’s earlier life. In some instances at least, this sort of extension has been effected to the asylum period, by Kövesi, or in Tim Fulford’s acute analysis of Clare’s lyric ‘personations’ in the context of his 1845 notebook (Northampton MS 19) as a mode of coterie publication.[8] But a larger job of critical integration, rather than the separation of particular aspects of Clare’s poetics within the silos of different ‘sane’ and ‘mad’ periods in his life, remains to be done.

The second main point is that no single frame will do, any more than it would do for such a large and various amount of any writer’s work, or such a long period of any person’s life. One of the dangers of writing about ‘madness’ in literature, or as an idea in general, is that it often imposes a totality or teleology on a human experience which can be as varied and variable from person to person, and from period to period in a person’s life, as any other.[9] This totality too easily reduces a complex life to myth, the symbolic pattern of a pathology, or of inevitable decline, or social defeat or resistance, or psychic dissolution and renewal, or primitivistic purity, or simply the pathos of second childishness and mere oblivion. This is not to say that none of these themes can be read into Clare’s later life; but all are easily overplayed to the detriment of a more variegated picture. Much older critical work on late Clare, valuable in many respects, is limited by treating his madness as a singularity. For example, this is one of the problems with Grigson’s fifty-page introductory essay to his edition, still in some ways the most sustained discussion of the asylum poetry as such. Grigson has a ‘trough and wave’ theory of Clare’s late-life creativity, plausibly so given the

likelihood of mood disorder or another chronic illness with a relapsing-remitting pattern in Clare’s life. But he is also determined to find the moment when Clare was finally pushed or jumped over the edge, never to return. Grigson persistently looks for a ‘natural sequence’ with a ‘climax’ or an ‘essence and a summary’.[10] Sometimes he pessimistically, ‘evidentially’, traces the degenerative ‘parallel course’ of Clare’s disease and his poetry, and is drawn here towards a medically much more dated sense of Clare’s ‘paraphrenic’ and hence irreversible ‘confirmed psychosis’.[11] Elsewhere he looks for the one moment (e.g. in ‘A Vision’) where Clare ‘completed the discovery of his true feeling, he had pushed his exploration to its horizon, metaphysically, to that edge beyond which he saw only the eternal’; Grigson seems disappointed when he does not find the ‘consequences of derangement’ in poetry after this, and is embarrassed to have to account for how Clare continued to write poetry into the final year of his life, despite having completed his journey to communion with the infinite almost twenty years earlier in 1844.[12] Later critical attempts to use his madness to enlist Clare into the visionary company have run into similar or analogous issues. (Romanticists nowadays are more likely to write with a revisionary gleam in their eyes, anyway, even about madness.)

One way of reconsidering Clare’s later poetry is to think more carefully about the site of its production: the asylum. There is probably still a prevailing tendency among cultural and literary historians to think of the Victorian asylum as simply a site of solitary suffering and oppression, a memory hole into which Clare, like other economically unproductive or non-conforming paupers, was unceremoniously dropped, and where his individuality and agency were inevitably effaced. More specifically, our sense of Clare’s confinement (or ‘enclosure’) within this sort of regime probably owes something to the historical coincidence that Clare was recovered and championed in literary history, partly as a quintessential subject of the alienation of industrialised society, at the same mid-century or post-war point that Foucault, Erving Goffman, and other critics of the ‘total institution’ were brought to bear on such locations historically. Certainly the standard references on Clare’s madness reflect a basic and longstanding divide in the historiography of psychiatry between this kind of position, as in Porter’s account, which is mildly inflected with such revisionism, or the more broadly celebratory narratives of ‘character, enterprise, and dedication’ which characterise the earlier medical and institutional histories of psychiatric institutions, often written by their clinicians, and here represented by Arthur Foss and Kerith Trick’s anniversary history of the Northampton Asylum.[13] The latter have also sometimes overlapped with the retrospective

diagnoses that have made up the rest of the go-to references on Clare and madness.[14] Yet much recent research on the history of psychiatric institutions, some of it only published in the last decade, has fundamentally challenged both narratives of benevolent medical progress and the *leyenda negra* of nineteenth-century asylum as oppressive total institution; and retro-diagnosis is no longer the primary pursuit of historians of medicine. The upshot of much of this recent research is that Victorian asylums, in any case, were certainly not oubliettes. They were highly visible, in many ways public, and even often social and sociable, locations, and a better sense of this may partly help to underpin a re-socialised account of Clare’s later poetry.

The convergence of earlier institutional historiography and critical attitudes on Clare can be seen sharply in Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield’s first edition of Clare’s later poetry, published in 1964, at the point at which the Canadian sociologist Goffman’s account of the total institution was at the height of its Penguin-disseminated influence. Robinson and Summerfield’s (somewhat notorious) claim that they sought to reproduce ‘John Clare in his natural state and not John Clare scrubbed and spruced up for inspection by the Board of Guardians’ surely diffusely reflects Goffman’s incisive account from 1961 of institutional processing, the ‘undressing, bathing, disinfecting, haircutting, issuing institutional clothing’ and other ‘admission procedures [that] might better be called “trimming” or “programming” because in thus being squared away the new arrival allows himself to be shaped and coded into an object that can be fed into the administrative machinery of the establishment, to be worked on smoothly by routine operations.’[15] Yet their institutional metaphor, which has largely been discussed in the context of the lively debate about editing Clare and ‘textual primitivism’, is also askew in one crucial, hitherto unnoticed respect: ‘inspection by the Board of Guardians’ was a feature of the workhouse, not the asylum. The Northampton Asylum was run by a Management Committee, which was subject to (some) oversight by the Commissioners in Lunacy, who were there to inspect the people who ran the asylum, rather than its patients; neither acted as an inquisitory tribunal. The elision of the two institutions here may reflect an equally Goffman-esque position, that all total institutions are nevertheless similar in their normative or punitive functions, or a more specific historical sense that mid-century asylums, many of which were created in the wake of the 1845 County Asylum and Lunacy Acts, were nevertheless entangled in the kinds of structures, such as Boards of Guardians, inaugurated slightly earlier by the 1834 Poor Law, as historians such as Peter Bartlett indeed argue.[16]

However, recent work specifically on the Northamptonshire system shows how this metaphor is nevertheless inapt. Catherine Smith has demonstrated that the Northampton Asylum’s early history (before 1876) was not that of a typical county asylum at all. It was originally, and remained, a philanthropic subscription asylum, with a varied mix of paupers, and private patients, as in fact Clare was. Its management resisted various attempts to bring admissions under the control either of the Poor Law officials, or the new county system mandated by the 1845 Acts, in a complex case of how that national legislation interacted with ‘considerable local power and autonomy’.[17] The Northampton Asylum remained, at least over the course of Clare’s residence there, a decidedly mixed environment. For instance, Smith describes how medical managers like Dr Edwin Wing (remembered partly for his role in and rather bathetic case notes of Clare’s final treatment) ‘felt it necessary to point out in the 1860 annual report that the mixing of different social classes of patients gave a “greater resemblance to life out-of-doors.” He dismissed the “theoretical objection” that private patients felt demeaned or degraded if mixed with pauper patients, arguing that he had never witnessed this in practice; moreover, not all those classified as pauper lunatics were necessarily of the same class as “those met with in our Union workhouses”: some had “education and refinement.”’[18] Certainly, there is little sense of the aggressive gaze of inspection or the scrubbing up of paupers in these aspects of the Northampton Asylum, or in Smith’s broader account of its management. It is also useful to remember how *new* an institution it was, as most other asylums of the 1840s were. This will only take us so far, of course. Smith points out that class-based segregation was still practiced in the Northampton Asylum, despite Wing’s claims, and the social constitution of the asylum only tells us so much about its actual sociability. And is any of this important for Clare, even with ‘his being a private patient [. . .] the fees for which were covered by his trust fund’?[19] Whatever the fine details of the asylum’s administration, he experienced it, or certainly repeatedly described it, as an English Bastille, a site of ‘no government at all but prison disapline where every body is forced to act contrary to their wishes’.[20] It is at once both absolutely necessary and rather difficult to take such statements entirely at face value. Even taking into account Clare’s bleakest and most hopeless expressions of his self-identity as incarcerated lifer, recent research into the very gloomiest of nineteenth-century institutions, including prisons and workhouses as well as the more punitive or overcrowded asylums, has emphasized a varied picture of patient or inmate activity and sociability, and the complicated affective dynamics of ‘kindness and reciprocity’ that could be involved in relationships between staff and their charges, especially in the soliciting of patient writing. Clare’s relationship to W. F. Knight

must be seen in this light, in particular. As Helen Rogers has argued, ‘we cannot evaluate [such institutional] philanthropy solely in terms of class discipline or normalization [. . .] if we wish to understand the often intimate relationships binding agents and recipients of charity, even in the prison’; in the asylum, too, patient writing holds the key to how those at the receiving end managed to negotiate identity in relation to ‘philanthropic’ intervention, through their own ‘laboring-class ethics of kinship and neighborliness.’[21]

Along with the general character of the institution, then, another fresh line of inquiry would be to think more deeply about the relationships involved in the production and transmission of Clare’s asylum writing. For example: is there is any figure who has played so great a part in the survival of so much of a now canonical poet’s work, approximately 800 poems in his transcripts, in whom so little real interest has been taken, as William F. Knight? Knight was the house steward at the Northampton Asylum from 1845–50, and the prompter of the transcripts which survive in two copies in the Northampton Library archive as the main, often the only source for almost all of the later poetry, which continued to be added to them after his departure. Clare’s editors have discussed the issues involved in working from these transcripts, and Clare’s biographers have also used the correspondence that survives in the archive between Clare, Knight, Knight’s friend Joseph Stenson, and Thomas Inskip, to describe Knight’s kindness in general towards Clare, and his attempts to keep Clare’s public profile alive.[22] But even Jonathan Bate’s biography, the most recent and fullest, does not go beyond a smattering of references to Knight drawn from this correspondence. Readers may easily be left with an overall impression of a sympathetic man, but ultimately just another avatar of middle-class values who attempted to promote but also censored Clare under cover of kindliness. Or they might see Knight as the last in a long line of patrons who encumbered Clare with their ‘help’, in Johnsonian phrase, or more conspiratorially, as the benevolent face of the controlling institution, the ‘enlightened Superintendent of the Northampton Asylum’, as Robinson and Summerfield call him.[23] Even if there are no further extant sources that will illuminate Knight’s attitudes and motivations in eliciting poetry from Clare, and there may not be, we can do a little more than this, drawing on the historiography on institutional roles in the asylum, and the scattered newspaper reports of Knight’s career after 1850, as the clerk and steward at the Birmingham Lunatic Asylum.

To begin with, Robinson and Summerfield again misconstrue institutional power to make Knight more of an authority figure than he was. He was not the superintendent, a senior

medical role held by a qualified physician, but house steward, a member of the domestic staff.[24] This was a difference of an order of magnitude financially. Knight’s salary at the Northampton Asylum was £60 with board, just above average, the income of a well-to-do servant or clerk; the superintendent’s salary was £500, the income of a middle-class professional. Even at the end of his career, almost half a century later, Knight’s income was less than half of this.[25] Economically, then, he was much closer to Clare’s situation than a middle-class medical officer would be, even if £60pa was still more than Clare ever managed to reliably make from his poetry. Socially too, Knight was closer to Clare than the top brass; the census shows that he was a local man from a rural background, from the village (then) of Rushden, a few miles down the River Nene from Northampton. As steward it is unlikely that he had any direct responsibility for Clare’s care, or control over his treatment, as his rueful reflections on Clare’s confinement to quarters for occasional intoxication in the letters to Stenson indicate.

Arthur Foss and Kerith Trick, in their chapter on Clare, note Knight’s ‘keen interest’ and ‘sympathy and encouragement’; similar terms, still smacking somewhat of noblesse oblige, are used by others. But in an earlier part of their institutional history, perhaps less likely to be read by Clare scholars, they note that Knight’s own position was precarious and class-bound. When he was officially appointed in 1845, the local press worried whether his social background and religious principles were respectable enough; he was obliged to provide a bond of surety.[26] He was then in his early thirties; when he left in 1850, the local press again commented on the appointment of his successor, a married man of a similar age; two younger men were rejected.[27] Qualifications were presumably irrelevant for what was a practical role, albeit one that came with significant organisational responsibility. Indeed, across the new asylum system, there were anxieties about how accounting or financial responsibility had to be entrusted to junior and unqualified members of staff acting as clerks and stewards, which reflected broader class tectonics across rapidly changing Victorian professional structures.[28] So Knight, and anyone who was in his position, would be under as much pressure as Clare to be ‘scrubbed and spruced up for inspection’. Perhaps we can understand the ‘tidying’ in his transcripts with this in mind, and as a more genuine and complicated act of kindness and social solidarity, rather than seeing him simply as a censor, or as one more person among the many who ‘thought that they knew better than [Clare] did’.[29] The circumstances of his life may remain obscure, but Knight surely deserves further

research, and more serious consideration from Clare scholars, rather than being condescended to himself.

A sense of the broader culture of patient or inmate writing in Victorian institutions is useful for understanding Clare’s asylum productivity, and the collection of his poetry by Knight. Sarah Chaney has recently argued that in later nineteenth-century asylums, patients not only had a ‘changing and fluid role’, but that in ‘in some instances, representations of madness [. . .] were the product of a two-way process of negotiation between alienist and patient. Patients, in other words, were not always mere victims of “psychiatric power”; they participated in the construction and circulation of medical notions by serving as active intermediaries between medical and lay perceptions of madness’. Crucially, in the cases she examines, this participation hinged on in-house asylum magazines. Via the authorial identities they might create by writing in such coterie publications, patients could even be credited as friends, advisers, or contributors in the textbooks written by the asylum’s medical officers. Another point that Chaney makes is that in socially mixed Victorian asylums, in her case Bethlem, or indeed Northampton, patients and staff sometimes had ‘similar backgrounds and shared a world view’; friendship and even identification with staff was much more common than earlier pessimistic accounts would assume, and was a ‘conscious strategy that helped patients to cope with asylum life.’[30] In terms of writing, Chaney looks at a slightly later period, when asylum magazines were common across Britain, but there are certainly examples as early as the 1840s, especially in Scotland, some of which are now coming to light because of increasing contemporary interest in recovering patient voices and writings. For example, the Wellcome Library has recently digitized a volume from the Glasgow Royal Lunatic Asylum, *The Gartnavel Minstrel* (1845). Immediately suggestive in relation to Clare if only because of its title, this self-published volume was the production of a single (former) inmate at Gartnavel, J. R. Adam, containing an autobiographical sketch, followed by a miscellany of comic and sentimental songs, some original, some imitations, of Burns and others, and some commonplace-book texts —which should begin to suggest its broader possible relevance to Clare’s asylum writings. No similar publication at the Northampton Asylum is apparent, nor an institutional magazine at this point, but the cultural model existed, and such enterprises are a suggestive context for Knight’s collecting activity, linked perhaps by the general climate of enthusiasm for gift annuals and keepsake volumes in the 1840s, forms of sociable publication that have interested Romanticists and Victorianists in recent

years, and of course a medium which had previously been an outlet for Clare’s writing, for example in the annual *Friendship’s Offering* in the late 1820s and early 1830s.

The models of domesticity associated with such forms of writing have also been central to recent accounts of Victorian institutions, which have turned increasingly to material culture or popular taste and aesthetics to add substance and nuance to the formerly bleak picture of the county asylum system in particular—and domesticity is no longer assumed to mean ‘conformity’. It now seems increasingly as likely in these contexts to have been chosen by patients themselves as dictated or imposed by ‘the rules and pressed social smartness of the asylum.’[31] So when Clare is seen in the asylum ‘dressed as a plain but respectable farmer in drab or stone-coloured coat and smalls [. . .] altogether as clean and neat as if he had just been fresh brushed up for market or fair’ (or again ‘scrubbed and spruced up’ later) we may still see this image through Foucauldian eyes attuned to ‘the symbolism of institutional clothing’ imposed ‘as a means to render inmates subject to a manipulative regime’, as docile subjects; but we should also be aware of how recent historical work has been interested in how clothes ‘could also serve as a means with which patients could undermine therapeutic intentions and even claim control of their own lives’ or ‘some of the small ways patients could use dress to express their identity or exert agency within the restricted world of the institution.’[32]

Much interesting research has also been done in landscape and garden history about the ideas of ‘therapeutic landscapes’ that lay behind much mid-century asylum and hospital design, including at Northampton. Any reader with a pre-conceived idea of the Northampton Asylum as a utilitarian environment, alien in all respects to sweet pastoral scenes, should turn for a corrective to the illustration reproduced by Clare Hickman of the ‘cottage orné with a thatched roof [. . .] built in the grounds’ of the asylum in the 1850s, or her reference to the management’s remodelling of the external areas, which took into account a discussion of the value for patients of different visual experiences of the picturesque landscape.[33] This may seem like a thin philanthropic parody of the real rural home that Clare had lost, of course, or, Hickman adds, could merely ‘feel like a gilded prison’.[34] And yet the right to roam in the real surrounding countryside that Clare was usually permitted at Northampton was also not the privilege allowed to an individual, idiosyncratic minor-celebrity patient, but squarely in line with many contemporary medical accounts of the curative value of unhindered access to a natural landscape, rather than bricked-in ‘airing courts’. Indeed, the ‘hallucinations of fear’ of

‘the vague danger that exuded through the walls of confinement’, the subsequently very real stigma and terror of the escaped madman, and fantasy of confinement and sequestration attached to the asylum and its patients which Foucault writes so vividly about, is often strikingly absent from mid-Victorian discourse about their asylums. It begins to looks more like a later efflorescence, just as our sense of the Victorian asylum as dumping ground for inconvenient people is in some ways the back-projection of attitudes from the early to mid-twentieth century, the years of the eugenic panic, and a much more likely and dangerous time for a disabled or mentally ill relative to be forgotten in a total institution, as Deborah Cohen has persuasively shown.[35]

Perhaps most important for Clare’s poetry among these softer faces of the asylum, however, is music and theatrical performance. Victorian asylums were surprisingly musical places. Stef Eastoe, in another account of an asylum which seeks to supplant the older picture of the ‘gloomy, isolated, and totalizing’ institution with a sense of its richer and kinder ‘inner life’, describes programmes of ‘Amusements’ that were important enough to occupy their own sections in asylum annual reports. These might be composed of ‘a diverse range of theatrical performances and musical concerts provided by professionals, volunteers, and in many cases by asylum staff themselves.’ Much of the repertoire was minstrel shows and comic songs, and the plays were usually farces, but she also reports performances of lieder and operatic arias. Asylums were even designed with dedicated music rooms.[36] At the Northampton Asylum, by the early 1860s, there was a brass band, a glee club, and a similar programme of twice-weekly ‘dancing, singing, music, magic lantern shows, lectures and readings—sometimes by the Chaplain—from Shakespeare, Dickens, and other authors.’[37] This has two consequences for Clare’s poems. The first is that the performativity of much of his poetry in the asylum, its adoption of roles and alter-egos, while highly distinctive to Clare, also sat in a context where this was one of the primary forms of sociable entertainment.[38] Clare himself called his poems ‘Prison Amusements’.[39] The second is that the predominance of songs in the later oeuvre might be framed slightly differently, slightly less as unaccompanied plangency, resounding only with the dying fall of Clare’s past, and slightly more as the refrains of an ongoing life. This may help to move past earlier critical disappointment at their apparently derivative (perhaps a better word would be ‘familiar’) voicing or diction, and disparagement of them as ‘traditional jingles’).[40] ‘Clare had a “song in the night”’, his fellow inmate William Jerom reported in his reminiscences of the last part of Clare’s life.[41] In this setting ‘a song in the night’ might sound a little less like a voice crying

in the wilderness, with no language but a cry, and a little more like something convivial, companionable, communal.

A note of caution: there is no getting around the fact, evident if only from his surviving writing in letters, that Clare’s experience in the asylum was not primarily a happy one; from any angle, it is still mostly a melancholy story of personal and familial loss and estrangement. Wherever there is a sense of fellowship or community, it is, as elsewhere in Clare’s writing, ‘invariably edged with an unblinking awareness of its limits.’[42] Moreover, the dynamics surrounding social and behavioural roles based on domesticity in institutions, or in quasi-familial networks of friendship and reciprocal obligation, are not straightforward. Claiming to find patient agency here, or in any of the more idiosyncratic aspects of the institution, has become a given in the recent social history of medicine, and in medical humanities generally, but it is hard to say that personal relationships are simple alternatives to power relations in social institutions, in the wake of psychoanalysis, or the *Genealogy of Morals*, or structuration theory, or Foucault read properly, for that matter. The dynamics of restriction, dependency, and autonomy at work are delicate. We might see this, by way of a conclusion, in a poem by Clare with a strong sense of curtailment, yet also a sociable exchange of music voices, finding support and relief from pain in musical performance, in shared refrain and repertory:

To
Jenny Lind

I cannot touch the harp again
  And sing another idle Lay
To cool a maddening burning brain
  And drive the midnight fiend away
Music own sister to the soul
  Bids roses bloom on cheeks all pale
And sweet her joys and sorrows roll
When sings the Sweedish Nightingale

The Lilies of the field are fair
  Nought on their whiteness emulates
Nature in pleasure says they are
  Words cannot musics charms create
Nor musings of an idle lay
  With music magic e’er prevail
Voice of the soul they steal away
From the young Sweedish Nightingale

I cannot touch the harp again
  No chords will vibrate on the string
Like broken flowers upon the plain
  My heart e’en withers while I sing
Eolian harps have witching tones
  On morning or the evening gale
No melody their music owns
As sings the Sweedish Nightingale

Feby 12th/49.[43]

This is neither Clare’s most celebrated nor his most obscure asylum poem; neither the most original, nor the most ‘familiar’. It has appeared in most selections of his asylum verse since J. L. Cherry’s in 1873, where the difficult to parse second verse was cut, but has drawn little critical attention. Its mixture of emotional intensity—the ‘maddening burning brain’ and the ‘midnight fiend’, the sort of line that for later poet-critics like Yeats or Arthur Symons aligned Clare with Blake and Tom o’ Bedlam—with the cooler, much more conventional diction of its refrain, is perhaps characteristic; or let it be provisionally illustrative at least, bearing in mind the need to see Clare’s asylum poetry as varied and not just one ‘mad song’. Contextually, the poem can support the revisionist account of the sociability and permeability of Victorian asylums: popular and worldly voices from the society outside could be heard drifting through their windows; here that of the soprano Jenny Lind, the Swedish Nightingale. (Clare’s ‘Sweedish’, a felicitous spelling whether his own or Knight’s, deliciously suggests ‘sweetish’ with a hint of operatic piping on the vowel and a Garbo drawl on the consonant.) It is very unlikely that Clare would have heard of Lind before he entered the asylum, as she was still a teenager in 1837, and only became widely known in Britain after the sensation of her London debut in May 1847. And of course, he never actually heard her sing, which is part of the pathos of the poem’s ‘audition’. But he probably read about her in the newspapers and periodicals supplied weekly to the asylum by the Northampton Mechanic’s Institute.[44] The poem betrays no diffidence about detachment, in this respect, from high culture or fashion.

Moreover, while the poem seems a private fantasy, it is also public, in that it participates in the wider public culture of Lind’s celebrity, during the height of her fame. When she took her celebrity to America in 1850, famously sponsored by P. T. Barnum, Lind inspired many ‘To Jenny Lind’ or ‘To the Swedish Nightingale’ type poems in the American press; there was even a competition for them. Clare may have read and been responding to similar poems in the British newspapers. Yet the bootstrap of conventional laudatory verse allows Clare subtler affinities and identifications. At the time of the poem’s dating, Lind had already intimated her early retirement at 28 from the operatic stage, overwhelmed by the demands of a celebrity sustained through two punishing years of constant performances, many of them in exhausting roles portraying the ‘mad’ heroines of the bel canto repertoire, such as Amina in Bellini’s *La sonnambula* (1831). The religious-minded Lind gave a series of benefit concerts in 1848–9, often at public institutions such as hospitals, before her operatic retirement was announced in May 1849, at which point there was feverish speculation about her eloping or going into a convent. Whatever the level of Clare’s

awareness of this, his sense of Lind’s voice seems fraught both with the anticipation of its silence, a ‘string’ resonating with his own situation, a ‘sister to the soul’, and with sympathetic identification towards another artist wounded by being the ‘comet of a season’, in Byron’s phrase, who, damaged and ‘stilted up to madness’, could not bear to ‘touch the harp again’, but who kept on singing all the same. Somewhere in the background too is the motif of the caged bird, a common symbol in asylum writings, although often in a more ‘pleasant and whimsical form’ than we might assume, or used as an image of home and domestic comfort as much as of captivity and yearning.[45]

Lind attracted this kind of identification from other poets, too, a virtual sodality of ‘broken flowers’. Clare was not the only male asylum inmate who wrote verses addressed ‘to Jenny Lind’.[46] Furthermore, readers of Emily Dickinson, a famed shut-in of a rather different sort, will remember the significance of her attending Lind’s concert in July 1851, in another Northampton, in Massachusetts: a nice piece of synchronicity, but more importantly also a threshold encounter between the poet not wholly confident of liberty, and ‘the most public of public women’.[47] Also across the Atlantic, and the fences of historical periods, another semi-outsider artist and semi-recluse, Joseph Cornell, became fascinated with Lind. In the words of Octavio Paz, translated by Elizabeth Bishop, arranging scores of ‘the solos of Jenny Colonne and Jenny Lind’ alongside the dolls and birds who populate his vitrines, Cornell made spaces of confinement which also lovingly protected and displayed a faded or disappeared world: ‘Minimal, incoherent fragments: / the opposite of History, creator of ruins, / out of your ruins you have made creations.’[48] This may be pulling away from Clare, or drifting back towards the religiose rhetoric of the infinite and ineffable. But the aesthetics of the minimal or the fragmentary can help us to read Clare’s asylum poems in a more modest way than this, too, aligning their ‘etiolated life’ with what recent critics have posited as ‘Rcsm’ rather than Romanticism, ‘the down-tuning of an aspirational form to its not-quite-barest minimum.’[49] We can see that here in the nightingale and the Aeolian harp, no longer the symbols of prepotent creativity (as they never really were for Charlotte Smith, Coleridge, or Keats), but singing or playing on still, owned by or owning no individual melody, but a common chord.

Clare’s poem, finally, may complicate our existing sense that, ‘for the last twenty-three years of his life, incarcerated in Northampton General Lunatic Asylum, Clare had no audience.’[50] Some of its audience is imagined, or a virtual community of fellow-feeling stretching into the future, but its outward address is certainly made pointed by Knight’s

arrangement of the title (To/Jenny Lind), and it was produced with more than one flesh and blood recipient in mind: ‘You tell me you write the Swedish Nightingale to please me’, Inskip wrote to Clare in April 1849, probably having received the poem in a copy, which is not extant. He added to Knight a month later, in the same week as all the hue and cry surrounding Lind’s official retirement: ‘I think of trimming up Johns Swedish Nightingale and uncaging her to the public.’[51] ‘Trimming’ may again make us think of Goffman, and the death by a thousand tiny cuts of Clare’s censorious ‘improvers’. But we should remember that the etymology of the word ‘trim’ in English is in addition and increase, rather than subtraction. Originally it meant to ‘make firm or strong; to strengthen, confirm’, ‘to comfort, exhort’, and ‘to repair, restore, put right’; later ‘trimming up’, specifically, meant to fit out and dress one’s person and appearance, ‘so as to give it a finished appearance.’[52] Hilary Mantel has written movingly of being ‘so mauled by medical procedures, so sabotaged and made over, that sometimes I feel that each morning it is necessary to write myself into being [. . .] How then can you create a narrative of your own life? Janet Frame compares the process to finding a bunch of old rags, and trying to make a dress. A party dress, I’d say: something fit to be seen in. Something to go out in and face the world.’[53] The dynamics of ‘uncaging’ Clare’s asylum poems are not simple; they have always involved compromise and social mediation, and such ‘dressing up’. The ambiguity of the word ‘trimming’ might remind us of this, and remind us to look a little more carefully at the decidedly mixed picture of control, correction, comfort, and sociable concord that early Victorian mental health care aimed at, as well as looking a little more kindly on those individuals who preserved and dressed Clare’s poems and sent them out fit to face the public world and to please others, to be both seen and heard. As indeed they still are.

Notes

[1] *John Clare: Nature, Criticism and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 1, 54.
[2] Hereafter ‘Northampton Asylum’.
[3] Goodridge, ‘A First Line Index to the Poetry of John Clare: Introduction’ (1999), at http://www.johnclare.info/firstlineintro.html, accessed June 2019.
[4] *Poems of John Clare’s Madness* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949), 31.
[5] See *John Clare in Context*, 259–78, and the somewhat overlapping account in Porter’s own *A Social History of Madness: Stories of the Insane* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987), 76–81.
[6] This habit seems to have begun with Janet Todd’s *In Adam’s Garden*, in 1973; others who write of Clare’s ‘pre-asylum’ poetry include Mark Storey, in the *Critical Heritage* volume, and Tim Chilcott (both of whom do also give the earlier asylum years their due), Johanne Clare, and more recently Paul Chirico, *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 5, and Adam White, *John Clare’s Romanticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 108, 300.
[7] John Goodridge, *John Clare and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 6, and passim; Kövesi (talking here, admittedly, about asylum writings, and establishing a critical frame for the later poetry), 204; Chirico, 1, 18.
[8] *Romantic Poetry and Literary Coteries* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 165–88.
[9] I am thinking here in particular of the work of Peter Barham and Robert Hayward: *From the Mental Patient to the Person* (London: Routledge, 1991), and the piece cited below.
[10] *Poems of John Clare’s Madness*, 3, 31.
[11] *Poems of John Clare’s Madness*, v, 6, 28, 23. Grigson’s sense of Clare’s *dementia praecox* is very much a mid-twentieth century conception of schizophrenia, before work by psychiatrists such as Manfred Bleuler and Luc Ciompi established, as Barham and Hayward quote Ciompi, that ‘the developmental course of schizophrenia is not compatible with the conception of a progressive disease process but, rather, that such courses, upon closer inspection, show themselves as being almost as protean as life itself’(‘Schizophrenia as a Life Process’, in *Reconstructing Schizophrenia*, ed. by Richard Bentall (London: Routledge, 1990), 62). The point is that even the most serious mental illnesses, like schizophrenia, or dementia, do not necessarily mean the end of life itself.
[12] *Poems of John Clare’s Madness*, 32, 2.
[13] *St Andrew’s Hospital Northampton: the first 150 Years (1838–1988)* (Cambridge: Granta, 1989), 3. Dr Trick, at least, was a working psychiatrist.
[14] These and the medical judgements of neurologists and psychologists such as Walter Russell Brain (who splendidly not only became The Lord Brain, 1st Baron Brain, but also edited the journal *Brain*), Seán Haldane, and Evan Blackmore, constitute the other standard references on Clare and madness.
[15] *The Later Poems of John Clare* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1964), 3; Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (1961) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 25–6.
[16] See Bartlett’s *The Poor Law of Lunacy: The Administration of Pauper Lunatics in mid-Nineteenth Century England* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), now the standard reference point on this topic.
[17] ‘Parsimony, Power, and Prescriptive Legislation: The Politics of Pauper Lunacy in Northamptonshire, 1845–1876’, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 81, no. 2 (2007), 359–85 (370).
[18] ‘Parsimony, Power, and Prescriptive Legislation’, 373.
[19] *New Essays on John Clare*, ed. by Simon Kövesi and Scott McEathron (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3.
[20] *Letters*, 669.
[21] ‘Kindness and Reciprocity: Liberated Prisoners and Christian Charity in Early Nineteenth-Century England’, *Journal of Social History* 47, no. 3 (2014), 721–745 (721). For similar dynamics of gratitude in the asylum, see Len Smith, ‘“Your Very Thankful Inmate”: Discovering the Patients of an Early County Lunatic Asylum’, *Social History of Medicine* 21 (2008), 237–52.
[22] The key sources used in most biographical accounts to date here are clearly MSS 410 and 412–14 in the Northampton catalogue, from the 1970 accession to the archive.

[23] *Later Poems* (1964), 9.
[24] Robinson and Summerfield’s mistake is repeated elsewhere, for example in the introduction to *John Clare in Context*, 9, where Knight is called ‘Clare’s doctor’. This error was pointed out in the useful cluster of essays on Clare at Northampton in *Northamptonshire Past and Present*, 3 (1971), 85–102, which also gives the information on salaries cited here, taken from the asylum records.
[25] His retirement on a pension of £216 is reported in 1891 by the *Birmingham Daily Post*, September 29 and November 27. Knight had worked at the Birmingham Lunatic Asylum, later All Saint’s Hospital, for 41 years. By then he was 77 years old, which tells another sort of story: this was a long shift at an institution ‘enlarged repeatedly between opening and the late 1870s in order to contain ever increasing numbers of pauper inmates fuelled by the relentless expansion of Birmingham’ (County Asylums website, https://www.countyasylums.co.uk/all-saints-winson-green-birmingham/, accessed April 2019). A much earlier article praises his ‘faithful and efficient services’, ‘high character’, ‘kindness’, and ‘great humanity’, reproducing a visitor’s report to this effect, while also reporting on a Dickensian debate among local councillors as to ‘whether they were always to be purchasing kindness and humanity with high wages?’ (Knight’s salary had just been raised modestly with the expansion.) ‘Local Intelligence’, *Aris’s Birmingham Gazette*, October 17, 1853, 4.
[26] Foss and Trick, *St Andrew’s Hospital*, 58, 135–6.
[27] *Northampton Mercury*, March 2, 1850, 3.
[28] For anxieties relating to stewards and the possibility of embezzlement, see e.g. Jo Melling and Bill Forsythe, *The Politics of Madness: The State, Insanity and Society in England 1845–1914* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 41–2, or Foss and Trick, *St Andrew’s Hospital*, 88–9, for a later case of this at the Northampton Asylum; cf. Clare’s line in ‘Don Juan’ about the steward ‘open[ing] shop’ and having a ‘jolly flare up’ with stolen tobacco: *Later Poems* (1984), I. 38.
[29] Robinson and Summerfield, *Later Poems* (1964), 10.
[30] ‘“No ‘Sane’ Person Would Have Any Idea”: Patients’ Involvement in Late Nineteenth-century British Asylum Psychiatry’, *Medical History* 60, no. 1 (2016), 27–53 (37–8, 47).
[31] Kövesi, *John Clare*, 199.
[32] Rebecca Wynter, ‘“Good in all respects”: appearance and dress at Staffordshire County Lunatic Asylum, 1818–54’, *History of Psychiatry*, 22, no. 1 (2010), 40–57 (40, 41); Jane Hamlett and Lesley Hoskins, ‘Comfort in Small Things? Clothing, Control and Agency in County Lunatic Asylums in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-century England’, *Journal of Victorian Culture* 18, no. 1 (2013), 93–114; see also Hamlett, ‘Public Asylums’ in *At Home in the Institution* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 16–37. The sketch of Clare’s coat and smalls is from Spencer Hall’s account of his 1843 visit, later recounted in his *Biographical Sketches of Remarkable People* (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1873), 166.
[33] ‘The Role of Landscape in Relation to the Treatment of Mental Illness in the Early Nineteenth-Century Asylum’, *Garden History* 33, no. 1 (2005), 47–60 (49, 51–2 for the cottage).
[34] ‘Cheerfulness and tranquillity: gardens in the Victorian asylum’, *Lancet Psychiatry* 1, no. 7 (December, 2014), 506–7.
[35] *Family Secrets: Shame and Privacy in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Foucault: *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Routledge Classics, 2001), 195. My awareness of some of the social and medical historical work cited here was informed by two recent conferences; the asylum panels in the SSHM conference in 2018, and ‘Rethinking the Institution’ at LJMU in 2017; thanks and acknowledgements to Kate Taylor for organising the latter.
[36] ‘Playing Cards, Cricket and Carpentry: Amusement, Recreation and Occupation in Caterham Imbecile Asylum’, *Journal of Victorian Culture* 24, no. 1 (January, 2019), 72–87 (73, 80–2)..
[37] Foss and Trick, *St Andrew’s Hospital*, 98–9.
[38] Roger Sales offers some lively comment on ‘asylum culture’ in his *John Clare: a Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002; chapters 4 and 5), specifically addressing ‘the everyday theatricality of asylum life’ (120) in relation to Clare’s boxer roles, although not really in this actual everyday sense, and not with much detail that is specific to Northampton Asylum; rather, as a form of symbolic contest with authority, his reading of Clare’s time in the asylum being more marked by the anti-psychiatric critique (and some of the generalizing) of earlier revisionary accounts, especially Porter’s.
[39] *Letters*, 660.
[40] *Later Poems* (1984), I. xv; quoting, partly critically, Tibble and Thornton, *Midsummer Cushion*, xii.

[41] Peterborough MS G5; quoted in Bate, *Biography*, 477. This was also used as the title of a play about Clare in the asylum, produced for BBC radio in 1978 by Roger Frith and later staged in 1989, and for the bicentenary in 1993.
[42] Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, 190.
[43] *Later Poems* (1984), II. 666–7 (Knight transcripts).
[44] See Joanna Ball, ‘“The Tear Drops on the Book I Read”: John Clare’s Reading in the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum, 1841–1864’, *Wordsworth Circle*, 34, no. 3 (Summer, 2003), 155–8. There are 34 articles mentioning Lind in the *Northampton Mercury* up to February 1849 (Gale British Library Newspapers database).
[45] See Chaney, “No Sane Person”, 45, which reproduces and comments upon such an image.
[46] See Benjamin Reiss, *Theaters of Madness: Insane Asylums and Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008), 1, 15.
[47] Judith Pascoe, ‘“The House Encore Me So”: Emily Dickinson and Jenny Lind’, *Emily Dickinson Journal* 1, no. 1 (1992), 1–18 (2).
[48] ‘Objects & Apparitions: For Joseph Cornell’; Elizabeth Bishop, *Complete Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2004), 275.
[49] Kövesi, 203; Anahid Nersessian, *Utopia, Limited: Romanticism and Adjustment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 25.
[50] Mark Storey, ‘The Poet Overheard: John Clare and his Audience’, *JCSJ* 10, no. 1 (1994), 5–16 (9).
[51] Northampton MS 52, quoted in *Later Poems* (1984), II. 666.
[52] *OED*, online edition, senses 1–7.
[53] *Giving up the Ghost* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003), 217.

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