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"A relish for eternity" : the process of divinization in the poetry of John Clare.



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Clare has been highly praised as a purely descriptive poet, but the faithful representation of rural life and scenery is not the sum of his work. In this thesis I consider his achievement as a poet of the "visionary" as well as of the "visual", and I have approached the topic by relating his loving attention to "trifles" to his endeavour to give permanence to a local Eden which is threatened by enclosure and social change. By examining in chapters one and two Clare's organization of images (guided by his sense of the poet's mission to see what others fail to notice), I have shown that he is concerned not simply to record for posterity the natural history of a place, but also, through the power of "fancy", to translate mundane sights into glimpses of paradise. In chapters three to five I discuss each of Clare's three main themes (the past, Nature, and Woman) in terms of what I have called the process of divinization" (the growing reverence for earthly beauty as the type of Eternity), and in chapter six I consider Poesy as the visitation of the divinity in Man, the inspiration to capture in song the harmony of Creation. In the course of these chapters I examine the strictures against descriptive poetry, Clare's attitude to "botanizing", the tension between fact and fancy, the myths of Childhood and Solitude, the topography and typology of Eden, natural religion and natural morality, Clare's place in the georgic and Romantic traditions, and the interrelationship between Nature, Love, Poesy, and God! Clare's "relish for eternity" I see as affording a consistent and unifying quest in his poetry, and I argue that his descriptive genius is valuable not only for its own sake but also for its communication of his Edenic vision.

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