

**Jack Clemo: Poet in White Silence, A Critical Analysis,
& *Stripping the Cadaver*, A Collection of Poems.**

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Abstract

This is a hybrid thesis in two parts, one critical and one creative. The first chapter of the critical part examines selected poems from Clemo's first five collections, beginning with *The Map of Clay* (1961), containing three series of poems written over twenty years, followed by *Cactus on Carmel* (1967), written after he became deafblind. After marriage at fifty-two he wrote *The Echoing Tip* (1971), *Broad Autumn* (1975), and *A Different Drummer*, (1986). The chapter examines the impact of his mother's religion, his environment and limited education, his attacks of childhood blindness, and the onset of deafness at nineteen on the development of his poetry. It traces his internalised conflicts, and projection of emotions in relation to disability, onto some subjects, and explores the way Clemo's poetry widens in scope after marriage, moving away from a harsh, narrow religious perspective, to a more tolerant and ecumenical outlook. Chapter Two concentrates on Clemo's penultimate collection, *Approach to Murano* (1993). It follows the further development of his thought after he moved to Weymouth in 1984, and visited new places, including Venice. It looks at how he met the challenge of writing descriptive poetry about places never previously seen, and his dependency on his wife to interpret his surroundings. Chapter Three is concerned with his final collection, *The Cured Arno*, posthumously published in 1995. This includes poems written about his second visit to Italy in 1993. It examines his need to resolve life-long conflicts, and to confirm the validity of his religious and aesthetic ideas. There is an introductory chapter linking the critical section with the collection of poems. Part One of the collection, *Stripping the Cadaver*, engages with Clemo and with deafblindness. Part Two is a more personal body of work exploring the same themes.

Dedicated to David O'Brart, MD FRCS FRCOphth, his
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Introduction

This thesis examines selected poems from Jack Clemo's seven poetry collections in order to chart the development of his thinking and ideas as expressed in his creative work. References to his autobiographical writings have also been used to help to clarify his often complex and conflicting ideas. It questions how a socially isolated and poorly educated boy, growing up in poverty in the Cornish clay district, became a prolific writer. He produced two autobiographies, three published novels, a book stating his religious beliefs, and seven collections of poetry over five decades. Most of his poetry was written after he became deafblind. Clemo's sense of separation from others, of being a misfit, is tracked through his poems. While his eventual and longed-for marriage at fifty-two brought some resolution, his later work continues to record his internal battle.

The influence of Robert Browning's work, and his marriage to Elizabeth Barrett, runs as a motif through Clemo's writing as he was convinced that he would have a similar marriage if he maintained Browning's optimistic outlook. Other influences came from a number of female figures, both children and adults, who took the role as muses during his youth and middle age. Some of Clemo's work shows a disturbing sexualisation of young girls when a young man, and this manifests even in his later life.

This thesis also traces his ambivalent attitude towards his deafblindness which includes denial of the significance of his disability, and contempt for other disabled people. This can be seen in the projection of powerful and conflicting emotions that he transfers onto some of the people he takes as subjects for several poems throughout the collections. Despite being deafblind for so many years, his verse contains vivid descriptions that are rich in sound and sight, and this work examines how he achieves this, and who helped

him. The thesis attempts to answer how these and other diverse factors become incorporated into his substantial body of work, and the ways in which his ideas change and develop over time.

Early life

Clemo was born within the clay-mining area of Cornwall in 1916, and spent much of his life in considerable poverty. He had two attacks of blindness at the ages of five and twelve. At nineteen he became deaf, and while he recovered a little hearing in later years, he was unable to hear speech. After recurrent sight problems, he became blind in 1955 at the age of thirty-nine. The cottage where Clemo was born had no electricity or running water. At the back were the clay-pits with their heavy industrial machinery, smoke belching chimneys, constant noisy traffic, and the heaps of clay-waste that featured in much of his early poetry. In front were green fields with the distant Foxhole Beacon rising from a heath.¹

Clemo said himself that his work showed 'a preoccupation with frontiers – the boundaries between religion and sex, mysticism and morals, creed and art, personal intuition and objective truth'. He considered he was forced to write about these subjects 'by spiritual and emotional stresses, often hereditary conflicts'.² The contrast between the two views served as a metaphor for Clemo's sense of borders, of being caught between different visions. They symbolised the split between the spiritual and the natural, or fallen world. The constant destruction of the countryside surrounding his home by the clay industry became a metaphor for the power of God destroying evil, and inspired some of the angry anti-nature and anti-beauty poems found in *The Clay Verge* section of *The Map of Clay*. Clemo's

¹ Jack Clemo, *Marriage of a Rebel*, 2nd edn (Sevenoaks: Spire, 1988), p. 21.
² Ibid.

spiritual and mental landscape was strictly binary, and this provides insight into the different conflicts indicated above, and expressed in so many of his poems. These include the conflict between the religious and the aesthetic, the choices made by an artist between God and the world in creative work, and the tensions between spirituality and sexuality. His attitude to his disabilities also shows considerable conflict between his acceptance and his denial of their impact and importance.

These hereditary conflicts can be understood to have their roots in his perceived differences between his 'good' Christian mother, and his 'bad' pagan father who died at sea at the end of 1917 during the First World War. Clemo's widowed mother, Eveline, had received her religious instruction through the Trethosa Bible Christian chapel where her father preached. Andrew Symons, a co-editor of *The Awakening: Poems Newly Found*, a collection of Clemo's very early verse, explains that the Bible Christians were a Methodist sect, founded in 1815. They promoted Wesleyan revivalism and political radicalism throughout Cornwall and Devon. They took the Bible as their sole authority. Symons also says that Clemo's supernaturalism came from his mother. Eveline Clemo told Symons that it was 'twuz liberal theology that killed the preachin' and materialism the congregation'.³ When Clemo had his first attack of blindness at five years old, his mother turned to the Bible and read a passage from Isaiah that included the words "thy children shall be taught of the Lord".⁴

Clemo's writings, including his poetry, can be read as a testimony to the truth of his mother's revelation in which they both firmly believed. This can be seen as keeping within the Puritan

³ Andrew C. Symons, 'Jack Clemo: Poet, Novelist and Autobiographer', *The Expository Times*, 121:5 (2010), 229-233 (p. 230).

⁴ Jack Clemo, *Confession of a Rebel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975), p. 21.

tradition of receiving direct communication with God, without the intervention of clergy, through reading the Bible. Linda Anderson gives a perceptive insight into the processes involved. Quoting Peter Carlson, she says: 'The pattern they were taught, they sought for; the pattern they sought, they experienced'.⁵

The Invading Gospel, first published in 1958 and revised and republished in 1986, was written while finally losing his sight and immediately afterwards. In this Clemo sets out his beliefs, including the belief that Christianity revealed two ultimate beings, God and Satan, and two ultimate worlds, heaven and hell. He thought there were two ultimate wills; divine predestination and natural, or Satanic fate at work. Within this split cosmos 'the individual is caught between the fall and the Redemption'.⁶ One of the difficulties with this form of dualism is that it appears to give God and Satan, and heaven and hell, equal powers. Such concepts raise the question of the role exercised by Jesus as Saviour and Redeemer, and His position in a divine hierarchy. This may be why Clemo appears so deeply conflicted and anguished in so many poems. It is possible that Clemo thought that his father was fallen, or unredeemed, and that his mother was redeemed as a Christian, and as the child of both, he found himself continually acting out that conflict within himself.

When Clemo became deaf, he relied mainly upon his mother to write things down on paper, making no attempt to learn either sign language or lip-reading, although his sight may have precluded this. When he finally became blind he insisted on having people print on his palm. This task fell mainly to his mother, and after marriage at fifty-two, to his wife. Print on palm is a very slow method, and very tiring for the printer, but Clemo refused to learn the faster deafblind manual, although this would have made communication faster and

⁵ Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 32.

⁶ Jack Clemo, *The Invading Gospel: A Return to Faith*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1986), p. 91.

easier for everyone. He also refused to learn Braille until 1963, and this meant that he had cut himself off from new literary influences and any reading for eight years.

The willingness, initially of his mother and then his wife, to allow Clemo to dictate how things were done, meant that he was able to ignore his disabilities because others were forced to adapt to him. There was no requirement for him to learn any daily living skills as his needs for shelter, food and clothing were met, and he depended on others to lead him around. Being unfit for work Clemo spent his teenage years from the age of fourteen trying to write novels, but all he published were some short Cornish dialect stories, some early verse, and impassioned letters in the local press on religion and sex.

Robert Browning's influence runs as a motif through Clemo's work, and on the dichotomies governing his need to marry. Clemo sees the pattern of the Browning/Barrett romance that had unfolded in Wimpole Street as a template for his own marriage, having read the *Barretts of Wimpole Street* when it had been serialised in 1935 in *John o' London's Weekly* when he was nineteen.⁷ Clemo became deaf when he was nineteen, so he may have found the Barrett-Browning romance a form of consolation, fantasising that some female figure would rescue him from his situation in the way that he thought Browning had rescued Barrett from Wimpole Street. Browning was also a major influence on Clemo's individualistic form of Calvinism due to the use of the terms 'predestinated', 'ordained' and 'granted by God' found in the Barrett/Browning love letters.⁸ Clemo seems to have felt that this supports the religious viewpoint he held in his twenties and thirties, and expresses in much of his early poetry, although it becomes modified in later years.

⁷ Clemo, *Confession of a Rebel*, p. 128.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 142-3.

Chapter One

From *The Map to Clay* to *A Different Drummer*

The Map of Clay

This collection includes three sequences of poems beginning with *The Clay Verge* first published by Chatto and Windus in 1951. The next is *The Wintry Priesthood*, a prize winner in the Arts Council festival of Britain Competition and included in the Penguin anthology *Poems 1951*. The final sequence, *Frontier Signals*, was included in the first publication of *The Map of Clay* by Methuen & Co. in 1961.⁹

The Map of Clay was first published when Clemo was forty-five. It begins with a short piece by the Cornish poet Charles Causley, an admirer of Clemo's work and also his friend. In 'The World of Jack Clemo', Causley is particularly admiring of Clemo's achievements in the light of his deafblindness, and his religious convictions. The collection was published six years after Clemo finally lost his sight, and Causley says that his continuing to write verse is: 'the supreme and sharpest achievement, I believe, in the four-pronged thrust of his work as a novelist, autobiographer, philosopher and poet' (*MC*, p. 9).

Causley said that Clemo regarded his afflictions as a test of faith, likening himself to a clay phoenix experiencing 'all this singeing of feathers mythical and mystical birds have to go through' (*MC*, p. 9). He writes that Clemo saw learning Braille as a 'collapse of faith' as he had more than once regained his faculties by 'what he would call a miracle' (*MC*, p. 10). He ends by stating that he thinks Clemo is one of the greatest writers Cornwall has produced, and that he has 'never

⁹ Jack Clemo, *The Map of Clay* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), p. 4. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses after quotations in the text, where the title is abbreviated to *MC*. The John Knox Press edition, rather than the Methuen, is used throughout this thesis.

doubted he was in the presence of a man whose make-up includes genius' (*MC*, p. 11).

It seems that Causley almost hero-worshipped Clemo, and looking at the quotations from other critics found on the dust jacket of the edition used here, he was not alone. It is difficult to access critical material on Clemo, perhaps because he is seen as someone who triumphs over adversity, rather than as an artist, so comments on the back of his books have been used. On the jacket cover of *The Map of Clay*, Richard Church is quoted as saying he thought him 'a creature of genius', and Kenneth Allsop, quoted from the *London Daily Mail*, calls him 'the Bunyan of this century'. Sally Magnusson gives some additional information as she includes a few other critical comments in her book, *Clemo A Love Story*, writing that many critics were repelled by the poems in *The Clay Verge*. Some reviewers thought it to be 'a grim, ugly sort of religion that Jack was upholding in such vicious images' though they were respectful for the vigour and sincerity that it expressed.¹⁰ Magnusson comments that even Clemo admitted that he was giving vent to a 'distorted vision'.¹¹

The title of the collection gives an insight into the theme of the poems. The 'map' shows the terrain through which someone may travel, and 'clay' refers both to the human race and to the environment in which the work was produced. The title of *The Clay Verge*, the first selection of poems, indicates that it is about being at the start, on the verge of a journey or pilgrimage. The term 'verge' can also be seen as point at which the invading clay landscape ends and the wider, natural world begins. The poems are autobiographical and confessional.

¹⁰ Sally Magnusson, *Clemo A Love Story* (Tring: Lion Publishing, 1986), p. 73.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

The Clay Verge

The opening poem, 'A Calvinist in Love', sets the agenda. The subject under consideration is the inter-relationship between religious beliefs and doctrines, and human love and sexuality. The voice of the poem is that of the young Clemo calling himself a Calvinist, although he points out in the introduction to his first autobiography that his position is that a modern Calvinist like Karl Barth, but with personal idiosyncrasies and overtones not shared by any believers in the organised Church. He does not accept Calvin's notion that the non-elect are predestined to be damned.¹²

Clemo wrote many years later in *Marriage of a Rebel*, when giving an account of an unused interview for *In Touch*, the radio programme for the blind, that the poem was inspired by a young school girl. She had smiled at him when delivering milk and a cabbage to his home one Saturday morning in 1945. In the same unused interview he says that he had once been 'a muddled sex-mystic', and that he had no interest in handicaps or ways of overcoming them.¹³ But earlier in the same autobiography Clemo gives a different explanation for the poem. Writing about a time when he is hospitalised for a reoccurrence of his eye condition, he said it was 'my first successful attempt to produce my own brand of the Browning love poem'. He said that the speaker in this eleven stanza monologue was concerned with 'a love complicated and transformed by a doctrinal interpretation', that the 'wild heats' were 'pagan innocence', and that marriage was an offering within Christian worship.¹⁴

Clemo's interpretations of the poem seem to have been made with the hindsight of his older self. They appear to be an attempt to

¹² Clemo, *Confession of a Rebel*, pp. viii-ix.

¹³ Clemo, *Marriage of a Rebel*, p. 136.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18

put the poem in a context that others will find acceptable. According to the second account of the poem, Clemo was a man of twenty-nine when he found himself inspired to write a love poem about a school-girl he saw only once.¹⁵

The speaker describes a love tryst between two Calvinists.

This bare clay-pit is truest setting

For love like ours:

No bed of flowers

But sand-ledge for our petting. [...]

Our love is full-grown dogma's offspring,

Election's child,

Making the wild

Heats of our blood an offering. (*MC*, p. 15)

The two stanzas suggest that sex is an act of sacrifice even within Christian marriage. The inference that 'wild heats' belong to the natural, unredeemed world seems at odds with the declaration that their love was the result of a religious dogma.

The poem can arguably be read as a slightly erotic and immature fantasy of someone with very little, if any, experience of human sexuality. He may have drawn on his own emotional

¹⁵ Clemo does not identify the Browning poem to which he refers, but 'A Pretty Woman' is a likely candidate. See: *Robert Browning: The Poems, Volume One*, ed. by Thomas J. Collins and John Pettigrew (London: Penguin, 1981), pp. 582-5.

responses that were aroused by the little girls with whom he played since losing his hearing at nineteen. The use of the word 'petting' suggests some physical sexual activity, though the writer may not have intended this to be taken literally. On the other hand he may have used the word to emphasise the erotic nature of the imagined encounter. The text appears to portray two adults, suggesting some possible physical contact involving more than kissing, although, as said earlier, it was inspired by a child. It seems to be something of a wishful fantasy. The lovers are idealised figures who appear to be seeking romance as an escape from a barren landscape. Perhaps the speaker is seeking consolation for a lonely life by creating an imaginary lover.

The title of the poem stands as a declaration of the author's religious beliefs, and can be seen as an attempt to establish himself as a poet of some religious profundity and seriousness. Calvinism is perhaps one of Christianity's harshest and most prescriptive manifestations, but the claim to be a Calvinist indicates the speaker's belief at the time that he was chosen, or set apart, as one of God's Elect. In his study of Clemo mentioned earlier, Andrew Symons does point out that Clemo's 'literary theology bears little resemblance to the academic theology of Calvin's "Institutes of the Christian Religion"'. He says that 'Clemo's understanding of predestination and election were not that of Calvin'.¹⁶

The form used, two long lines enclosing two shorter lines rhyming ABBA with an irregular number of beats, gives the poem movement and energy. He may also have found that the Browning love poem was a useful template for practising writing because of the regularity of its form. Clemo makes considerable use of rhyme throughout the poems in *The Map of Clay*, and there is something of the rhythm of the traditional hymns from his early immersion in

¹⁶ Symons, p. 230.

Methodist worship. Regular metre can be felt by touch and may have also helped Clemo maintain the beat of his poems despite his deafness.

Some of the poems found in the first part of *The Map of Clay* are influenced by Evelyn Phillips, a girl who was a year younger, and who had been kind to him at a family wedding during his second attack of blindness at the age of twelve. She was a year younger than Clemo and he attributed his recovery from that attack to her. She inspired in him the urge to write, starting with novels and some early poetry. He developed a romantic fixation for her, leading him to almost stalk her during his teens, until her parents insisted he have no further contact.¹⁷

The long poem 'Prisoner of God' is a wild diatribe at God for the ending of this idealised, but unrealised relationship, and her later marriage.

You would not hear my voice,
And how could I hear Yours
When You are slamming, slamming all my doors? (MC, p. 18)

The next two poems discussed indicate Clemo's preoccupation with, and sexualisation of, small girls, a reoccurring theme in his work. The child who played a major role after Evelyn Phillips had left his life, and after he lost his hearing, was Barbara Rowse, a three year old whose 'warm, innocent caress' roused him to a consciousness 'of a world where happy laughter remained'.¹⁸

¹⁷ Clemo, *Confession of a Rebel*, pp. 62-3, 110-1.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 111.

The sexual implications in both poems are very obvious, and while in the first half of the twentieth century may have been considered quite innocent, the author must have been very naive not to be aware that he was titillating the desires of those who are sexually aroused by little girls, even if he considered himself innocent of any perverse feelings. In the twenty-first century he might not have been cleared by a Truro psychiatrist of an abnormal interest in a little girl as he was in 1941.¹⁹

Clemo reports that after he has been cleared of inappropriate behaviour, he had been 'exhilarated' by the scandal, and felt like a village Oscar Wilde.²⁰ But in the following chapter he seeks to explain his attitude to female children, perhaps aware of how others might interpret his words. He writes that 'unusual attachments between children and adults were rarely touched on by novelists', but he thought his position was like that of a middle-aged character in T. F. Powys' *Unclay*, with a nine year old girl. Powys had made it a 'beautiful and spiritually significant thing', showing a 'frank appreciation of the girl-child as a sexual being', 'pagan yet merry with God'.²¹

The first autobiography makes it easy to identify the children to whom the poems refer, suggesting a certain disregard to the sensibilities of others. Clemo was, of course, cut off by his deafness from the normal social intercourse usually afforded a young man, even in such an isolated area of Cornwall. Nonetheless, the sexualisation of small girls may be seen as a somewhat distasteful form of eroticism however he might justify it. To the twenty-first century reader, it is less than acceptable.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 191-3. The child in question was called Irene and she had moved into the house previously occupied by Barbara Rowse's family. She was also allowed to live with the Clemos afterwards.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 194.

²¹ Ibid., p. 197.

'The Burnt Bush', a poem about a bush becoming ignited while the speaker is playing with a child contains the lines:

Fresh too was my desire.

I looked upon her laughing play

There in the gully's winding way:

A cool breeze had bared her clay. (*MC*, p.25)

The image here is of someone experiencing a sudden onset of sexual desire as he sees the child's clothing disarranged by the wind. The phrase about the 'gully's winding way' has sexual implications, possibly expressing the speaker's suppressed urges.

'The Plundered Fuchsias' tells of a child tearing fuchsia buds from a bush and flinging them around destructively.

In those moments she was mine,

The love of beauty's dress

Dead in her eyes, [...]

And then the last flower trampled on,

She turned more naughtily

And gave her lips to me. (*MC*, pp. 26-27)

In this poem the speaker may be projecting his desire for the child onto her desire to destroy the flowers. She seems to take a brutal pleasure in her actions, and the speaker may be resisting his own desires. There is a suggestion of sadism in this poem.

In an article by Howard Sergeant, titled 'The Discovery of God's Jazz: The Poetry of Jack Clemo', Sergeant refers to the child in the poem as Clemo's 'lady companion'. This minimises the child sexualisation so frequent in Clemo's early work, but he then goes on to say that Clemo speaks without 'apparently appreciating the sexual symbolism of the act'.²² It is possible that Clemo's reputation as a religious Christian poet prevents some commentators from acknowledging the extent of his overtly expressed sexual feelings for little girls. They may not even be able to imagine that such a man would think so of a child.

'Neutral Ground' takes the destruction of the world by the Biblical flood as its theme.

God's image was washed out of nature

By the flood of the Fall:

No symbol remains to inspire me,

And none to appal. (*MC*, p. 20)

The sense of alienation and dehumanisation being expressed may be an indication of the level of trauma resulting from the terrifying attacks of blindness in childhood, and the onset of deafness at the end of his teenage years. The daily sight of the ground being

²² Howard Sergeant, 'The Discovery of God's Jazz: The Poetry of Jack Clemo', *English*, 14:83 (1963), 189-192 (p. 190).

swamped by the ever encroaching clay can be understood as a metaphor for increasing sensory deprivation, translated into a metaphor for God's destruction of the world found in the Biblical flood story. Alternatively, the flood could be a symbol for the punishment deserved for sexual desire, including the sexual desire for girl children, as well as punishment for mankind's knowledge of sex found in the Garden of Eden story. If that sin was washed out, then perhaps too were the speaker's sinful lusts, however his rational mind might have justified them.

Poems like 'The Excavator' and 'Christ in the Clay-Pit' are among those recording Clemo's mystical experiences as he wandered around the strange clay landscape during the evenings. It is possible to argue that Clemo's experiences were the result of visual disturbances, his emotional response to sensory loss, and his belief in the supernatural.

His sight loss occurred over a period of nearly forty years, and his acuity seems to have varied considerably during that time. Personal experience suggests that sight loss frequently involves visual distortions that can be misinterpreted, particularly if the individual either is denying or misunderstanding the process. An underlying human fear of the dark, of blindness, may stimulate the psyche to a heightened awareness of what is called the mystical or the numinous, and Clemo had had religious beliefs instilled in him from early childhood. He read the Bible, religious books, tracts and sermons, he believed in the supernatural, the power of evil as well as good. He thought of himself as a mystic, as one who understood and could experience a spiritual awareness.

The need to seem to be justifying the ugliness and brutality of the vision displayed in his art could indicate a failure to recognise the possibly inevitable end result of his failing sight. Perhaps by claiming to see only the horror of God's destruction of the natural world's

beauty, the speaker is preparing himself for seeing nothing at all. For some one already deaf, there may well be a natural sense of fear for the future, of how far his terrifying God might go in destroying him.

In the poem, 'Christ in the Clay-Pit', the figure of the broken and wounded Christ appears in the broken world.

Why should I find him here
And not in a church, nor yet
Where Nature heaves a breast like Olivet
Against the stars? I peer
Upon His footsteps in the quarried mud;
I see His blood
In rusty stains on pit-props, wagon frames
Bristling with nails, not leaves. (*MC*, p. 29)

The speaker seems convinced of the validity of his spiritual and mystical encounter with the risen Christ while walking in the clay-pits. This experience offers some release from despair, but it also, and perhaps more importantly for the speaker, presents him as someone who has had a genuine mystical experience.

In 'The Excavator', God is presented as a destructive machine, but a machine on which Christ is crucified.

The bars now hinged o'erhead and drooping form
A Cross that lacks the symmetry

Of those in churches, but is more
Like His Whose stooping tore
The vitals from our world's foul secrecy. (*MC*, p. 31)

The image of God as a brutal machine, and the cross as a broken structure, not a beautiful ornament in a church, suggests that the speaker's anguish remains. The image of God as a destroyer is frequent in Clemo's early work. Here the machine, or God, appears to be broken, giving the appearance of a cross. The figure of God the Son is presented as crucified on God the Father, echoing perhaps, the voice of Jesus asking God why he has forsaken him during crucifixion.

In the poem the speaker states that such images of a brutal and destructive God are 'Christian art', unmodified by 'delicate aesthetes'. It is also possible that Clemo sees his own anguish at the time as a reflection of Christ's anguish during crucifixion. The Christ figure he encounters may be a projection of himself, a type of supernatural doppelganger, but one can understand the reality of it to one having the experience.

In 'Sufficiency', the last poem from *The Clay Verge*, the speaker admits:

Yes, I might grow tired
Of slighting flowers all day long,
Of making my song
Of the mud in the kiln, of the wired
Poles on the clay-dump (*MC*, p.38).

Now the speaker is standing at the edge of the clay verge. He realises that he has travelled a good distance from his starting point among the signs of God's destruction of the world, yet he seems unsure of taking a more positive view of the world. He begins to consider what will happen if he 'turned from [...] the hard / contours of dogma' (MC, p. 38). This poem makes a rather uneasy break before the beginning of *The Wintry Priesthood*.

It shows the mellowing influence of a young girl, only known as Eileen, with whom Clemo had corresponded for a while. They never met, but discussed marriage as well as religion and poetry. She told him that his environment amid the clay works was making his writings 'ugly and inhuman', and that 'an excavator tearing up flowers was *not* a symbol of divine grace removing sin and error from the human soul'.²³

The Wintry Priesthood.

When Clemo wrote the poems in *The Wintry Priesthood*, the child playmates of his younger days had been replaced by older female contacts. The publication of his first novel, *Wilding Graft* in 1948 and his first autobiography in 1949, had led a number of more mature women to correspond with him.

The poems here show a widening of vision and a broadening interest in literary figures. Writers to whom some of the poems are addressed include the Baptist preacher, Spurgeon, the existentialist, Kierkegaard, the poet and novelist, D. H. Lawrence, and the religious thinker, Karl Barth.

'The Broad Winter', addressing Spurgeon, refers to the preacher's exile on the south of France after leaving England as the

²³ Clemo, *Marriage of a Rebel*, p. 44.

result of deep divisions within a narrow Baptist group. Spurgeon voices the words:

'Woe to the idol shepherds who feed not
The sheep, but speak in swelling words
Of human wisdom! Vengeance is the Lord's.' (MC, p. 42)

The theme of this poem is the conflicts that can arise, between members and leaders of narrow religious sects, who are each convinced of the correctness of their differing views. The speaker considers that those who are in conflict with him have become idolised by their congregations because of their humanly wise words. Yet Clemo seems to idolise people like Spurgeon and Robert Browning for their words, and to be idolised himself by Causley.

Spurgeon is an early figure to feature in Clemo's pantheon. He can be seen as an example of correct Christian practise and ideas for Clemo, and as someone with whom he can identify.

Clemo's tendency to compare and contrast influential figures, often to their detriment, is found throughout his work, and makes an early appearance in this series of poems. In 'The Broad Winter' preachers are compared, with Spurgeon as a model of goodness as opposed to those he calls 'idol shepherds'. Clemo identifies himself with Spurgeon, ending the poem by saying 'I chose to dwell / With torturing symbols of the citadel', suggesting a degree of religious masochism in his makeup.

In 'The Two Beds', D. H. Lawrence is called 'a child of the black pit', the coal mines, while the speaker's world was found in the surface clay mines. Lawrence never saw, the text says,

The clay as I have seen it, high
On the bare hills, the little breasts
So white in the sun [...]
So I had the open view,
While you groped in cramped seams, found no heavenly
clue. (*MC*, p. 47)

Lawrence, the speaker suggests, did not find any religious revelation in

...the dead
Coal forests where the dark gods reign, silently breeding
The sensual theosophy, the second death. (*MC*, p. 48)

While Spurgeon is used as an example of 'correct' or 'good' religious thinking, a preacher who was not an 'idol shepherd', D. H. Lawrence is presented as an example of 'incorrect' thinking. This tendency to condemn people whose views are more liberal, more modern than the author's, and certainly different, may be inclined to alienate a reader.

In 'Thorn in the Flesh', addressed to Kierkegaard, the speaker questions why his subject rejected human love, asking:

Why did you turn
From gift of passionate norm,

Afraid to let its ardours burn

Down to the dark thorn root

And quicken there the choicer nuptial fruits? (MC, p. 50)

Here the speaker is questioning his subject's refusal to marry, a state he himself has idealised since he learned of the Barrett/Browning romance and marriage. The concept that marriage, or perhaps more correctly, sexual intercourse within Christian marriage, is the greatest reward in life, occurs frequently in Clemo's later poetry, and is indicated here. The last two lines quoted seem to be a rather crudely lewd reference to the subject's genitalia. Clemo may have thought that he was expressing a down-to-earth, working-class attitude to sex.

Clemo said that some of the poems in this sequence were inspired by his reading of John Donne in the winter of 1949-50. He said that when he studied Donne, 'I realised that he was one of the few great poets who had passed along my Via Dolorosa and spoken my language'.²⁴ Donne, he said, was 'voicing the mystery of the conversion process', and knew 'the tension between the natural urge to write poetry and the post conversion urge to preach and evangelise'. He thought that Donne's marriage had taught him what it had taught Browning, 'the refining power of womanhood when explored and fulfilled within transcendent grace'. Clemo said he wrote half of the poems in *The Wintry Priesthood* in a single week in February 1950.²⁵

Here Clemo seems to be attempting a justification of his writings and his themes, by seeing parallels between his and Donne's life and experience, thus identifying with the great religious and

²⁴ Clemo, *Marriage of a Rebel*, p. 56.

²⁵ Ibid.

spiritual poet. Perhaps he thinks that as someone whose education ceased at the age of twelve, and whose learning had been self-directed since then, that by aligning himself with various distinguished writers, his work gains validation.

The epilogue to *The Wintry Priesthood*, titled 'Priest out of Bondage', shows how Clemo has seen a way forward in his journey and decided to take it.

.... I take the irrevocable step beyond

Loyalty to this dead land: [...]

The bright blade of the Word severs the barbarous bond.

Christ calls from the tarred road and I must go [...]

Out of the bitter moorlands where my tears

Fell on the sullen bramble and the dun

Rock of the derelict years. (MC, p. 54)

Despite there being no physical contact, Eileen's influence appears to have been constructive in enabling Clemo to re-examine his hatred of nature and rejection of churches. For Clemo, who was isolated both by geography and by his deafness, the opportunity to discuss his work and concepts with a sympathetic reader opened him to new ideas.

In place of the fierce and destructive Old Testament God there is the Word, or Christ, who calls from the 'tarred road', a place where people meet and travel. The speaker is no longer a 'priest in bondage', but free to follow Christ in a less isolated manner.

Clemo admitted that after the correspondence with Eileen he could no longer write poems like 'The Plundered Fuchsias', 'in which pagan sexuality is rebuked by a child's kiss'.²⁶

Poems from *Frontier Signals*

The forward movement continues in the poems from *Frontier Signals*. As the title indicates, these are about crossing borders and moving into new landscapes geographically and mentally. They are also about passing two physical borders, the final loss of his sight in 1955 and the regaining of some hearing in 1956.

Shortly after Eileen had withdrawn from any contact, two older women, both writers, wrote to him after the publication of his novel, *Wilding Graft*, in 1949. These were Helena Charles, an Anglo-Catholic, and Monica Hutchings from Somerset who wrote books on rural life. Helena Charles did meet Clemo at his home, but she had no interest in his poetry, only the prose. She did try to help through the Church's ministry of healing.²⁷ Monica Hutchings did have a more direct impact on Clemo's poetic creativity, and she also introduced him to T. F. Powys, author of *Mr Weston's Good Wine*, and *Unclay*. Powys, referred to by Clemo as 'the great hermit mystic at Mappowder', had already admired Clemo's work.²⁸

Before losing his sight completely, Clemo visited Dorset with Monica Hutchings, to meet T. F. Powys.²⁹ A result of the visit was the poem 'Daybreak at Dorset', showing a movement away from the earlier dominating images of the Cornish clay district, towards a softer and wider vision.

²⁶ Clemo, *Marriage of a Rebel*, p. 50. *Marriage of a Rebel* was first published in 1980, some thirty years after the events discussed above.

²⁷ Clemo, *Marriage of a Rebel*, pp. 52-3.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 54.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 61.

Was not my language mere
Curt crumbling jargon of mauled rock, [...]

And I have seen
Fair golden evening drowse on Bulbarrow Hill
And on grey arch and parapet
Of old Sturminster bridge; [...]

I have shed the scabs of my hard destiny,
I have crossed the frontier, found a living land,
A vision more complete
Because of Dorset's yield, so magically sweet. (MC, pp. 71-73)

The language in this poem is vivid and lyrical, evoking the Dorset landscape in a more Romantic literary manner than Clemo has used previously. The hatred of natural beauty has gone, and in its place is the vision of a promised land and a fruitful future, based on a landscape beyond Cornwall. The speaker has hope. It also shows a dynamic interaction with a landscape outside of the clay-pits of Cornwall, and a joyous response to scenic beauty. There is the beginning of a fusion between the spiritual and the aesthetic.

It is also very possible that he had been, consciously or unconsciously, aware that his fragile, often threatened sight was finally fading. With this recognition, he may have become as acutely aware of natural beauty as he had once been of the harsh, glaring

clay lands. There is a certain poignant defiance in this poem as he declares: 'I am purged now / Even of my purgation' (MC, p. 73).

While Eileen had enabled Clemo to become more aware and responsive to scenic beauty, Monica Hutchings's influence seems to have been greater because she took Clemo to Dorset for the first time, and introduced him to T. F. Powys, and to his brother, Littleton, who became interested in him. Hutchings was writing her autobiography, *The Walnut Tree*, at the time. In it she declared that her 'passionate love of nature never brought her the slightest intimation of a personal God', a remark that may have puzzled Clemo.³⁰

The poems in this section show the influence of Clemo's wider circle of contacts, particularly in the fields of art and religion. He has tried spiritual healing, become familiar with the Anglican prayer book, and developed an interest in Catholic saints.

The poem 'Lunar Pentecost' celebrates Clemo's regaining of some hearing after finally going blind, and his enthusiasm for American revivalism. It is addressed to the American child evangelist, Renée Martz, and celebrates the regaining of a little hearing so he can hear some music. Martz can be understood as another of Clemo's girl-child muses, although they never met and he only knew of her through his mother's reports from newspapers. She appears as a major influence in his poems celebrating the Revivalist movement. Clemo associates Martz with Browning's character, the girl silk-weaver Pippa, in *Pippa Passes*.

A fire-flake has pierced my silence,

And a tongue responds – too deep

³⁰ Clemo, *Marriage of a Rebel*, pp. 58-9.

To be greyly solemn, too sure
Of heaven's glowing heart to let me sleep

With the sufferer's image, that cold fang
Of lunar mystery. Now I feel
God's gay eruption is bedrock truth
Our stoic solitudes conceal. (*MC*, p. 75)

The speaker appears to be dismissing suffering as a useful or constructive experience, compared to the sudden event of God-given happiness.

Clemo's enthusiasm for American Revivalism appears at odds with his earlier claim to be a Calvinist, as no amount of preaching can save those God has not elected for salvation. Calvinists are not noted either for enthusiastic revivalist campaigns, but as said earlier, Clemo had formulated his own version of Calvinism. His love of revivalism goes back to his early religious teaching and fondness for Sankey and Moody hymns.

There is also a developing interest in Catholic saints and Mariology. The poem 'Beyond Lourdes' is dedicated to St. Bernadette. In this he notes a difference between Martz, himself, and the saint.

...and yet
In my own pilgrimage I found
That a vision born in pain
Dissolves in morbid rain. [...]

Faith has schooled me further, brought me round
To the secret that you may have lost
Through your suffering: heaven's vivacity
In the child world lit by Pentecost. (*MC*, p. 76)

Here the speaker seems to be telling Bernadette that her sufferings taught her less than his had taught him. He suggests that she lacked the joy of the American child evangelist, Martz, who can be seen as no more than a brief footnote in revivalism's story. Bernadette is a world recognised Saint of great influence. He also infers that his experiences have more validity than Bernadette's, which seems somewhat arrogant.

Bernadette, on your bleak verge
You could scarcely dream
How a jazz-throb gives the ultimate purge;
How the Cross bends closer to the neon-gleam
Than to the grim grotto (*MC*, p. 77).

This appears as a very simplistic, uninformed and debatable view of the life and importance of a major religious mystic and their experience. Perhaps Clemo is allowing his still puritanical and narrow views to colour his work in a very subjective manner. Even at the age of forty, this indicates a shallow understanding of religious and

spiritual matters, while seeming to be setting himself up as an expert and arbiter in such things.

Two poems, written after he became blind, are accounts of sitting for his portrait. First he sat for a sculptor called Patricia, and the next for the painter, Lionel Miskin, who became a significant friend, the only male friend who could write clearly on Clemo's palm.

'Modelled in Passion Week' is about having his head modelled in clay by a young London sculptor called Patricia during the Easter of 1957. Very little information is given about Patricia, not even her surname. She was studying at the Royal College of Art where she had met Epstein. In 1957 she was on holiday in Devon with friends of a mutual friend, Ernest Martin, who had told her about Clemo. After reading *Wilding Graft* she had decided to cancel her holiday plans and spend Easter week in St. Austell, travelling each day to Clemo's home to model the head. She said 'she regarded the task as an offering to God, and was praying that he would inspire her'. According to Clemo, she told him that when she read *The Clay Verge* and *A Wintry Priesthood* she grew aware that she 'had to interpret the soul of a man who believed he was destined to marry'. Clemo comments that she never gave him any hint of romantic inclinations, could not make herself clear when writing on his palm, and that attempts to maintain a correspondence after the sittings failed. The finished head, cast in bronze plaster, was exhibited at the Truro Art Gallery later in the year.³¹

Clemo also says that she commented on his saddle nose, and this suggests that he was possibly unaware that this is a feature of congenital syphilis.³² As Clemo said she could not make herself understood to him, it was probably his mother who passed her comments onto Clemo, including the one about being destined to

³¹ Clemo, *Marriage of a Rebel*, pp. 102-3.

³² Ibid., p.104.

marry. It may be that his mother often put words she thought he wanted to hear into other peoples' mouths.

The wet cloth was folded back;
The unformed lump stood naked for her touch,
So vulnerable and piteous, each day
Through Holy Week. It bore the clutch
Of a creative spasm that has passed,
Leaving the modelled cast;
And now at the Emmaus hour,
Tense with resurgent power,
I kneel before my image carved in clay. (*MC*, p. 73)

The imagery is tactile. The speaker feels the unformed clay before it takes on the shape of a human head. By using the words 'clutch' and 'spasm' the speaker gives the impression of an internalised desperation, as well as the physical manipulation of the wet clay. A link between himself and Christ is made by referring to events before and after the crucifixion.

The suggestion is that the speaker has undergone a form of crucifixion – his deafblindness – but now finds he is resurrected and has new power. The last line of the third stanza, 'The risen man escapes', indicates his identification with Christ. That he should kneel before his own image seems rather narcissistic and melodramatic. On the other hand, with such profound losses of both sight and hearing, Clemo probably needed a very strong ego, focussed in on itself, to survive.

The desire to identify with Christ is not new to Clemo. In his first autobiography he wrote that during his teens he had 'wished to make the worst possible impression on everyone I met [...] wishing to cry with Marmoledoff in *Crime and Punishment*, "Crucify me—nail me to the cross! I thirst not for pleasures but for suffering and tears"'. Responding to chiding by S. E. Borrows, another correspondent to the local papers, for 'the extravagant swagger of a conceited adolescent', Clemo declared he could not 'dare to call myself a Christian unless I deliberately invited such a crucifixion as Christ endured at the hands of the smug superficial guardians of conventionality'.³³ The figure of Marmoledoff, an untrustworthy father, probably relates to Clemo's perception of his own father. Clemo's behaviour had become very odd and he had become very boorish and neglectful of his personal care after his mother told him details about his father, details which he refuses to discuss, when he was seventeen.³⁴ Clemo may have been transferring his feelings about his father onto himself. If his dead father could not be crucified, then he would crucify himself. An element of self-loathing does manifest itself in later poems.

In 'The Veiled Sitter', which is dedicated to Miskin, the speaker reflects on being painted when he is both deaf and blind. Like many of Clemo's poems it is a monologue.

Uncanny though not quite dark,
This rigid hour in which I sit
Marooned and fog-bound on the familiar chair. [...]
... I am sealed
For a distant gallery's glare.

³³ Clemo, *Confession of a Rebel*, p. 94.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 90.

In the world of culture, elegance,
My trapped and truant mood should yield
Its fire on canvas. [...]

You paint a man reborn through creed. [...]

...You'll create

A hint of something shattered, and that's my fate. (MC, p. 77-8)

The language here relates to both visual and kinaesthetic perception. The word 'glare' has multiple meanings. It can be a very bright light that illuminates clearly or one that obscures vision. Glare is also a problem for those with a number of visual disorders, and prevents being able to see clearly. It can be painful as well as uncomfortable. Does the portrait reveal or conceal the sitter's character? Do the viewers glare at the portrait or does it glare at them? Is the sitter perceived as fierce or angry, and will the viewers understand the artist's vision of him?

Unlike the portrait, the speaker is aware of his position. Chapter Nine of *Marriage of a Rebel* is titled 'The White Prison', noting that Clemo's blindness was not a total blackness, and the opening lines capture this. 'Marooned and fogbound' is very apt descriptive of profound dual sensory loss. It captures the sense of isolation felt by those with such a condition. In this poem, like the previous one, the speaker seems to be desperate to emphasize the power of his ego, and to assert his individuality. While accepting his fate, he also rebels against the implications that it might diminish him.

Clemo had difficulty finding a publisher for *Frontier Signals*, but when Colin MacInnes visited with Causley in 1959, Causley explained the problem. Clemo's former publisher had lost interest in him and MacInnes offered to try to place the manuscript. In January 1960 he persuaded Methuen to take the poems and publish them together with reprints of *The Clay Verge* and *The Wintry Priesthood* under the title *The Map of Clay*, and he built up support for the book.

A television crew visited and filmed Clemo and his mother. Clemo thought they were embarrassed by his belief in the Wimpole Street romance and his conviction that he was destined to marry. Instead he was presented as an unromantic but courageous man who had triumphed over handicaps by writing books. Clemo said his friends like Causley agreed, preferring him to be admired as an artist, not as 'an absurd sentimentalist who was consoling himself with fantasies about marriage'.³⁵

Clemo was not happy with the way he was presented by reviewers as being blind since five, deaf, and living in poverty, which suggests that there was more interest in his 'tragic' life than his poetry. It was untrue, and he thought it would have a bad impact on any girl or woman who 'might be romantically stirred by my poems'. He was happy though to receive a Civil List pension of nearly five pounds a week as the result of efforts by Derek Parker, a Cornish broadcaster and journalist, despite the failed efforts by his publishers, and T. F. Powys, Aldous Huxley and Howard Spring in 1950, ten years earlier.³⁶

Magnusson says that *The Map of Clay* attracted more attention than Clemo's previous work, noting that Walter Allen ended an admiring review with the following comments: 'At his best – and he is at his best [...] in the poems of *The Clay Verge* – he has rendered an

³⁵ Clemo, *Marriage of a Rebel*, pp. 111-2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

industrial landscape more completely and more successfully than any other English poet except possibly Auden'.³⁷ Magnusson then adds Allen's final comment, which she says is shared by many reviewers of his later poetry (though it must to apply to the remaining two sections of *The Map of Clay* in this case): 'In these early poems, where the quarrel is with himself, the language is taut, strong and naked. His recent verse, written as it were from settled conviction, is disappointing. The quarrel is now with others and the verse has become rhetorical'.³⁸

Cactus on Carmel

Cactus on Carmel was published by Methuen & Co. in 1967. All but two poems in this collection were written after he went blind, but the poems and their themes give an insight into Clemo's attitude to his own deafblindness and to disability in others. Yet in the Preface he says they

contain little which throws any light on the peculiar psychology of the handicapped. I am not interested in subjects that would make my work a mere curiosity. From my unhampered teens onward I have been preoccupied with the universal tensions of nature and divine grace, especially their bearing on the Christian regeneration of sex. [...] These explorations are continued in the present sequence, and the physical disability is irrelevant to them apart from the change in imagery³⁹

³⁷ Magnusson, p. 99.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Jack Clemo, *Cactus on Carmel* (London: Methuen, 1967), p. 7. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses after quotations in the text, where the title is abbreviated to CC. The 'unhampered teens' refer to the period between the age of twelve and his recovery from the second attack of blindness, and his loss of hearing at nineteen. He may have been denying the extent of the damage done during his first attack of blindness as five, or being so young, did not realise the extent of his poor vision.

He was, he wrote, 'exasperated to find my entire poetic output assessed as the work of a "blind poet"' (CC, p. 7).

This suggests a denial of his deafblindness, and the unique and challenging conditions it presents, particularly to a writer. On the other hand, it also shows a legitimate resistance to being read in too limited a manner. Causley had made a point about Clemo's disabilities as indicated earlier, and Clemo feared that other critics were inclined to do so too. But in his first autobiography he places great emphasis on the distress caused by his losses of sight and hearing. By assuming that disabled people have a 'peculiar psychology', he is projecting a stereotypical image onto those who are as variable as the rest of the human race. He seems to be saying that he is different from others with handicaps as he is *not* peculiar, something that indicates a considerable lack of self-awareness and insight.

He refused for many years to learn Braille, only doing so when Mary Wiseman came into his life in 1963 and they became engaged. While the influence of his other female muses is ongoing in the development and broadening of his thinking in this second collection, published when he was fifty-one, in 1967, it is Mary Wiseman who appears to have played the most significant role as muse. Theirs was something of an off-on romance lasting under four years, but brought about a change in his poetry. She exercised both an editorial and literary influence on Clemo. She wanted him to develop a modern style, so he began to study Eliot, Rilke, Hopkins and Dylan Thomas in Braille.⁴⁰ Braille also gave him access to other people's lives, moving him away from his own self-obsession, and towards his prolific production of portrait poems about people who interested him. In this collection Clemo uses monologue, a form he develops increasingly in later work, and this is probably due to the pervading influence of

⁴⁰ Clemo, *Marriage of a Rebel*, p. 120.

Browning, his predominant literary model. The monologue also enables Clemo to speak in a persona that is free to express ideas, opinions and feelings that he cannot articulate in his own voice.

Clemo appears never to have learned how to write Braille, something more difficult than learning to read it. This may have been because Braille machines are expensive, and writing it by hand, using a frame and working from right to left in reverse is difficult. Instead he thought out his poems in his head, wrote them down in longhand using a line guide, then typed them up from memory.

Previously, before meeting Wiseman, Clemo may have thought that divine grace was sufficient to compensate for not adapting the usual methods used by deafblind people, and that it would transform the disabilities as he thought it did sex. It is also possible that he thought, unconsciously or not, that to learn the deafblind manual or Braille would signal his acceptance of his disabilities. Indeed Causley suggests in his introduction to *The May of Clay*, that Clemo thought that learning Braille would show a 'collapse of faith [in God]' (MC, p. 10).

The poems in *Cactus on Carmel* may not shed light on the 'peculiar psychology' of disabled people in general, but they do provide an insight into Clemo's own particular psychology. They also show that he has moved beyond the presentation of himself as a rigid and harsh Calvinist, to someone who can embrace broader religious views, including American Revivalism, and empathy with Roman Catholic saints.

The 'cactus' symbolises the poet and 'Carmel' can be understood as Mount Carmel, the place where the prophet Elijah called down fire from heaven and defeated the prophets of Baal. It can also be understood as a desert or place of isolation, and a testing ground, for the cactus/poet, as in the opening poem, 'Cactus'.

Starved cactus in mirage heat
That shows the distant mouth of the maze:
Slaver of the jackal creeping
Past the headstocks where sensual night
Bristled beyond the last globule
Of spilled Zion light. (CC, p. 9)

The landscape here has a dream-like quality with a hint of nightmare. 'Mirage heat' obscures the view and the way forward involves negotiating a maze. Consciously or not, the speaker seems to be describing his condition, his deafblindness, as being like that of a prickly cactus starving in the desert. The desert is a metaphor for his physical loneliness and unfulfilled sexual drive. Perhaps more than his deafblindness, the speaker is expressing his sexual frustration.

'Spilled' suggests that the 'Zion light' has flowed over into the darkness and consumed it. The light flows like water, quenching a spiritual thirst, and perhaps promises fulfilled future sexual desire, and this seems confirmed in the final three lines.

... at the maturing turn
Where Zion light dissolves the desert,
Breathe in compassion, soul's roots exempt. (CC, p. 9)

The speaker is trying to visualise a landscape that he cannot quite imagine, full of unseen and unknown threats, but also containing the possibility of relief and release from his troubles.

While Clemo tells his readers that his work gives little insight into disability, there is a contradiction to this in the two poems that do refer it. 'Bunyan's Daughter' is quite a long monologue, in ten stanzas, written in the voice of Bunyan's blind daughter who is addressing her mother. It is an early example of the way that Clemo uses monologues by people with similar disabilities in a very idiosyncratic way to express his ambiguities about his condition. By using a female voice, he may think that no one will interpret the words as pertaining to him, the man Clemo. It may be his way of trying to be anonymous, or of hiding some of his deepest feelings of rage against his situation.

... I shall never know –

Where you lie, once harlot and slave,

Mother of all my sorrow: [...]

Your practised hand did the routine work,

Pressing the thorns and spear

Into the blind hereditary stream, [...]

Knowing but speech and sound, shapes warm or cold.

(CC, pp. 14-5)

The poem is an early example of Clemo's re-imagining and rewriting of other peoples' lives. The suggestion is that the mother is a whore

who bore a child by a soldier, and the child is punished by blindness. The references to the thorns and spear refer to the crucifixion of Jesus, suggesting a further identification with the suffering of Jesus, similar to that found in poems in the *Map of Clay*. The word 'lie' may have two meanings here. The speaker may be saying his does not know where his mother is buried, or if she has been telling him untruths.

This is also an example of Clemo's rewriting of history, perhaps due to lack of any good, well researched sources being available to him. As Anderson points out in *Autobiographies*, Bunyan attributes his awakening 'desire to religion' to his first wife who also passes religious texts onto him from her father.⁴¹ Both of Bunyan's wives are acknowledged in his *Grace Abounding* as being important to his religious life. This first wife is the mother of the poem's speaker.

Perhaps Bunyan's daughter symbolises the author, hawking his writings and being rejected by women because of his disabilities. Alternatively Clemo may have been projecting his deeply suppressed feelings about his mother onto the person who is responsible for the speaker's blindness in the text. He may have believed or known that his disabilities were the result of infection passed from his father to his mother. He might actually be addressing his mother, saying:

I owe to you all the leprous scars

Peeled deep to slime that spat at the Cross; [...]

...I staggered from loss to loss,

Hawking laces, bearing the coarse jeer,

Crying all night because you had made me one

⁴¹ Anderson, p. 33.

Whom pure men would shun. (CC, p. 15)

Clemo may have thought when in his twenties that only 'pure' girl-children accepted him. There are some very deep and divisive conflicts being expressed in this monologue. The author appears to be transferring onto the speaker some of his own confusing emotions and anger.

That soldier boy, that camp carouse...

My father dreams of pilgrims now, of grace

So potent at life's core

That he can write: "I never touched a whore". (CC, p. 16)

This is an interesting interpretation of Bunyan's life. It continues to raises questions about the sources used by Clemo for information on the lives of his subjects. Bunyan did have a blind daughter, who was devoted to him. Her mother, Bunyan's first wife, had died after bearing other children. In this poem, a personal anger is perhaps being transferred safely onto long-dead individuals, but really it might be aimed at Clemo's very religious mother, but in a covert and coded way. There is a line, 'When a parent repents too late', that could refer to Clemo's mother, as could the lines:

I could reach out to you

With the caress of Christ in my soul [...]

Nor in the end would I undo

All the agony you brought. (CC, p. 16)

The speaker is presented as being helpless, vulnerable, and sexually unattractive, and this may be how the author saw himself, and why he resisted so strongly being labelled as disabled.

This displacement of complex feelings that Clemo cannot express in his own voice, are often projected onto figures he judges and frequently condemns, or as in this case, onto women he sees as victims.

As mentioned earlier, the sculptor who modelled Clemo's face had remarked on his saddle nose, which shows clearly in Miskin's portrait at the front of *The Map of Clay*. This is a common sign of congenital syphilis. Clemo preferred to blame the devil for his disabilities, choosing a supernatural, rather than a physical, human cause. He may well have been deeply ashamed of his disabilities, and blaming the devil for them, directing guilt away from an inherited condition. It is possible that Clemo saw his parents as both God and the devil fighting within him.

'Outsider' appears to address those who adapt to disability by learning the skills that the speaker despises.

I am outside, a truant soul,

Deep in the Word, [...]

I cannot be a comrade

To you who find your victory

In affliction's craft and trade. (CC, p. 18)

This seems to be a defiant justification of his eight year refusal to learn a useful skill like Braille, or any of the crafts practised by the blind to earn a living. Once again there is the suggestion that he is the better, more spiritual man, for his approach.

I do not have to overcome,
I do not face the worst, I do not accept:
I just speed home
With no flake of darkness admitted or defied. (CC, p. 19)

The tone in this poem is quite hubristic, but this may be type of over-compensation, not uncommon in Clemo's work when he seems to be praising his own approach over that of others.

In 'The Riven Niche', addressed to St. Bernadette, the speaker refers to having Lourdes water 'Damp on my brow, the unfathomed sign of the cross' (CC, p. 30). This poem also refers to his childhood activity of having to collect water from outside as there is none indoors, judging his life to be similar to that of Bernadette.

My raw life was so like yours:
Holding my pitcher to the wheezing pump
Or the valley spring-pipe, forty years back. (CC, p. 31)

In 'Cactus in Clayscape', the opening lines refer to Elijah on Mount Carmel.

To know the God Who answers by fire,
To pray for rain and flee from Jezebel:
The cactus throbbed at voice and footfall
Of these prophetic urges. (CC, p. 34)

The cactus prayed for death
Because the elect were too few for the battle,
And the priests of the evolving light,
The pruned approach, the sleek interpretation,
Ran glib and gloating over the holy mount. (CC, p. 35)

This appears to be an attack on those whose religious ideology and interpretation of scripture is Modernist, unlike that of the speaker who believes that the Bible is factual. The 'evolving light' probably refers to Darwin's theory of evolution, and the 'sleek interpretation' is the explanation that miracles have a natural, rather than supernatural, explanation.

Seer of judgement and grace,
The cactus would stab to save the primal mountain
For the true fire, the pure rain, the embrace
Of the holy Queen, conceived without stain,
Who halts the advance of man and nature

With a humbling flash in which they are emptied,
Re-fertilized and born again. (CC, p. 35)

In the second stanza the speaker refers to the selective, Calvinistic concept of the elect, as he interprets it, but in the final one, there is a Catholic reference to the mother of Jesus as 'holy Queen', and to people being 'born again', a term for religious conversion used by the Evangelical movement. These concepts seem contradictory, almost incoherent, as the speaker wrestles with such deeply differing ideas. Perhaps he is attempting to make a synthesis of his interpretations of Calvinism, Revivalism and Catholicism.

The poem 'Carmel' is addressed to St. Thérèse of Lisieux and the landscape is the cloister. It is the final poem in the collection. Again the subject is a young girl, still a child when she receives her religious calling.⁴²

Gaunt as an ancient dungeon,
Those cloisters of Normandy: [...]

You were the true child-bride,

⁴² St. Thérèse of Lisieux, (1873-1897), also known as The Little Flower, had a vision of the Child Jesus just before her fourteenth birthday. She wanted to join the Carmelite Order but was turned down because of her age but allowed to join at fifteen, taking her final vows at seventeen and becoming Novice Mistress at twenty. She was ordered to write a journal and the material in that became *History of a Soul*. She defined her path to God and holiness as *The Little Way*, involving a childlike love and trust in God. She also wrote several devotional poems. She died of tuberculosis, and was canonised in 1925 by Pope Pius XI. Many miracles are attributed to her. <<http://saints.sqpn.com/saint-therese-of-lisieux/>> [accessed 9 May 2009].

Burning among the passionless, cold-eyed,
Uncomprehending species (CC, p. 51).

The theme here is spiritual marriage within the religious vocation, in contrast to marriage between humans.

Who are the cheated, who forfeit most?
Not you, Thérèse, but earth-drugged lovers, [...]

Who, tasting the Word, yearns deepest
For the ultimate Carmel of the soul?
Not the frosted nun, but the doubly wedded
Flesh-fertile pilgrims, canonised at Cana (CC, p. 52).

The reference to the wedding at Cana, when Jesus turned the water into wine, suggests that a similar transformation occurs within Christian marriage, in which two become one in spirit as well as flesh. The union of two people is transformed through Redemption and they are 'spirits still chaste for Christ, heaven's eagle, / Amid the bedded senses' shock' (CC, p. 52).

This appears to be a more sophisticated development of the ideas found in 'A Calvinist in Love', where the transforming nature of Christian marriage is explored. In the intervening years, Clemo's female contacts have been women, not girl children. Marriage was something he always considered when he came into contact with a

new woman, even if that contact was, as noted earlier, only by letters which his mother had to transcribe onto his palm.

The Lake District poems

Included in this collection are a number of poems written when Clemo came under the influence of Mary Wiseman. She was probably the most significant woman, after his mother, to come into his life before he met his wife. She can be seen as a major factor in the development of his poetry and in the widening of his horizons.

Clemo wrote a number of poems after visiting the Lake District with Mary Wiseman and his mother on two occasions. These include 'Lines to Wordsworth', 'Grasmere Reflections', 'Dungeon Ghyll' and 'Friar's Crag'. Wiseman was an art teacher who had contacted Clemo by letter in January 1963. His nearly four year relationship and on-off engagement to Wiseman would have allowed him time to ponder the validity of his belief in the transformation of sex in Christian marriage. There is no indication that anything other than kissing took place between Clemo and Wiseman. Actual sexual intercourse appears to have remained beyond his experience, but his deafblindness meant that close physical contact was essential for those who communicated with him and guided him.

By the spring of 1963 Wiseman had stayed at the Clemo's cottage and they became engaged. Clemo began to learn Braille and to memorise the keys on his typewriter, claiming he could read and type within a month or two. Although Wiseman broke off the relationship in August, they resumed the friendship and then became engaged in October, when Wiseman had moved to the Lake District.⁴³ Clemo began sending Wiseman drafts of his poems and he found her criticism very useful. In 1964 Clemo and his mother stayed with

⁴³ Clemo, *Marriage of a Rebel*, pp. 119-20.

Wiseman in the Lakes. This resulted in several poems, but ended with more doubts from Wiseman about the relationship. By 1965 they had resolved their problems. They also began studying Franz Werfel's *Song of Bernadette*. They returned to the Lakes in April of that year and made a pilgrimage to Wordsworth's home, Dove Cottage. The relationship ended in 1966 when Wiseman decided she could no longer continue with it.⁴⁴

Wiseman's methods of communication with Clemo

During the two visits Clemo and Wiseman made to the Lake District, Wiseman constantly spelled out on his hand descriptions of the scenery and information about places. She made him touch the rowan trees and put his hand in turbulent becks.⁴⁵ Wiseman was interpreting the landscape, thus enhancing the deafblind poet's ability to appreciate and comprehend it. Her art training, and knowledge in the visual media, would have helped her in describing scenery. An awareness of the topology could then be gained by maintaining close physical contact with the person guiding, though this requires considerable confidence in each other when negotiating difficult terrain. The effectiveness of Wiseman's methods can be seen in the poem 'Dungeon Ghyll'.

Rowans – tender, shy, elusive rowans,
Swaying, summer-warm, as a symbol
Of a woman's gift at her nocturnal base:
Soft puffy leaves and sleek stems brushing

⁴⁴ Clemo, *Marriage of a Rebel*, pp. 122-4.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 121.

Like shaken tresses or the first kiss;
And, with the rowans' whisper, you hear the purl
Of a mountain stream, the pure, blissful cascade. (CC, p. 47)

The speaker uses sight, hearing, touch and movement to set the scene in the Lake District, and also to convey the fragility of human relationships.

The rowans symbolise both the gift of a woman's virginity on her wedding night and the consequent masculine shedding of blood. They represent womanhood.

Here at the foot of Langdale all is guarded:
A flat rocky gulch, a turfed bank for the shy embrace;
But further up there are rowans, berried so brilliantly
Under the bold green peaks.
If you ascend to them there is danger;
There might be death, and the resplendent rowans
Would seem to shrug coldly as you fell,
And the torrents would laugh in the moonlight (CC, p. 47).

In this poem the deafblind poet has the challenge of putting another person's visual and auditory perceptions into his own words, and then presenting the result as his own. Without foreknowledge, the reader, seeing the poem in isolation, cannot know that the speaker is deafblind, and that is probably the intention. The poem appears to

highlight human vulnerability in contrast to the invulnerable power of nature, but it also demonstrates an attempt to overcome terrible constraints.

The reference to the rowans shrugging coldly may be a comment on the ability of the feminine to dismiss male attention after a while, reflecting the way girls and women have dismissed and hurt him. Perhaps he is also anticipating Wiseman's rejection of him.

'Lines to Wordsworth' is a rare attempt at the sonnet form. The rhyme scheme used is ABCCBADDEFEGFG (CC, pp. 44-5). It was written after the second visit with Wiseman to the Lakes. Wordsworth's cottage and garden had been a highlight of the visit that Clemo, who had been 'a violently anti-Wordsworthian poet', found ironic.⁴⁶ Clemo's dislike of Wordsworth could have been the result of his reading of Browning's poem 'The Lost Leader' in which he castigates Wordsworth for taking the Laureateship.⁴⁷ But in the poem Clemo contrasts the industrial landscape of the Cornish pits with Wordsworth's landscape, so Clemo may have a problem with Wordsworth's pantheism, though he himself presents images of a very powerful and potent landscape in *The Map of Clay*.

I reached truth through my world's industrial fray,
And scorned the placid breathing of the soul
Within its natural dream. But now your hills
Flash on my heart, trance-sweet with new control.

(CC, pp. 44-5)

⁴⁶ Clemo, *Marriage of a Rebel*, pp. 122-3.

⁴⁷ Robert Browning: Poems, pp. 410-1. Notes, p. 1091.

Wiseman seems to have been influential in softening Clemo's attitude to the poets of the Romantic Movement and to pastoral verse, as she was in introducing him to the wider range of poetry, now available to him in Braille.

The poems in this collection cover the period after his sight failed, both before and after he learned Braille. The movement away from work relating to the self and self-introspection, to a wider awareness of other people and other writers, indicates his progress both as a poet and a person. His work still remains highly autobiographical, but this is hardly surprising in someone whose world ends where his feet and hands can reach. Anything else must be reached through the intervention of another.

The Echoing Tip

In 1968, when Clemo was fifty-two, he married Ruth Peaty, and *The Echoing Tip* was published in 1971. In the Prefatory Note Clemo says that most of the poems included in the collection were written after the marriage,

which may explain why the personal erotic element so familiar in my verse is less aggressive here, often replaced by objective portraiture. While climbing towards the peak, I wrote mostly about the peak, the various thrills of the ascent, and the rather complicated map (showing mystical and theological routes) on which I relied. Now from the summit I can evoke a much wider spiritual landscape.⁴⁸

The title of this collection is likely to come from the tips found high up amid the clay pits where all the waste from the clay-workings was

⁴⁸ Jack Clemo, *The Echoing Tip* (London: Methuen, 1971), p. viii. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses after quotations in the text, where the title is abbreviated to *ET*.

emptied. Clemo's only childhood ambition had been to be a sky-tip worker, emptying the refuse wagons at the top of the clay-dumps.⁴⁹

While Clemo draws mostly on his own mystical experiences in his early poems, he turns increasingly to the experiences of others, both Protestant and Catholic, in his later work. His interest in theology and theologians, in missionaries and martyrs, in social reformers, and artists who find themselves divided between the spiritual and the aesthetic, continues to develop and broaden as Braille gives him increased access to more biographical, albeit limited, information.

Recognition as an artist also brought Clemo into personal contact with a wide variety of people, creative, religious and humanist, who broadened his ideas and stimulated his mind. In this way the isolation suffered by so many deafblind people was diminished. His wife patiently transcribed non-Braille writing and all conversations onto his palm. The material found in *The Echoing Tip* includes portraiture, and an increased use of the monologue and free verse form.

Included in the collection are poems on Dylan Thomas, one of the contemporary poets to whose work Wiseman had introduced him along with the work of T.S. Eliot. There are also poems on the Brownings, Mary Shelley, Beethoven and others. With the passage of time, blindness, combined with his earlier deafness, appears to have broadened his horizons and made him pay greater attention to other people and their ideas, although he does not hesitate to disagree with, or criticise them.

He chides Dylan Thomas in the poem 'I go Gentle', telling him: 'That terminal rage gets us nowhere / Except into the wrong grave, the dead end' (*ET*, p. 2). Beethoven is accused of pride: 'There was

⁴⁹ Clemo, *Confession of a Rebel*, p. 36.

too much pride, too much disdain / In the fluted bubbles, the sullen quivers, / The quick raging melody' (*ET*, p. 18). This is a strange judgement to make on someone whose music Clemo may never had heard clearly, but Beethoven had also lost his hearing, so this may be a point of identification and transfer of his own unacknowledged traits onto another.

In the final stanza of the poem 'Wedding Eve', dedicated to his wife, Ruth, he confirms his faith in nuptial transformation.

So two more loves are freed,
Outside an age adrift and dark:
Vigils of dune and forest
Set us on the anchoring quest,
And we find how disenchanted seed
Is changed to spirit's Cana-spark. (*ET*, p. 7)

Perhaps because of his marriage a number of the poems refer to various peoples' marriages. 'Mr Barrett in Cornwall' refers to the beginning of the Barrett-Browning romance on which Clemo fixed his own hopes of eventual marriage. In the sixth and final stanza the speaker identifies with Elizabeth Barrett.

Our faith-patterns were so much alike,
Hers and mine: something must strike,
Something must yield, for a poet's resurrection. (*ET*, p. 9)

The suggestion here is that marriage enabled both Elizabeth Barrett-Browning and himself to rise from a form of death. There is also the indication that Clemo identified himself, and his health problems, with Elizabeth Barrett, thinking that Ruth Peaty had rescued him just as Browning had rescued Barrett from a pre-marriage prison.

The next poem is 'The Brownings at Vallombrosa', recalling their visit to that part of Italy and how they were turned away from a hospice because the Abbot would not allow a woman to enter: 'the rigorous Abbot, / Who feels the remote hospice fouled / By a wife's gesture' (*ET*, p. 10).

In 'Mary Shelley in Geneva', a monologue in Mary Shelley's voice, she recalls her marriage to Shelley, the death of Shelley's first wife Harriet by drowning, her own miscarriage, the novel Frankenstein, and other deaths.

The *Ariel* waiting for the death-trip, I
Driven to miscarriage by my husband's shrieks
When a poet's dreams turned nightmares, reason slips. [...]
Suppose my father, once in Calvin's fold,
Had broadened the firm core with tenderness
And won my mother to it, [...]

Calvin was monstrous. It is my husband's frail
Light I must lean to: I can search no more. (*ET*, p. 17)

Perhaps this poem indicates that Clemo has moved away from his Calvinistic ideas because it is surprising for him to call Calvin monstrous. On the other hand it does not seem very surprising for Mary Shelley to express that view as she and Shelley were atheists.

There are two poems about the eccentric Cornish primitive painter, Alfred Wallis (1855-1942). In these poems Clemo is perhaps making a comparison with Dylan Thomas, and identifying closely with Wallis. Both Clemo and Wallis were working class, self taught in their art forms, and were heavily influenced by evangelistic religion and the Bible. Wallis married a much older woman and took up painting after her death. The first, 'Porthmeor Cemetery', is set at Wallis's grave in St. Ives. The speaker is Clemo, reflecting on his early life in Cornwall, and declaring that he is a changed man since his marriage.

No,

The shrouded fighter, cramped in his clay den,
Sense spurning, drawn to the tragic line – I swear
That man is not myself. (*ET*, p. 1)

To distance himself from the past and celebrate his happy marriage seems important to the speaker. Both Clemo and Wallis could be seen using their art as a form of therapy and catharsis, as a way of making sense of life circumstances that they found incomprehensible. Both men felt themselves to be in a spiritual battle between salvation and damnation, although this is expressed more intensely in Clemo's early work; in the poem, Wallis experiences it in later life.

The next poem about Wallis is another monologue, a form being used increasingly by Clemo. The title is 'Alfred Wallis' and the

speaker is Wallis, reprising his later life as a painter and a Salvationist who was constantly tormented, he believed, by the devil.

Clash the timbrels, flash the red texts;

Keep the devil's hands off my brush:

It's from the Word I must paint, beside the broken harbour.

[...]

I have done mad things, but colour's sane enough;

Yet it brings me to this: this mouldy room, [...]

With my teapot and the blessed Book. (*Ibid.* p. 36)

The poem suggests that the speaker is using art as a form of prayer when the creative urge is upon him.

... my spirit prays in splashed paint. [...]

I wonder if there is a man, a brother to me,

Somewhere in Cornwall, with this outlawed twist,

Half artist, half revivalist, [...]. (*ET*, p. 37)

The desire for brotherhood and contact with another who is an outsider and little understood misfit, seems like Clemo projecting his own desires and persona onto his subject. Wallis is presented as an

unsuccessful artist, driven to paint by inner spiritual forces, desperately hoping that he is not completely alone. With the passage of time, Wallis may be seen as more successful and influential in the art world than Clemo supposed.

'Helen Keller at Wrentham', a significant monologue, is unusual as its subject is a deafblind person. While 'Bunyan's Daughter', discussed earlier, has a blind subject, this is the first time Clemo chooses a subject with the same dual sensory disability as himself, but this is not acknowledged. Perhaps Clemo wishes to keep a distance between himself and others with similar problems, or he may still wish to hide his disabilities as far as possible, despite their being plainly stated in the covers and introductions to his works. His auto-biographies, of which the first was published in 1949, leave the reader in little doubt as to the impact of his deafness, attacks of blindness, and continuing visual impairment. It may be that Clemo could only write about something as personal as deafblindness by use of a female voice, again distancing himself from disability.

In 'Helen Keller at Wrentham' the speaker is Keller and the poem opens in her garden at Wrentham. She is told of the animals who visit there. In the text the speaker claims that she can feel the vibration of the whip-poor-wills' song through a balcony rail.

That pair

Were at mating crest – [...]

...I caught every note

Pulsing through vine-cord and metal

From his unseen exultant throat. [...]

I, the debarred freak, breathed a woman's vows. (ET, p. 20)

This is a reference to Keller's aborted romance and may also be Clemo's way of dealing with his own aborted romances. As in 'Bunyan's Daughter', he has taken a female voice to express ideas and feelings he feels unable to admit to himself. He probably unconsciously considered himself a freak and this may be why he over-compensates with self-praise so often.

The deer who had been allowed to roam in the garden left 'Fruit trees destroyed, the bark all ripped away'. This may refer to the girl-children with whom he played, and who caused him much distress at times when they sulked or were separated from him for some reason, and the women who had rejected him.

I was stripped, and because no whip-poor-will,
Nor will of mine or any man's,
Could tap the dream back, I took up vaudeville,
The red flag, many unpopular causes. (*ET*, pp. 20-1)

In this poem, Clemo is probably drawing on material he has read, and the most likely sources for this poem are Keller's second biography, *The World I Live In*, published in 1908, with some additional material relating to her later life.

The poem suggests that the speaker thinks that a happy marriage would have been preferable to all her good works, but this may again be the author's own projection. Keller was tireless in campaigning on behalf of the blind and the deafblind, something in which Clemo was quite uninterested, although he had no hesitation in allowing others to forward his cause.

In addition to being about another deafblind person, the poem also deals with the phenomena of sound experienced through vibrations. This is something that Keller often referred to, and which Clemo would have experienced himself when touching a radio or record player, or feeling the vibrations of an organ and choral singing through the floor boards in a church. The experience of hearing bird song through the medium of tree vines and metal rails does seem like a conceit too far. The vibrations could come just as easily from the movement of the wind pressing the vines against the rails, with imagination providing the rest. Clemo may have wanted Keller, and even himself, to be understood as having such super sensitive touch appreciation that something as delicate as bird song could be physically felt. By referring so directly to the sense of touch in relation to deafblindness, Clemo is beginning to incorporate the experience of his own disability into his art. He even has Keller refer to herself as a 'debarred freak', an unexpected term for her to use in relation to disability, but not Clemo, with his belief in the 'peculiar psychology of the handicapped'. Clemo's view of women, of the feminine, may have enabled him to express his own sense of weakness, vulnerability and shame, by using a female voice.

Broad Autumn

Broad Autumn was published in 1975 when Clemo was fifty-nine and had been married seven years. Clemo said *Broad Autumn* consisted 'mostly of poems about marriage and the natural alternatives of rape and prostitution'.⁵⁰ The idea that rape and prostitution are natural alternatives to marriage indicates a rather confused attitude to sex, and a low opinion of both men and women.

⁵⁰ Clemo, *Marriage of a Rebel*, p. 145.

The scope of his work has broadened with each collection, and now includes poems set in Asia and Africa, as well as work about characters and places in the United Kingdom. There are poems about Christian missionaries such as the Scot, Mary Slessor (1848-1916) in 'Ikpe', and in 'Wamba Convent', Marie Clementine (1939-1964) the first Congolese Catholic saint martyred when she resisted rape. The poem, 'Josephine Butler' deals with its subject's campaign on behalf of prostitutes.

The broadening of scope and interest is expressed in the final stanza of the opening poem, 'Broad Autumn'.

I have not changed my country;
I have grown and explored
In my faith's undivided world.⁵¹

There are references to marriage, including his own, in the final poem, 'A Wife on an Autumn Anniversary', a monologue in the voice of his wife, Ruth Clemo. Clemo seems to use the monologue to 'become' women, and in this case it is his wife. The increasing use of the monologue indicates Clemo's growing confidence, as well as the influence of Browning, his favoured poet, who made great use of the form.

Five years with your positive bright leaves!
I, too, hear the rumour

⁵¹ Jack Clemo, *Broad Autumn* (London: Methuen, 1975), p. 9. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses after quotations in the text, where the title is abbreviated to *BA*.

Scrapped on the autumn vein: we meet

Pain in a new context. (*BA*, pp. 60-1)

It is not unusual for a wife to praise her husband, but for him to put the praise into her mouth himself – ‘your positive bright leaves’ – is perhaps uncommon. The ‘bright leaves’ are obviously his poetry, so he is praising himself both as husband and poet. Clemo is displaying considerable egotism, as well as hubris again in doing this.

The voice in ‘Comeley Bank’ is that of the author comparing his happy marriage to Thomas Carlyle’s unhappy one. The poem speaks about Carlyle’s wedding night.

Romance-rhythms snap and harden

At the first night-touch, and a Comeley Bank garden

Lies ghastly at dawn, ransacked, root-strewn,

Torn by Carlyle’s wild hands in the uprush

Of despair: fumbling amiss for the bride’s blush,

They had found only ice of her. (*BA*, p. 38)

The poem ends with the speaker’s attitude to his own marriage.

I ventured brideward with prayer and heart-ties

Shaping my needs as a believer;

And though I wed in autumn I wrung no root

From frosty earth, but embraced the absolute
Crag-tongue of Christ and a joy bedded. (BA, p. 39)

Again there is self praise as Clemo compares himself, as he frequently does, with another writer, another husband, another Christian, pointing out how he is better. Clemo sees his view of marriage as dominant. In a hierarchy of husbands, and Christians, he places himself first.

His particular Christian approach to marriage leads to the transformation of human sexuality into a realised spiritual experience, something he finds lacking in other 'Christian' marriages. According to previous lines in the poem, 'I would not wed / The thundering brain-cloud or art's dream-guise', the speaker thinks that intellectual ability and an artistic ideal do not lead to true marital happiness and satisfaction, nor to spiritual realisation, a theme running through much of Clemo's work. This also suggests that he does not have too much respect for his wife's intellect.

Another reason why he may feel the need to demonstrate the correctness of his approach could lie in the prophecy he makes in the preface to his first autobiography, written in his early thirties. There he writes: '[...] while psychologists theorise about the morbid causes of my faith I shall be enjoying the fruits of it, which are curiously lacking in morbidity'.⁵² It does seem that Clemo is trying hard to fulfil his own prophesy, and demonstrate that he has been right all along in his thinking.

The poem 'John Wesley' comments on the preacher and founder of Methodism's unhappy and failed marriage. The wife is presented as an unpleasant virago.

⁵² Clemo, *Confession of a Rebel*, p. viii.

Stumbling, numbly docile,
He soon felt a shrew's tongue
Hiss, her fingers rake him (*BA*, p. 29).

In contrast, 'Toyohiko Kagawa', celebrates the happy marriage of the Japanese Christian social reformer, prolific author and poet, to his wife Haru. Kagawa is introduced in the opening line as 'Geisha's late love child'.

He plumbed a double mystery,
Found an ascetic cleansing
On the beach where he first held Haru,
In the shack where their children frolicked. [...]

From a rich and illicit birth-bed
He attained, along alley and sea-shore,
Christ's yoke: poor, blind, but married,
Shared heavens unrecognised by Buddha. (*BA*, p. 17)

The crucial point in this poem is that the visually impaired Kagawa has a happy Christian marriage, although his life is full of personal sacrifice, shared by his wife and children.

'Helpston' is about the peasant poet John Clare (1793-1864). A footnote to the poem states that Clare was born and buried at Helpston and spent nearly thirty years in an asylum. The speaker compares himself with Clare.

I never heard wild geese
Nor sowed wild oats, but the omen
Was there like Clare's, straggling from the fen.
This homeless freak, the artist,
Seems born marsh magnetised
In some Helpston (*BA*, p. 12).

In this stanza Clemo could be referring as much to himself as to Clare, as if he saw, in Clare, his own self-portrait. Here again the term 'freak', also used in relation to Helen Keller, is referring to someone who is disabled, this time by a psychiatric illness. This again seems to be an act of displacement for self-loathing. Such deep prejudice by someone who is disabled, against other disabled people, also includes the speaker. While Clemo is anxious not to be labelled by his deafblindness, he does not hesitate to label other disabled people with the term 'freak'. The use of the word may be a kind of tic, revealing that he is talking about himself by projection. This poem can be linked with 'Affirmative Way' as representing Clemo's internal conflicts over his disabilities, and his desire to distance himself from them.

Clemo: Disability, Sex and Marriage

There are two poems in the collection that do deal with Clemo's developing attitude to disability, indicating that as the scope of his work broadens, he feels compelled to re-examine his past. These poems indicate that he has developed to a point that he can use monologue *in propria persona*, rather than projecting onto others such as Bunyan's Daughter, Keller or Clare. This can be seen as a significant change and a sign of his maturing as both a poet and a person.

'A Young Mystic' is written in two parts and dated 1 Goonamarris, 1933, when he was seventeen, and the second, 11 Goonamarris, 1940, when he was twenty-four. The voices are those of the young Clemo, rethinking and restating earlier, but still painful, experiences. Here monologue is being used as a means of critically distancing the speaker from his past, while accepting that it is his past.

My lot's no part of suffering mankind,
For human ills throb through the whole mass,
Are understood and draw forth sympathy.
I think of the afflicted, deaf or blind
Or crippled: they remain inside
The general strata of human pain,
And their thirst is slaked
By the usual plaudit: they are not lonely
With my aloofness – that of a star grain. (BA, pp. 32-3)

This expresses teenage angst, alienation, and contempt for others, showing the adult Clemo exploring and contextualising his youthful revolt by being a misfit. The idea in the previous stanza that for him 'there is no union / Beyond the primal bonds of God and sex', shows the speaker's youthful interest in the link between spirituality and sexuality.

It is quite plain that the speaker does not wish to be categorised with other disabled people. If this is his view after the first two attacks of blindness and prior to the onset of deafness, then he is taking a negative attitude forward into long-lasting severe sensory impairment. Rather than receive praise for coping with disability, the speaker wishes to ignore it by being aloof and distancing himself from the reality. This attitude accounts for Clemo maintaining his lifelong sense of separation from other disabled people. They are not as he is, and this may suggest a level of denial. There is recognition of this conflict in the second part of the poem.

What growth could end this quarrel?

Only the unique Rock

Where the mainland was exposed

At the crow of a cock, [...]

How could love bridge the distance

To my tongue of stellar pride.

The Source of all cells was there,

Seeking mine for his bride. (BA, p. 33)

'Rock' is capitalised, and it is Christ who specifically calls Peter his, punning on the Greek for rock, Petra. In the poem it indicates that only Christ can resolve any internal conflict. The speaker also recognises that his pride is a cause of separation.

The idea that God or Christ, as the Source, is seeking the speaker as his bride may seem somewhat homoerotic, but is a conventional theological idea found at least in Catholic and other mysticisms. It picks up the earlier idea that there is no union 'beyond the primal bonds of God and sex', suggesting that the sexual act represents God's union with his perfected creation. It also raises the question of how Clemo sees the woman's role in sex. As a dogmatic non-conformist Clemo cannot accept sex outside of marriage, and apparently believes that for him union with God was impossible without sexual intercourse with a wife, accounting for his desperate desire to marry.⁵³ Clemo probably held the belief that the groom, or the male, represents Christ, and that the bride, or the woman, represents the church. Arguably he sees the male or husband as superior to the bride, suggesting that marriage is not an equal partnership. In the twenty-first century, this can be seen as a somewhat old-fashioned view.

'A Young Mystic' prepares the ground for 'Affirmative Way', a more mature reflection on his disabilities and attitude towards disability in general. 'Affirmative Way' sets out, in his present voice, his views on the subject. It begins by likening the loss of his senses to having a great hole open up in the ground, blocking the way forward, and continues.

⁵³ The ideas on the Bride of Christ are complex. In Ephesians 5. Vs. 22-23, wives are told to be subject to their husbands, as to the Lord, because the husband is head of the wife as Christ is head of the church. See: *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version (Michigan: Zordavan Publishing House, 1971), p. 185.

I recalled the maxims of the negative school,
The trite line of condolence:
'The blind glimpse truths that sighted people miss;
The deaf hear subtler tongues astir within;
The paralysed thrill with a rarer bliss....'
None of that patter here! I could see
What became of my only highway
When a quarry face caved in. [...]

And I still ignore the old blockage, hearing
The old winds above the riper seed swell. (*BA*, pp. 54-5)

Here the speaker is affirming that he continues to hold the same beliefs he held before losing his hearing and then his sight. His faith is an internalised path that has not been destroyed, and he must rely on his spiritual vision, ignoring his deafblindness.

A Different Drummer

Published in 1986 when Clemo was seventy years old, *A Different Drummer* shows a widening range of subjects relating to the arts, as well as those involved in Christian evangelism. Figures from both the literary and visual arts are featured in many of the poems, with comments on their spiritual and sexual lives.

The sense of being apart from others, and holding the religious or spiritual high ground in a materialistic world, continues to be

emphasised. This is indicated by both the title of the collection and by the poem, 'A Different Drummer'.⁵⁴

Just after dawn the foreign sound
Starts the pilgrim off on the wrong foot,
Tramping his lonely inner slum,
His soul's Samaria, spellbound
By the rhythm of the well-head drum
Calling from the desert in an unknown tongue:
'Tell the harlot there is living water...'.⁵⁵

This poem appears to be based on the story of Jesus promising the woman from Samaria 'living water', when they meet at a well.

The inference of the poem is that those who follow the different drummer, here a symbol for Christ, will be rewarded. In Clemo's case the reward can be understood as the happy marriage of a rebel or 'misfit'. At another level this poem can be read as an interpretation of three stages in the speaker's life.

The first stanza recalls a childhood in which he feels alienated from his fellow pupils and his teachers.

He sees, through tears, the casual young

⁵⁴ The subtitle of the poem is a quotation from Thoreau. 'If a man does not keep in step with his fellows, it may be that he hears a different drummer'.

⁵⁵ Jack Clemo, *A Different Drummer* (Padstow: Tabb House, 1986), p. 2. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses after quotations in the text, where the title is abbreviated to *DD*.

Stepping to the rhythm of balls bouncing. [...]

...the cold announcing

Voices of teachers. (*DD*, p. 2)

The second stanza records his 'starved nature', and his search for a partner, and how he is out of step with others of his period. The last stanza ends by declaring that the 'misfit' has won his 'shared dance', marriage, 'at sunset' (*DD*, p. 3). This poem celebrates his triumph over all the obstacles and problems of the past.

In 'Poem at Sixty', the speaker reflects on some poets who committed suicide before that age.

So many poets, before they reach three-score,

Let their despair employ a coroner. [...]

I recall a few:

Chatterton, Beddoes, Davidson, Mew,

Hart Crane, Vachel Lindsay ... I think my stars

Were as tragic as theirs, yet my pen

Still throws up clues to my survival, [...]

The old Damascus call brought me balance.

All my gifts straightened and tasted sweet

As the glib exhibit ceased to be the norm of advance

And the brooding ego the norm of retreat. (*DD*, pp. 8-9)

It is his acceptance of Christ, and prayer, the speaker thinks, that has prevented him from committing suicide like the other poets, implying that he too has considered taking his life.

'Charlotte Mew' is a long poem, in Mew's voice, drawing from her own poetry, yet dismissing it as 'The crushed little cat's last mew'. Clemo's footnote says Mew, 1869-1929, was 'a dwarf who wrote poetry, seeking in art a compensation for her tragic remoteness from normal life' (*DD*, p. 13). This seems an extraordinarily insensitive remark, as if Mew's work can be dismissed because of her perceived height. But this displacement onto others, such as Keller and Mew, appears as a recurrent device in Clemo's work and is used frequently in this collection. Clemo is again identifying with a female character he sees as weak, this time Mew, displacing his feelings about himself onto her, as he does with his portraits of other writers. His own art can be seen as a compensation for a more normal life. Few in the twenty-first century would dismiss Clemo's work based on his disabilities, though they may well be alienated by his self-praise, his tendency to preach, and his religious bias.

Poetry was his way of communicating with the outside world from which he was largely cut off. Without it, others would not have sought him out and broadened his horizons. Perhaps he feared, consciously or not, that his work would be dismissed in a similar manner. Clemo does seem to project a lot of his emotions onto other people. He may have chosen, as figures in his monologues, some that he felt could be used to channel his own feelings of insecurity, weakness and isolation. There is much of the cathartic in Clemo's work, and this is very prevalent in the early poems, but more muted in the later ones, where he projects powerful feelings onto his subjects. Many of those he writes about are quite obscure figures in

literature and religious life. Clemo himself can be seen as a minor, rather obscure figure within twentieth century poetry.

'A Choice About Art', addressed to Oswald Chambers, (1874-1917), deals with the conflict between religion and art as presented by the characters of Chambers and Van Gogh. In the poem Chambers is shown having given up art for evangelism, and Van Gogh as giving up evangelism for art. This conflict between religion and art is central to Clemo's thinking, and is an issue that he seeks to resolve in his work, as seen in the earlier comment on John Donne. He seems to feel that if the major thrust of creativity is towards greater spiritual growth and evangelistic purpose, it has greater validity, and the artist has greater value. This is a little like saying that a bad evangelical hymn is better than a good sonnet by an atheist or agnostic, but Clemo seems to think just that.

In the footnote to the poem Clemo writes that Chambers 'was originally a painter, abandoned art for evangelism and served many years as a Chaplain in Egypt'. Van Gogh, says Clemo, 'abandoned evangelism for art – with tragic consequences' (*DD*, p. 21). Neither of these statements is factually correct, but this can be due to the limitations of Clemo's sources, which may have contained a particular religious bias.

Chambers had been converted by the Victorian evangelist Spurgeon when he was seventeen, gave up the study of art and archaeology for theology, preached in the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan for several years. With his wife he founded a Bible Training College in Clapham, where he was Principal from 1911 to 1915. He, and his wife, then sailed for Zeitoun in Egypt where he served Australian and New Zealand troops as a YMCA chaplain for two years. He died in 1917 after surgery for a ruptured appendix.

Van Gogh's career as an evangelist was ended by his church. He was encouraged to study art by his brother Theo. His choices

appear to have been dictated more by others and by his own mental illness. The lives of both men, especially Van Gogh, were far more complicated than the poem suggests. Perhaps the point here is that Clemo considered Oswald's posthumously published sermons of greater value than Van Gogh's paintings, but that would be an oversimplification of both men's lives and works.

Of Van Gogh the poem says:

The pulpit had lost a voice, the galleries gained
Some savage pictures. Fate must respond
To a man's choice (*DD*, p. 20).

Of Oswald, the poem states:

At the Zeitoun base, near Cairo, the troops
You served were awed by the balm
Of your fertile marriage, gay amid camel and palm. (*DD*, p. 21)

This casual dismissal of Van Gogh's extensive and highly valued body of work seems inappropriate, while Chambers is being lauded for a happy marriage bringing awe to soldiers fighting away from home. One approach is to understand that Van Gogh and Chambers are being used as symbols, as are Mew and Kagawa, and that the facts of their lives, apart from a happy marriage or not, are unimportant. Clemo is subverting other people's lives to try and prove that religious belief and marriage define success better than aesthetic achievement or fame.

In 1979 Norman Stone made a film for the BBC called *A Different Drummer* that was a dramatised account of Clemo's early life. The making of the film appears to have forced Clemo into a re-examination of his past and present as others might perceive it. It probably highlighted the gulf between his life as a lonely misfit and the happiness of his late marriage. Marriage appears to have mellowed his harsh religious views and broadened his horizons, but many other issues remain unresolved. It also bought him into contact with a number of little girls, some the daughters of friends. He wrote several poems to amuse and entertain the children and these appear in *The Bouncing Hills*, along with some of his old dialect stories published in Cornish Almanacs in the 1930's. The short 'Epilogue: Chorus for Children' shows a writer willing to poke fun at himself, and taking himself far less seriously than usual. The opening stanza reads:

You've heard of the Cornish curmudgeon,
That surly, cantankerous chap
Who scowled at the flowers in dudgeon,
Or growled at a kid on his lap.⁵⁶

The final poem in *A Different Drummer*, 'Filming at Gunheath', takes the dramatisation of his early life as its theme, forcing its subject to reflect on his past in light of the present. Participation in the making of the film seems to have made Clemo see himself as

⁵⁶ Jack Clemo, *The Bouncing Hills: Dialect Talks and Light Verse* (Redruth: Dyllansow Truran, 1983), p. 99. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses after quotations in the text, where the title is abbreviated to *BH*.

others saw him, and this is something that he avoids ordinarily. It recalls events from his youth.

A small boy will whimper on the stairs,
A shabby youth rush from a tear-tapped typewriter
Into scourging silence, sobbing a barbed name, [...]

I am here as a married visitor,
A man of few questions. Let others ask
Why the pain had to be: I merely bless each mask. (*DD*, p. 72)

The word 'barbed' is a play on the name of the girl Barbara Rowse, a neighbour's child with whom he had played since she was three years old and after he became deaf at nineteen.⁵⁷

In the ever greater number of monologues, with their increasing sophistication, Clemo acts out, symbolically, his inner conflicts, and demonstrates an expanding world view. His first visit to Italy in 1987 with his wife and friends, expanded his world even more and led to the challenge of writing new poems, responding to new, unseen and unheard, surroundings, while seeking to finally resolve his conflicts and gain a clearer vision of his world.

⁵⁷ Clemo, *Confession of a Rebel*, p. 111.

Chapter Two

Approach to Murano

Approach to Murano is Jack Clemo's penultimate collection. In the Prefatory Note Clemo says that most of the poems were composed in Weymouth, his wife's home town, to where he moved in 1984, at the age of sixty-eight. It also includes some of the last poems he wrote in Cornwall, as well as those written about his first visit to Venice in Italy in 1987. Many of the poems show Clemo's preoccupation with the perceived rewards for his own goodness and virtues as a Christian aesthete, when compared to more 'worldly' artists. The emphasis seems to be more on his own goodness than on the greatness of God, despite his recognition of his personal shortcomings.

Clemo was seventy-one at the time of his first visit to Italy and still much occupied with the conflict between the aesthetic and the spiritual. This chapter also looks at the way Clemo juxtaposes his past and present, and his seeming need to justify the idea that spiritual growth and development are preferable to aesthetic success. In several of the poems being discussed, Clemo appears to argue that a happy marriage is a sign of spiritual virtue. This suggests that a failed or unhappy marriage, or single state, demonstrates a lack of such virtue. This seems an overly simplistic view of human relationships.

These ideas are demonstrated in Clemo's use of parable form in the poems, loosely based on the Christian parable of the sheep and the goats. The poem 'A Choice about Art', discussed in Chapter One, is a good example, with the preacher, Chambers, as a sheep and Van Gogh as a goat. Success and fame as an artist, even when it comes after death as in Van Gogh's case, is inferior to being a happily

married preacher, however obscure, and this idea is developed increasingly in *Approach to Murano*.

'The geographical change', Clemo writes in the Prefaratory Note,

was related to a spiritual and emotional shift away from cramped and austere concepts of truth, and the double movement made me receptive during visits to other parts of Britain and, even more significantly, to Venice. The city's glass-producing centre, the island of Murano, became a symbol of the clear-cut, luminous image, contrasting with my bleared and heavy clay idiom. The character sketches in the collection, balancing the personal record, depict historical figures who were in my mind at times when I approached the Murano stage.⁵⁸

The collection is divided into five parts. The theme throughout is of movement, of travel and journeys, both physical and spiritual, intellectual and emotional, as the writer continues to resolved his inner tensions and conflicts through the medium of poetry, his means of communicating with the world as a deafblind person.

It is possible that Clemo, in his sixties and seventies when the poems in the collection were written, wished to be seen as a poet who is predominantly a preacher of Christian truths and virtues, rather than one seeking to achieve aesthetic greatness.

Part One

The opening poem, 'The Model', features a small glass gondola brought back from Venice, and kept on the speaker's desk.

⁵⁸ Jack Clemo, *Approach to Murano* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1993), p. 6. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses after quotations in the text, where the title is abbreviated to *AM*.

It's my symbol of unsplintered clarity,
 Perfected vision, owing nothing
 To the blast thuds of diseased rock,
 Or the muddy, snarling iron tooth.

These Cornish images suggest the dull cup,
 Not the entrancing voyage. [...]

The unique oar dipped and a multitude
 Of heaven-trapped lovers' longings glowed again
 In my maturing transit. (*AM*, p. 11)

While the speaker makes it plain that he has left the harsh symbols of his early poetry behind, he still continues to refer to them. There may be no place for the 'iron tooth', his symbol of God's destruction of evil from 'The Excavator' in *The Map of Clay*, in this new collection, but it remains as a shadow in the background. There is a recognition that his earlier vision of the world, of society, was, like the rocks, diseased. As a result, he had been unable to see clearly and so his internal vision, like his physical sight, had been damaged. The 'iron tooth' can also be seen as a metaphor for his deafness and progressive sight loss that separated him from the world of both people and full sensory perception.

This poem indicates that Clemo has begun to distance himself from the past, offering a more objective consideration of his life's events. This process, as discussed in Chapter One, appears to have begun with his involvement in the BBC film on his early life, *A*

Different Drummer, made in 1979, and to have evolved slowly.⁵⁹ Shortly before leaving for Venice in 1987, the film was shown in Weymouth Baptist Church, probably re-enforcing Clemo's sense of distance from the past, while reminding him vividly of the traumatic events in his early life.⁶⁰

This is perhaps why 'The Model' presents two different images, the harsh clay landscape representing his past false vision, and the glass gondola representing his present clear, un-obscured vision. The 'heaven-trapped lovers' is a recognition of his happy, made in heaven, marriage, although the term 'trapped' is usually seen as negative, so using it indicates some ambiguity. A possible suggestion for the use of the word is that God is being seen as trapping the lovers for their own protection and safety.

The penultimate line shows the recognition that he is still in a maturing process. He is making a transition from one state to another. As a person in his sixties and seventies, when these poems were produced, he would have been conscious that he was approaching the end of his life, and re-evaluating and reflecting on his past.

The second poem, 'Perennial' takes a retrospective view of the visit to Venice.

Modern lights in Venice

Do not annul, or even distort,

Tradition's dowry. (AM, p. 12)

⁵⁹ Clemo, *Marriage of a Rebel*, p. 162.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 172.

The reference to light and vision may refer to his internal vision, with its lost distortions. His wife may have spoken about the historic city buildings when lit by powerful modern illumination, and he sees a parallel with his new perceptions of the world. He then compares this image with that of the 'steady white wave' of traffic remembered in England. This latter image may refer to the lights of the constant traffic that roared around his home in the heart of the clay district of Cornwall. He may even be remembering the brightness of the search lights scanning the Cornish coast for enemy planes during the war. It can also refer to the glare from lights often experienced by the visually impaired and recalled.

But here no vehicle, no jolt of brakes,
Shakes the ancient road. There are only footsteps,
Footsteps and low voices: you think of lanterns
And torches bobbing a thousand years ago.

Fancy the relevant dream-drawn walkers'
Plod across bridges and islands
To a church rite or a lovers' rendezvous! (AM, p. 12)

England stands as a symbol of the modern, discordant world, and of the speaker's own internal conflicts and discords, but now he has left the illusions of his past behind. In Venice the past and present are blended into a wholesome oneness, and this may be how he sees his own past and present blending in this visit.

Something of the 'white silence' in which the speaker lives is conveyed in the quiet, dream-like images, evoked in this poem as he describes being led through the ancient, timeless city. It is not possible to tell if the visual images derive from Clemo's own memories of nighttime and moonlight, or from his wife's spelling out of what she sees onto his palm, or he may use an amalgam of the two.

The use of the word 'plod' seems discordant and out of keeping with the atmosphere of the poem. For Clemo, who was always led around, walking may have seemed like plodding, but it sounds inappropriate when used to describe the movement of the 'dream-drawn walkers'. It adds a heavy note to an otherwise rather delicate poem. Perhaps if Clemo had been able to hear his work and read it aloud to himself, he might have seen the incongruity of 'plod', or alternatively, he may have deliberately paired it with 'cold' or 'jolt', or even 'bobbing'. He would be more aware of the movement of walking up and down streets and across bridges while seeing and hearing nothing.

'The Split' is about moving home from Cornwall to Dorset.

Am I leaving home or homeward bound?

Where the car starts or drops it load

My wife makes a world authentic; [...]

The attempt to adjust, exchange

That friend for this, this church for that,

Weighting the gain and loss

At both ends. Our marriage must shine

Equally at each end, but which is mine? (AM, p. 17)

While this, like so many of Clemo's poems, is personal and autobiographical, is also expresses the almost universal feeling of ambivalence experienced when moving to a new home.

The speaker wants his marriage to be a visible success to the world and for them both to be happy, but seems doubtful about his own outcome. He is literally leaving his past behind and that takes a certain act of faith. His wife is fundamental to his sense of place in the world, wherever that is. It is his wife who grounds him, confirms his existence in a soundless, sightless world, as they move together in a harmony of motion.

At a deeper level, this poem is about the need to resolve conflict, about how to let go of the past and grasp the present and the future. Clemo is leaving the rough tracks of his Cornish environment for the pavements and 'tarred roads', to quote from an earlier poem, of Weymouth in Dorset, and is unsure about which gives him the greatest comfort.

This poem, like those preceding it (and those discussed in Chapter One), deals with dichotomies. There is gondola/clay, England/Venice, Cornwall/Dorset and husband/wife. In each poem Clemo looks back to his past, and even the ordering of the poems, probably his choice, alternate between Italy and England, and the poems are discussed in the order that they appear. He constantly compares and contrasts his past and present situations.

'Ironies of a Homecoming' describes the emotions felt when returning from a stay in Dorset to his birthplace cottage.

'Clay tips again!' Always the same words

At the same point on my homeward journey, [...]

Having sea-spelled Dorset months behind me,

I no longer understand

The gaunt hills' lines of struggle. [...]

It is not to these blighting metaphors

That my heart returns, but only [...]

Where Cornish sprays of friendship

Gather around a Weymouth flower. (*AM*, p. 19)

The opening words are likely to be the speaker quoting his wife, Ruth Clemo, and they seemed to be spoken with a sigh, as if the landscape appears dismal. 'The gaunt hills' appear to confirm this, as the speaker goes on to list the features of a place he knew intimately and had seen, perhaps rather blearily, for thirty-nine years before he finally lost his sight. His memory of the working clay district is still vivid to him, both in sight and sound, but his present concern is for his home, where his 'Weymouth flower', his wife, meets friendship in Cornwall.

The final poem in Part One of the collection is 'On the Prospect of Leaving my Birthplace'.

Don't talk of my being uprooted

From the clay-beds of my childhood: [...]

My roots are in my soul's Jerusalem, [...]

Wimpole Street, Aldersgate Street,

Spurgeon's Tabernacle, Bernadette's shrine,

The Brownings' Florence and Barth's Safenwil.

How could the sick, fear-dazed child

At Goonamarris know of these? [...]

Clay-ravage was a fitting stage

For the doomed creature I seemed to my young mother,

Not the happy husband I am to my wife (*AM*, p. 20).

There are echoes in this poem of 'Priest Out Of Bondage', discussed in Chapter One. Despite his efforts, memories of childhood terrors and the harsh landscape around his home continue to colour his work. Despite the appeal to the talismanic properties of places like Wimpole Street and Bernadette's shrine, and people like Spurgeon and Browning, the speaker seems unable to fully free himself from the past, seeming always to be dragged back to the 'defiled meadows' and the excavator image of 'iron teeth'. The places associated with both nonconformist and Catholic beliefs are given equal status, signifying a high level of resolution between what many might consider unreconcilable approaches. The rigid supposed Calvinist of decades before is taking an ecumenical view.

There is no regret in this poem for leaving the place where he was born. There is a rather courageous embracing of a new place, and a different mental landscape, by someone approaching his seventh decade. In many ways Clemo can be seen as a resilient figure. Even if the nightmares of the past still haunt him, he faces them, uses poetry as a means of seeking resolution. He trustingly allows others, though mainly his wife, to lead him in strange places and prevent him from falling or walking into obstacles. Even in his later years, he boldly goes where sighted and hearing people of his age might hesitate. Perhaps, most remarkably, he records his experiences, adding the sights he cannot see and the sounds he cannot hear to give others a vivid record in his poetry.

Part Two

All seven poems in this section relate to literary figures and people associated with them. The first, 'Dorset Roots', refers to East Woodnates and East Stour, places of significance to Browning and Fielding respectively.

Woodnates nurtured the Browning family

Centuries back – [...]

...hideous wealth

Piled from a sweltering plantation

Remote on St. Kitts, where half starved negro women

Shrieked and fainted under the whip [...]

The poet's father turned from the sick trade,

Risked ruin that slaves might be free, [...]

There was Fielding too, [...]

The Stour's flow

Was fouled by brutish peasants, [...]

Choked with garbage, rotten rags and bones,

Sometimes a drowned girl, scandal bruised.

Young Fielding heard coarse tavern songs,

Saw poachers brawl, yet clung to classic beauty, [...]

The two threads fused,

Grew to the massive sinews of *Tom Jones*. (AM, p. 22)

There is some considered social commentary in this poem. The speaker acknowledges the financial sacrifice made by Browning's father when he left St. Kitts because he disapproved of the family wealth being derived from the slave trade. Fielding is presented as someone who rose above his social position, clung to his aesthetic vision and wrote *Tom Jones*, a book Clemo appears to admire.

The women in the poem are presented as helpless, either as abused slaves or 'fallen' women, except for a 'Mistress Browning' 'prim in her pew' on St. Kitts'. This latter presents an image of religious self-righteousness and complacency. This may be a type of self-image of Clemo himself, or of his very religious mother.

Clemo may have considered that both writers, like himself, have risen above their status at birth. He could identify with them as

proletarian defenders of rights of the common people, whatever their race. Unusually for Clemo, Browning and Fielding are compared quite approvingly, rather than contrasted for their virtue and non-virtue. Fielding may be a surprising figure to find in Clemo's pantheon, despite his Dorset roots, but in Clemo's early, unpublished novels, and the published ones, there are women of 'loose' morals who become 'saved'. Clemo may have felt that he and Fielding had much in common with their choice of subject and with their experience of the harsh, unpleasant side of rural life.

'Jonathan Swift: June 1723', takes the satirist and Dean of an Irish Cathedral as its subject.

In the gilded Dublin salons
Society shows its amused, witty talons,
And the Dean of St. Patrick's is in flight. [...]

He has been scarred often, [...]
Injustice, tyranny, Ireland's plight.
Bishops are acquiescent, he must fight, [...]

The ragged, thieving Irish peasantry,
Repel him. There seems no remedy: [...]

The fugitive rides faster, his twisted visage
Bowed in the unpitying sunset. (AM, p. 23)

The bogs and 'stumbling skeletons' can be seen as metaphors for the mental weakness threatening, and eventually engulfing Swift. Here too, there are echoes of the young Clemo, stumbling and crying in the clay-pits of Cornwall. The vivid image of the rider bent over his horse in the face of unpitying nature seems particularly apt.

Clemo's engagement with social history and conditions indicate his growth and development as someone who comments and reflects on the human condition outside himself. Swift never married, and the loss of his two feminine companions, must be something that Clemo, who looked for marriage so long, could empathise with. Underpinning this poem, is the loneliness and isolation of a brilliant, but progressively clouded, mind.

The subject of 'Tryphena' is Hardy's young cousin, with whom he had a much debated relationship. This is a return to Clemo's little girl theme, and the child and older male relationship.

On another level these often sexualised portrayals of women may have their roots in a period in 1934 when the young Clemo began drawing naked women, usually standing or kneeling at the foot of the cross. He attributed this to his reading of the controversy over Epstein's 'Genesis' and the record of the sculptor's conversations in *The Sculptor Speaks*.⁶¹

...these furtive meetings

With her haunted, mysterious cousin

Had the rippling flavour of smuggled things. [...]

⁶¹ Clemo, *Confession of a Rebel*, p. 103.

We know a Gale blew her from Hardy's spell; [...]
But whether the eclipsed, dark-tressed Tryphena
Escaped or was cheated, we would trust her memories
Of the pure enchanted heath in moonlight. (*AM*, p. 26)

Here there is a mysterious female figure with an ambivalent relationship with Hardy. She is the subject of rumours, possibly of a sexual nature, and therefore damaging to a young woman of the period.

The final stanza suggests that Hardy may have cast her off in favour of another woman. The closing image is of Tryphena in a Hardy landscape, alone and released from a potent but dubious relationship. The poem comments on the social vulnerability of women, and how they can be eclipsed by a dominating male figure, in this case, the author and poet, Thomas Hardy, whose work influenced the young Clemo.

'William Barnes' takes the Dorset poet, philologist, school-master turned clergyman as its subject.

Homely and benign, [...]
When a charming bundle of blue
Left the stage-coach at Dorchester, [...]

He built until the beloved image fell
And faith's rock broadened for the widower. [...]

He saw a young friend shorn
In the city's agnostic climate,
Heading for the blizzard at Max Gate (*AM*, p. 27).

In this poem the figure of Barnes is idealised as husband, clergyman, and poet of the rural landscape, writing in the broad vernacular of Dorset. Clemo likes to present subjects who had happy marriages, and Barnes is shown as displaying fortitude in the loss of his wife, keeping his religious faith intact.

This poem seems to indicate that Clemo has revised his earlier views on scholars and academics. Perhaps he felt that his honorary Doctorate placed him in their company. Barnes (1801-1886) was, in addition to being an English dialect poet, a gifted philologist whose linguistic theories influenced both Thomas Hardy and Gerard Manley Hopkins. He was ordained a Priest in 1848.⁶²

Barnes's friendship with Thomas Hardy is indicated in the text of the penultimate stanza with the reference to Hardy's home, Max Gate. In this poem Clemo shows a deep respect for his subject, seeming to rate Barnes's faith above that of Hardy, who has been influenced by the 'agnostic climate' of the city and is heading for trouble. Barnes's rectory is compared favourably with Hardy's 'cold', self-designed house in the final stanza. Once again Clemo sides with the lesser artist in comparing Barnes and Hardy.

Barnes, the loving husband and priest, and much less known than Hardy whose marriages were not happy, is presented as the better man. Clemo may have considered that Barnes has found the correct balance between the aesthetic and the spiritual, and therefore

⁶² *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 15th edn, 10 vols (London: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1983), i, p. 826.

can serve as a template for Clemo's own development. But whatever Clemo's views on Hardy might have been at the time of writing, they seem free from the disdain and apparent contempt expressed about those of whom he did not approve, found in earlier collections. This respect for Hardy may be due to Clemo's being referred to as the 'spiritual progeny of that greatest of West Country writers, Thomas Hardy' on the back cover of the 1983 edition of his novel, *Wilding Graft*.

In the poem 'John Harris', Clemo turns from Dorset artists to the nineteenth-century Cornish tin-miner, poet and Methodist of that name.

Rattling through the pell-mell air
Down Dolcoath shaft, the lonely miner
Guided the inner tools of his craft. [...]
Awaiting the blackberry juice,
Ink substitute, the red scrawl on paper, [...]

The golden phrase scooped in the tin seam
Must be the man's excuse
For silent withdrawal, akin to prayer, [...]

Holier here than in Burns or Clare,
The peasant fibre kindled by poetry.
Chaste and sober, faithful in Wesley's fold,

He grew as saint and rhymer (AM, p. 280).

There is a sense of warm admiration and respect for the speaker's subject. This is perhaps because there were parallels in their lives. Neither have been educated past village school level, both are intensely religious and both knew life in harsh mining areas in Cornwall.

The poem notes that Harris uses blackberry juice for ink, and this suggests poverty and deprivation. He works with crude men, and the conditions in the mine are poor. The reader is given a snapshot of social conditions in which the production of poetry is, perhaps, remarkable, almost as remarkable as Clemo's own.

The second stanza suggests that Harris composes his poetry in his head, as a form of prayer, or meditation, and this distances him from the physical reality of his working conditions. Clemo himself became withdrawn when composing, only writing or typing out when the work had been formed internally. Clemo appears to be identifying strongly with Harris.

The speaker considers that Harris is 'holier' than either Burns or Clare, who are also working class poets. The use of the term 'holier', with the connotations of being better than other religious people, seems rather inopportune. Perhaps Harris is thought to be more spiritual than Burns and Clare because he is a Methodist, or simply because of the strong religious beliefs expressed in his poetry, or even because Clemo thinks Harris is like him. Clemo may have been unaware of Burns's poem, 'Holy Willie's Prayer', which is a devastating satire on the hypocrisy on those who consider themselves holier than others. If he did know the poem, he may have failed to recognise something of himself in it. In any case, Clemo gives an overly simplistic view of the three men.

The phrase 'mine-sharpened vision' suggests that the darkness of the tin mines is helpful in writing poetry, just as Clemo might say he finds his physical blindness helpful. This does pick up from the opening lines on 'the lonely miner / guided the inner tools of his craft'. Such a concept relates easily to the idea of the lonely poet digging his lines out from inside his mind, or the deafblind poet receiving his knowledge of the world through touch, through words in air on his palm, or as patterns of raised dots on a page.

Clemo's habit of writing about obscure poets, and people of religious faith, may be his way of attempting some social engineering. His readers, intrigued by the poems, are encouraged to look the characters up and discover unknown sources of aesthetic pleasure, and take a stimulated interest in forgotten work. Clemo may also hope to encourage future readers to bring his work to wider attention, thus repaying him for his support of lesser known and less respected writers.

Part Three

The eight poems in Part Three all relate to visits to places in England, some well known and others less known. In these poems Clemo establishes a link between himself and those who occupy academic and historically significant places. At the same time he is keen to emphasise his equality with such establishment models of education and privilege.

The opening poem is 'Link at Oxford'. In this poem Clemo explores the connections with Oxford, Magdalen College, and an unspecified writer called Lewis. This is most likely to be C. Day-Lewis, the Poet Laureate and one time Marxist, who advised Clemo's first publisher and whom he thought selected the poems for inclusion in

*The Clay Verge.*⁶³ Day-Lewis can be seen as an early advocate of Clemo's work.

I stepped out of Magdalen: the Lewis aura
Was heavy in corridor [...]

I had intruded from an uncouth region (*AM*, p. 30).

Despite his sensitivity to his surroundings, the speaker feels himself an intruder, perhaps because he is conscious of his social and educational shortcomings. He is being somewhat unfair in suggesting that all Cornish people are uncouth, but he does go on to defend his working class origins.

I saw tip-waggons bombard earth's beauty
Till my faith caught their mood – a hard working-class
Bulldozing, but untouched by the skilled Marxist,
The sceptical debater, the aesthete (*AM*, p. 30).

He finds it important to emphasize his lack of left wing political views and his freedom from such influences, suggesting that he does support the Establishment despite his origins.

⁶³ Clemo, *Marriage of a Rebel*, pp. 65-6.

My harvest, too, is in libraries, [...]
I am awed by the gulf, the two spheres –
Lewis's here, mine (some critics tell me)
Nearer to Bunyan's fens – converging,
Naming wholeness in a sick climate. (*Ibid.* p. 30)

This can be seen as an acknowledgement of his self directed reading of the Bible and other books of a spiritual and religious nature, as well as fiction and poetry of a more general type.

In this poem he is comparing two types of learning; that of the much respected formal educational route to university, and his own, that of the self-directed working class auto-didact. There is a sense in this poem that the speaker considers the gains from his method of learning to be greater and more preferable. This is because they can be seen as spiritual rather than as aesthetic or academic. He is also pointing out that his approach has led him to become Dr. Clemo, without the discipline of higher education.

'Windsor' is an account of a visit to Windsor Castle. This is full of tactile references, and the speaker again reflects on his working class background. In this poem the speaker appears to feel more at home than he did at Oxford.

I plodded around Windsor Castle,
Of all places – I who was born
Under crusts of a drab trade, smoke skewered,
Clammy with kiln-steam. But I had matured

Beyond the pit's smear of class prejudice.

I felt no proletarian scorn

For the massive grandeur: it impressed me

With hints of divine rule (*AM*, p. 33).

The speaker appears to be identifying with the right wing working class, and to be a supporter of royalty, even the divine rule of kings. The speaker seems to wish to emphasize his political viewpoint, perhaps not unexpected in one who had Fascist sympathies during the Second World War, and then voted Conservative at the election afterwards.

In a 1979 article by Dr. Donald Davie, titled 'A Calvinist in Politics', the writer explores Clemo's poem, 'Royal Wedding', about the marriage of Princess Anne. In it he asks: 'How could it serve the Left to have this proletarian [...] recording that he found consolation for his own condition, and significance for it, in the institutions and the rituals of monarchy?'⁶⁴ Davie then reflects on Clemo's wartime support of fascism and Nazism as expressed in his first autobiography, and 'his callow equations of Calvin or Cromwell or Luther with Hitler and Mussolini'.

Davie notes Clemo's claim in *The Invading Gospel* that while he liked Wesley's hymns and some of his journal, 'his sermons seemed to me as chilled by eighteenth-century rationality as the writings of Edwards and Haldane'.⁶⁵ Davie says that 'this antipathy [is] asserted, constantly in Clemo's writings, often with vehemence',⁶⁶ and he quotes from *Confession of a Rebel*: 'It was impossible for me to take

⁶⁴ Donald Davie, 'A Calvinist in Politics: Jack Clemo's *Confession of a Rebel*', *Poetry Nation Review*, 6 (1979), 29-32 (p. 30).

⁶⁵ Clemo, *The Invading Gospel*, p. 42.

⁶⁶ Davie, p. 31.

the cultured, civilised view of human rights—or anything else. I demanded Christian gusto and scorned the weary dignity of the classic ideal. Ever since my childhood I had detested the Greek spirit and loved the Gothic'.⁶⁷ Davie does not seem to have recognised that Clemo would have seen his award of a Civil List Pension as indicating royal favour, and therefore his support of both the monarchy and the establishment is not all together surprising.

Clemo's preference for the emotional, over the rational or analytical, in his belief systems, whether religious or political, seems to have remained with him. He also seems to depend on an emotional response to people and places in a similar way. He seems warmer in his response to Windsor Castle than he does to Oxford.

.... in poverty

I had caught the ripe gleam, a foretaste
Of infinite wealth. I glimpsed my service,
Blest the opulent, as a mystic may;
And in the castle I traced
The aura which had brought me singing
From clay-blight to a broad regal bay. (AM, p. 33)

Here the speaker is celebrating his journey in life. He recognises his growth mentally, spiritually, politically and aesthetically. He is enjoying the experience of visiting a place so full of national history, and finds himself a part of tradition. The former misfit now feels a part of social and national history, knows he has a place there. He

⁶⁷ Clemo, *Confession of a Rebel*, p. 150.

shows no angst against wealth, power or class, just happiness that his life has turned out so well after a difficult start.

Again, the use of 'plodding' seems out of place, because the poem does not suggest that the visit involved laborious drudgery. On the other hand, anyone who has been forced reluctantly to walk around museums and galleries, may find it apt. Clemo does appear to use the verb when writing about places with historical significance where much walking is required.

The idea that a mystic can bless the opulent, perhaps in contrast with lesser persons, is a little strange, even a little condescending. He could even be identifying with royalty in the sense that both can be seen as having a divine right, continuing his tendency to position himself close to establishment, or privileged, models. By this time Clemo has a Civil List Pension, is a Cornish Bard, and holds an Honorary Doctorate, so may well see himself as among the elite.

'Abbotsbury Gardens' describes a visit to the sub-tropical gardens in Weymouth. The theme of the sexualised girl child appears again through the inspiration of two little girls who are guiding Clemo.

I can fancy a black-skinned Congo girl,
Child-wife of a pygmy, staring at bamboo,
Or a dainty, slant-eyed, yellow-faced
Japanese maiden fondling such blooms (*AM*, p. 37).

Clemo appears, from these lines, to still find little girls capable of inclining him, even in his late sixties and seventies, to have sexual fantasies about children.

Part Four

The poems being discussed in this Part refer to the visit to Venice and to historical figures. The opening poem, 'Island Contrasts', refers to the funeral island of San Michelle and the glass producing island of Murano, as well as the historic role of the Doge.

The poem opens with symbols and ritual related to death.

Cypress groves of San Michelle

Stand plumed and ceremonial (*AM*, p. 40).

It then turns to the trivialities of casino life in contrast to the praise of God in the ringing of bells.

...the historic image

Of the Doge in his sturdy vessel, [...]

...chanting nuptials on Ascension day. [...]

'We wed thee, O sea'. (*AM*, p. 40)

Here the theme turns to the Venetian ritual of the Doge throwing a ring into the sea to symbolise the lasting marriage of the city to the sea. This event seems to have exercised considerable influence on

Clemo, as can be seen in poems discussed later. Clemo has the event taking place on Ascension Day, (although there may be some dispute about this).

Within the context of the poem, opening with a description of the funeral island where people are buried, the Ascension carries the ideas of the resurrection of the dead, the promise of eternal life, and the Day of Judgement. It brings a number of potent Christian images associated with the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the afterlife.

The symbol broadens: travellers pass San Michelle,
Nearing Murano's sea of glass
Spread from a craftsman's fount, ungrieving
In its crisp and festal welcome. (*AM*, p. 40)

The previous images are reinforced in the final stanza about Murano, a place that has becomes an important symbol to the writer of his approach to a clear and unblemished vision, or even the perfecting of his life.

The sea stands as both a highway along which people travel, and being water, is also a symbol of ritual cleansing and purification. A 'sea of glass' is mentioned in the Book of Revelation at the end of the Bible, and in the hymn, 'Holy, Holy, Holy', where the angels cast their crowns into the glass sea.

Glass, in its liquid form, can be shaped, formed and moulded as the craftsman desires. When it emerges from the source, or furnace, it does not grieve as it is formed into a beautiful object, or has to be returned to the fire when the process goes wrong. Glass cannot resist

the transforming heat of the fire, nor protest as humans may, against the purifying fires of God.

It also represents both transformation and transition, in this case the changing of certain types of sand into glass through the medium of heat. Glass is both liquid and solid and can be opaque, clear, coloured or dark. It can be combined in forms that become one, just as in marriage two people are considered to become one flesh.

'Island Contrasts' can be read as a Christian allegory on the human life journey. The poem opens with a description of the island graveyard, a *momento mori* image reminding the reader of the inevitability of death. The Lido and the casino stand for the foolishness of many earthly pastimes, a type of Bunyan-esque Vanity Fair, but despite these, the bells still praise God. Bells and the campaniles from which they ring are man-made, so can be seen as symbols of the role of art, poetry in this case, in celebrating God's glory. The reference to the continually renewed marriage of Venice and the sea suggests the speaker has a belief in the eternal nature of the marriage state transcending death.

The final stanza celebrates the pilgrim's final vision of the promised land, the 'new Jerusalem' of much non-conformist thought. In the speaker's mind these images appear to link the ending of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* with the Book of Revelation in the Bible. The placement of the poem at this point in the collection, suggests that the author finds himself close to his goal of achieving the clarity of vision that he speaks of in the opening poem.

'St. Margaret of Cortona' (1249-1297) is about sin and repentance. It tells the story of a wanton peasant girl, another sexualised child, who became the mistress of a noble and mother of his children. Her life of comfort ended with the noble's murder.

In that fierce age of Flagellants, [...]

Peasant wild Margaret built the natural scandal, [...]

Wanton at twelve. [...]

The way of penance next, the body-hatred,

Her old reckless folly and public show

Twisted by guilt. [...]

Out of Franciscan shelter she burst, a disfigured flame. [...]

She was led by the neck-noose, the blood dripping

Over her rags as she screamed confessions

Proper for Magdalenes. [...]

...She was blessed

With visions, mystic gifts...Yet all's distorted.

Did Christ bid Mary mutilate her breast,

Scar the ministering lips, or win

His love through a rope's chafe on her chin? (AM, pp. 41-2)

This poem portrays violent self-harm as self-administered punishment for sins of the flesh, for veniality. If Margaret excelled as

a sexual wanton in her youth, she is shown as displaying an excess of violence in her attempts to gain heavenly pardon.

While such behaviour may have been acceptable in medieval Italy, the speaker finds it distasteful in the twentieth century, although the concentration on the erotic and masochistic nature of the Saint's actions is rather indulgent. His question about the acceptability of such self-harm to Christ in any age is a moot point, as it is not something He asked of Mary Magdalene.

Beneath the surface of the poem, there is a commentary on the way that women are asked to pay the price for exercising sexual freedoms, not men. Women are shown as eternal Eves, forever leading men astray and then being punished by a male dominated society. It seems to be forgotten that in the Eden myth, the talking serpent is male.

A slightly lascivious interest in vulnerable, abused and damaged females found in this, and other poems such as 'Dorset Roots' and 'Tryphena', seem to betray a rather unpleasant attitude towards the poor and harsh treatment of women. This may echo his previously discussed view that rape and prostitution were natural alternatives to marriage.

Clemo does record that he thought that a highly sexed girl was capable of physical responses to sexual encounters at the age of twelve. For this reason his heroine in *Wilding Graft* was thirteen when she has her first embrace with the book's older hero. After several rejections by publishers, this was reluctantly changed to fifteen on the advice of his agent, so it would be 'more palatable to the general reader'.⁶⁸ This does suggest that as a young man in his twenties and early thirties, Clemo did think that sexual encounters with school-girls were acceptable, even normal, for a Christian like himself. He may

⁶⁸ Clemo, *Confession of a Rebel*, p. 204.

have considered St. Margaret 'wanton at twelve' because he did not think she and her lover were proper Christians like himself.

The short poem 'Pascal' looks briefly at the life of the French mathematician, and theologian, who is best known as the author of the posthumous *Pensées*.

He graciously thinned his library, a rare act
For a scholar, dying with only two
Books in his home: nun-sister,
No wife, matched the ascetic martyrdom.

He jettisoned [...]
The classic tag, the tripping guide,
The heretic's braying brag. [...]

He died bare and joyful, at the unslanted source –
Heaven's Word and the Hippo chronicle. (AM, p. 44)

This poem may be an expression of how its author would like to die, stripped to the bare bones of his faith and happy. This, like the reference to the 'sea of glass' in 'Island Contrasts', seem to indicate high points to Clemo's spiritual quest. Pascal's belief in knowledge of God by personal experience would appeal to Clemo, as would the Jansenist idea of divine grace, but it is unwise to take the apparently factual information in the poem at face value, and this applies to

Clemo's other poetic portraiture. These are less objective than he claims.

Pascal is reported to have spent his last years in scientific research and good works.⁶⁹ This does make it seem strange that he should have reduced his library to just two books. Unfortunately Clemo rarely gives the sources for his information. He had to depend on books available in Braille (and he does not appear to have used any Braille transcription services), and information gleaned by his wife's reading of religious publications and his own memory of perhaps early readings of biographies. This may allow for a freely re-imagined interpretation of peoples' lives.

The poet, like the painter or sculptor, is able to present his portraits as representations of his own interpretation of the character. The truth may be presented as a distortion of the apparent reality, as found in the work of modern and abstract artists. The works possess a shape-shifting quality. The reader's perception of a character can be modified by the writer's perception, and either may be right or wrong, but somehow the character gains a new dimension, a new life in a world removed from the original.

The Move to Weymouth

The move to Weymouth appears to have widened Clemo's imagination and led him to further develop the Romantic side to his poetry, first revealed in a visit to Dorset with Monica Hutchings, and the Lakes in the company of Mary Wiseman. The role of the feminine, from his mother, his girl-child playmates, then his female correspondents, appear to have played a most dominant and influential roles in Clemo's life. In his religious thinking and in his poetry, women have helped him modify his ideas. From the youthful

⁶⁹ *Encyclopædia Britannica*, viii, p. 780.

Eileen who turned him from his hatred of nature and to review his thinking about his harsh religious ideas, to the art teacher, Mary Wiseman, who introduced him to the work of more modern poets, and to a wider knowledge by overcoming his resistance to learning Braille. When he went to Weymouth it was to live in his wife's old home with her sister, so there were two women to share the task, no doubt often demanding, of looking after him.

His wife had brought him back to shared worship at chapel and other religious services, and enabled him to finally begin to overcome his sense of isolation and separation. With her he enjoyed the pleasures of visiting more beautiful places than the hard clay world into which he was born. She acted as his interpreter, communicator and guide in his interaction with others, although it appears from a close reading of Clemo's autobiographies, that visitors spent more time talking to his mother and wife than to him. This suggests that they were influential in the way that others perceived him. In a letter to his friend, the poet and fellow nonconformist, Brian Louis Pearce, Clemo wrote in 1989: 'Feminine suggestion *can* be helpful. Ruth never attempts any strictly *literary* criticism of my work, but she sometimes dislikes a word I've used and tells me to substitute one that sound less crude or is less likely to give a wrong impression!'⁷⁰ This indicates Clemo's reluctance to acknowledge the contributions his wife made to the descriptive elements in his verse, as she constantly detailed their surroundings.

The new friends, and the Dorset connections of his wife enabled him to explore new places, and these led to the changes in his work, found in this collection. The most significant friendship to occur with the move to Dorset was with the Russian Orthodox priest, Fr. Benedict Ramsden, and his family. A long time admirer of Clemo,

⁷⁰ Brian Louis Pearce, *Clemo the Poet: Study and Colloquy* (Twickenham: Magwood, 2002), p. 46.

Ramsden had looked for him in Cornwall, and had been given Clemo's Weymouth address in 1985. Ramsden was instrumental in arranging Clemo's two visits to Italy and he and his wife and children accompanied the Clemos on both occasions. For Clemo the visits were of particular significance because of the connections with Browning found in Venice in the first trip, and Florence in the second. Browning had a life-long talismanic power for Clemo. His courtship of EBB at Wimpole Street had fired Clemo's youthful fantasies of marriage and escape from his constraints in Cornwall, as he looked for a female liberator in the Browning model. That Ruth Peaty, who he married, should contact him on the anniversary of Browning's wedding, confirmed his belief in what he termed 'the Browning pattern'. The Clemo wedding and their first visit to Italy also took place in October, the month of the Browning wedding.

Part Five – Seven Poems on the Visit to Venice.

There are seven poems about the visit to Venice in the fifth part of the collection. These are autobiographical and give a day by day, diary account of activities.

'Festal Magnet' is first:

An unjolted glide across Europe [...]

... a water taxi [...]

... in the swell

Of the cool Adriatic, then the lap

Of a canal soothed me (*AM*, p. 56).

The emphasis in the first stanza is on movement, on the bodily sensations experienced in different forms of transport. For the deafblind individual, touch and movement are the primary modes of sensory experience, and Clemo refers frequently to movement in *Approach to Murano*. While walking is often described as plodding, movement on water suggests greater comfort and pleasure.

My mind [...] was firm and detached

From the ill turns of local history. [...]

I did not climb [...]

To track these dark phantoms, but to contact

The soil and climate in which my faith

First reached into poetry, rich with Italian colour

Through Browning's pen. (AM, p. 56)

In the second stanza he lists those characters he does not intend to speak about, and then states his purpose for the visit in the third. It was the characters portrayed in Browning's work that so stimulated his imagination, enabling him to envisaged a richer and more colourful world than he knew in Cornwall. They also offered the possibility of escape from what seemed like his harsh fate.

In Venice I feel again the dawn

Spread from Pippa's Asolo [...]

And the Arezzo crest, Pompilia's vision

That showed my goal beyond the clay sickness.

St. Mark's now sanctions them all; [...]

My clues thrive, more daringly festal,

Confirmed in their own land. (AM, p. 56)

The fourth stanza gives a list of people and places found in Browning's work. This may be a device to demonstrate his knowledge of Browning's poetry, just as the list in the second stanza may be to show his knowledge of literary history. Without sight and hearing Clemo was probably using the characters to connect to a strange environment he had only ever imagined and to validate the experience. He may have used them to orientate himself in the place of visual information. The subjects and events he refers to may well be more significant to the speaker than to the reader, unless the reader too is a Browning enthusiast or scholar. The challenge of describing an unknown, unseen place must be formidable, especially as all information about his surroundings has to be given as letters printed on his palm.

The final stanza says that whatever the outcomes for events and people mentioned, it is God, symbolised by St. Mark's cathedral, which legitimises them all. This is the speaker's equivalent of the line in Pippa's song in *Pippa Passes*.

God's in his heaven –

*All's right with the world.*⁷¹

'Palazzo Rezzonico' is an account of a visit to the place where Browning died.

Was there ever, in medieval Italy,
A more incredible wizardry? [...]
Air-flight at seventy-one, till the unclayed body
Boarded a gondola at Venice. (*AM*, p. 57)

As a deafblind person, the speaker seems delighted with the new sensations found in air and gondola travel. The term 'unclayed body' suggests that he feels free of the past in Cornwall. It can also indicate that he feels the self in Venice is distinct from the self in England.

Canal-veined city: its golden heart now beats
Congruous to my new destiny, [...]
I sense, in this enchantment, [...]
...the gain
Of a soul's voyage to the point furthest out
From its natural source and scent
And landmarks of a home-taught brain. (*AM*, p.57)

⁷¹ Browning, *Poems*, Vol. One, p. 311.

In the second and third stanza the speaker uses physical symbols to represent the emotional and intellectual distances he has travelled since his youth.

Back in Cornwall, [...]

My Bridge of Sighs was an unfenced plank

Above the clay-slime, [...]

The Bridge of Sighs, as an 'unfenced plank', is a metaphor for the speaker's early sufferings and difficulties to which he so often returns. There is the sense that there was always an imminent danger of falling into the clay-slime and being lost. An unfenced plank, which breaks so that those crossing fall into the bog beneath, is found in one of Clemo's very early dialect stories written in the thirties.⁷²

What saved the speaker from such a fate is his belief in the Browning pattern, the conviction that his life will repeat the same kind of romance found by Browning and Elizabeth Barrett at Wimpole Street, and that he will enjoy a similar blissful marriage (Browning's long widower-hood appears to be disregarded).

The final stanza refers to the painting on the ceiling in one of the palace rooms. That it should show an allegory of marriage has significance to the speaker, seeming to confirm perhaps, the happiness of his own marriage.

I clung, by stubborn grace, to the alien

⁷² Clemo, *Bouncing Hills*, p. 22.

Glitter of the Browning pattern

Which closed here, [...]

...in a frescoed palace.

Wedding allegory on a ceiling

Spills clues to the room of homage (*AM*, p. 57).⁷³

'Late Honeymoon' is a love poem celebrating the Clemo's marriage. Clemo saw the visit to Venice as the honeymoon they were unable to have when they first married. The poem is in six quatrains, with mostly half rhymes ending the second and fourth lines. Clemo may have felt that the significance to him of a late honeymoon demanded a more formal structure than the other poems in this collection, which are mostly in free verse. In the first stanza the speaker's wife looks at 'the winged golden lion / Mellow in St. Mark's Square'. The lion, the symbol of St. Mark, is an iconic image frequently found in Venice. In the second stanza the wife observes her husband feeding the birds in the square.

Doves make my raised arm a loaded branch;

Eager beaks peck seeds off my palm (*AM*, p. 58).

Here the speaker becomes an icon himself, caught in a pose similar to that used to portray St. Francis. This suggests that he thinks his

⁷³ Palazzo Rezzonico was closed when Clemo and his party visited, but a letter from Exeter University gained them entrance. The date of the visit was 26th October, the nineteenth anniversary of Clemo's marriage. See: Clemo, *Marriage of a Rebel*, p. 173.

wife sees him as an icon, as her literary lion, perhaps. The final line of the stanza, 'And she feasts through the seeds in a psalm', is puzzling. A number of images come to mind; perhaps it is the admiring wife gazing at her husband and forming part of a picture found within the initial letter of a psalm in an illuminated Bible, or as a Ruth figure in the gleaning fields, seeing her future husband Boaz as the threshed seeds fly into the air. The birds are pigeons, common in cities, but here they are described as doves, a symbol of both peace and love.

The third stanza declares that:

Italy's joy crowns an English faith

Which no ponderous school discusses. (*AM*, p. 58)

This suggests that the faith that has brought the couple to Venice is lived rather than intellectualised.

The speaker goes on to say that his life has always been 'prison or palace', 'biting iron fetter or a banquet...', contrasting his life before and after marriage and recalling the tribulations of his early life. The fifth stanza refers to those who were ordered to walk into prison by the Doge, but the couple in the poem are jailed first, and then released into 'this honeymoon hall'.

The final stanza is a joyous celebration of the speaker's late honeymoon.

It's in our soul and it holds all Venice –

Rialto market, gondola, arch,

Grove-dusked islet and soft lagoon,

And the bell-blithe hive of the church. (AM, p. 58)

'San Lazzaro' is about a visit to the island occupied by Armenian monks whose monastery contains libraries, a museum, once had a printing press, and has fine gardens. It is also associated with Lord Byron, who wrote about his visits there and their purpose in his letters.

Byron began visiting San Lazzaro at the end of 1816, travelling there in his gondola in the mornings. (He never stayed there). On his visits he studied Armenian, helped a monk with work on an English/Armenian dictionary, and translated some *Epistles* written by St. Paul that were unknown in England.

At that time Byron had lodgings with a Venetian merchant whose wife, Marianna Segati, was his mistress.⁷⁴

Byron's isle! Odd contrasts:

Flighty palms and the warm suck of tides

Almost at the harsh door

Of the Armenian monastery

Where a printing press, trapped and greased

On the penitents' dry floor,

Spins at times, in solid irony,

Leaves of *Childe Harold*, bound for the English tourists.

⁷⁴ Lord Byron: *Selected Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand (London: Pimlico, 1993), p. 137.

Perhaps the speaker is drawing more on the palms and tides found in Weymouth than on the island in a lagoon. The palms in the poem may stand as symbols of real love and the sucking tides as symbols of sinful temptations.

The text suggests that the monastery was a place of penitence rather than a place of learning, and the term 'harsh' suggests punishment for sin. It was originally a place of refuge, so could be seen as a refuge from sinful behaviour on Byron's part. Byron's collaboration on an Armenian and English dictionary and his translation of some letters by St. Paul could be interpreted as acts of penitence, but the poem gives no indication that the speaker is aware of these historical facts. In Byron's day, and for some time later, the printing press produced scholarly Armenian works and would have used a script unsuitable for printing *Childe Harold*. Clemo is imagining an event that appeals to him, but did not happen.

The language of the opening stanza does suggest restraint and entrapment, and perhaps the speaker does like to imagine Byron as restrained, penitent and living a celibate life.

Cowled monks will labour, praying for the soul

Of the satyr-bard who lodged here

Without a mistress, wooed by a viceless peace.

But I stood in his bedroom and felt nothing

Except this was not my Venice. (AM, p. 59)

The room being referred to here is probably the library room where Byron worked and studied in the mornings, and possibly a couch has been interpreted by touch as a bed. The term 'satyr-bard' signifies deep disapproval of the speaker's subject. He is distancing himself from Byron's sexual activities. The speaker feels nothing when standing in Byron's room except that the place does not fit his idea of Venice. There is a sense of alienation from, and rejection of Byron, and all he is thought to stand for in the speaker's mind.

Give me the Doges' symbol, the marriage ring [...]

I have thrilled to the ordered heaving

Near the nuptial fresco that drew Browning

From Camberwell, and now makes Weymouth palms

Part of the fertile answer

To the cold exile bed on San Lazzaro. (*AM*, p. 59)

In this poem there are again two poets, Byron and Browning, being contrasted with one another, with Byron falling short of the qualities found in Browning. The value of a happy marriage, like that of Browning and Clemo, is balanced against Byron's broken marriage and numerous sexual encounters, and underpins the poem.

Clemo's Personal Construction of Other Lives.

Like most of Clemo's poems about historical characters, this is presented in a very matter of fact manner, as if it is historically correct. But this is a work of the imagination, a fantasy, a rewriting of aspects and events in Byron's life. 'San Lazzaro' is a good example of

an imagined, fantasy construction of someone's life events that show little resemblance to well documented evidence.

Clemo's wife may have failed to give an accurate description of the environment of the island and its buildings, or she may have been given inaccurate information about Byron's visits. Deafblind people depend on others for information, and the manual communication systems, particularly print on palm, are laborious, and misinterpretations can occur.

Clemo could have asked for Byron's published letters and papers to be transcribed into Braille, and these would have told him what Byron was doing when visiting the island, and of his life in Venice, but such facts would not fit the poem. It is possible that Clemo felt that his deafblindness allowed him a great deal of licence in his work. Free from the restrictions of seen and heard knowledge of the world, he may feel that his imagination was quite free to re-invent peoples' lives in the way he felt was right, in the way that painters and sculptors may interpret their sitters as discussed earlier. In the poem Byron stays on the island, sleeps there, and is escaping from vice. In fact Byron went there in the mornings, returning to Venice, his other activities and his mistress, in the afternoon.

By inventing new realities, Clemo moulds his characters to his own design. Charlotte Mew, who was petite, becomes a dwarf, Byron, with his addiction to sex, becomes a penitent satyr-bard living a celibate life in a monastery. Browning, the talismanic husband and poet, is drawn to a painting in his youth that he probably only saw in his widower-hood, in his son's home.

Clemo may have thought that his representations were truer than the facts, and his characters move, live and have their being within the poems very vividly. Such re-writings are common features of historical movies, books and plays, however much they may annoy the historians and pedants. For someone as profoundly deafblind as

Clemo, all events, all realities, exist within the mind, and the touch of the hand on a couch in an unseen room can easily become a touch on a 'cold exile bed'.

'San Lazzaro' may lead the reader to question the extent to which Clemo may have rewritten other lives in his many biographical poems. This poem is a presentation of an alternative reality, a legitimate poetic construct that is a somewhat blurred and distorted reflection of historical fact.

One problem with such an extensive rewriting of history occurs when it is used to support the speaker's own belief in the correctness of his own convictions. It can be asked if one person's truth can be proved by what many may consider a lie. Is it legitimate to make one artist a hero by maligning, or using false witness, against another, even in the name of poetic licence? Perhaps because Clemo can re-configure his environment to match his own ideas, without too much reference to reality, he feels free to re-configure other peoples' lives in the same way. Perhaps he even re-configures his own life, in both autobiographies and poetry, to fit the way he desires to present himself to the world. Autobiography, like biography, can be seen as another form of fiction. As Anderson points out, 'our exploration of autobiography also suggested a need to be sceptical about the claim that the personal can ever automatically guarantee authenticity'.⁷⁵ This suggests that the reader should exercise scepticism in accepting Clemo's heavily autobiographical writings as factual, when he is reconstructing his past from memory.

The poem 'Venice' attempts a description of a day in the visit to the city. It is the fifth in the diary like sequence and the speaker seems rather weary. 'I sleep or sit with my wife at a table', he says

⁷⁵ Anderson, p. 123.

rather mundanely in the first stanza, and in the second he seems to be struggling to express himself.

...I am not sucked back
From Heathrow hubbub to a stale serenade
Frail in an aesthetic glut. My legs ache
After climbing tiers of steps to bridge-tops (AM, p. 60).

The wording seems awkward and flat here, as if the speaker is struggling to express himself. The speaker emphasises the common experience of legs aching from climbing stairs, so he is tired of walking around places he cannot hear or see, but trying to make the best of it. Some revision might have helped, or he may really want to say how exhausted he is.

The final stanza, with its return to Browning as subject, regains some vigour.

Renaissance palaces and the bones
Of St. Mark are not offended
By the modern canal transport, for that too
Moves within the spell. It carried me
To Rezzonico grandeur: a touch on the wall
Showed, still abreast, my literary lion,
Assured as the carved grin at the Arsenale,
And greeting the unseen as I shall do. (AM, p. 60)

In the final stanza it is not clear why the modern canal transport is described as not offending the unfeeling palaces or St. Mark's bones, but Clemo often attributes human characteristics to inanimate objects. The speaker feels the water transport system is a part of the magic, the enchantment of Venice, particularly as it is the means by which he visits the place where Browning died.

The last line, which has Browning 'greeting the unseen' as the speaker will do, is from Browning's final book, *Asolando*, where he writes:

No, at noonday in the bustle of man's work-time

Greet the unseen with a cheer!⁷⁶

Obviously the blind speaker must always 'greet the unseen with a cheer', but that is a superficial interpretation. Browning was in all probability talking about greeting death and the after-life with a cheer, a sentiment in keeping with his optimistic nature. The speaker, now in his seventies, is acknowledging that he too will die, hopefully perhaps, with the same cheerfulness as Browning.

The final stanza is much stronger and more rhythmic than its predecessors. The speaker is more confident, more assured as he returns to the magical qualities of his journey, and to its association with his literary lion, Browning.

Being unable to see or hear for himself, the deafblind Clemo has to draw on visual and auditory information that his wife, or another, gives him, then combine it with his own kinetic experience of his bodily sensations of climate and movement. To enhance the

⁷⁶ Robert Browning, *Asolando* (London: Smith Elder, 1890), p. 157.

experience, he then draws on his literary knowledge and references, and his personal emotional responses to them, to try to create a poem that will impact on his readers. By the time of his first visit to Venice, Clemo had not heard speech for over fifty years, or seen anything but thick mist for thirty, so his attempts over the years at descriptive verse are remarkable in their use of sight and sound.

In 'A Slant from St. Mark's', the speaker takes a retrospective view of his creativity in its early stages, and moves from the ancient Cathedral in Venice to the nineteenth century Cathedral in Truro, Cornwall.

Those Turkish domes, cool for six days,

Catch the sun's blaze at last. [...]

But now

Someone shares the interior with me,

Probing Crusader spoil and the friendly

Legitimate splendour of jewels and carved stone.

We entered the incense cloud [...]

And abruptly the scene spun personal meanings,

Ebb and rekindling of art within faith (*AM*, p.61).

He is accentuating the importance of his faith in relation to his creativity.

I knew creative heat in Cornwall
As white glare on deformed sand, not domes,
Yet I found a shift while Europe smouldered,
Its culture tarnished and war-sick.

There it stood, the bland cathedral, [...]
...sleek by the Kenwyn,
Delicate and modern, having no history
Of medieval romance. But as its spires
Twinkled I shaped my affirmation, [...]
Taking my notes for my tale's end
Beyond clay, a flotsam love's arrival. (*AM*, p. 61)

The third stanza suggests that the glare on white sand stimulated his creativity, but this can be a result of the enhanced visual perceptions and distortions that occur in some eye conditions, when bright light causes a kind of strobe effect, or creates coloured haloes or mists around objects. These may well stimulate the creative imagination, particularly in the strange lunar landscape of the clay-tips with their mica sparkle. White and glare are paired together in other poems, perhaps because the glare caused by light falling on white is not easily forgotten by those with some eye diseases. The speaker seems to think that his creative work was of greater importance than the war that was tearing Europe apart at that time, indicating rather grandiose ideas about his writing.

The movement in the final stanza to the 'bland cathedral' seems too abrupt. The speaker is presuming that the reader will understand the references to the unnamed cathedral and his 'tale's end', which seems a rather arrogant assumption. The 'tale' is in fact Clemo's first published novel, *Wilding Graft*. Towards the end of the book the hero and heroine meet, after a separation, or a drifting apart like flotsam, in Truro Cathedral. This suggests a happy ending to the story that can be seen as symbol of Clemo's conviction that he would eventually marry.

The final poem in the collection is 'Ring and Pen', a title rather obviously deriving from Browning's major work, *The Ring and the Book*. In this poem the pen is a gift from the speaker's wife on their engagement. It is associated with the ceremonial ring thrown into the sea by the Doge of Venice to symbolise the marriage of the city and the sea.

...centuries later

A betrothal pen struck an echo. [...]

In a stately gondola treading the Grand Canal, [...]

In Browning's death-room [...]

I fingered the slim hard bulge

In my holiday coat. My faith's hard outline

Taking Venetian colour as she pressed me,

Made my heart swell, made the pen dearer,

Its labours vindicated.

Then a tremor of chill dismay [...]
...for my pocket was empty.

Tides bore the Doge's dropped ring
To the fish's mouth, [...]
But my recorder, our engagement trophy ...

...gold glittered suddenly. [...]
...The lovers' pledge
Was usable again (*AM*, pp. 62-63).

This seven-stanza poem might seem to give too much importance to a quite trivial event, the speaker's mislaid pen, but it is not trivial to the speaker. He sees the pen as symbolic of the mystical union between himself and his wife, just as the Doge's ring symbolises the union of Venice and the sea.

The speaker's constant fingering of the pen, 'the slim hard bulge', has phallic overtones, but for the deafblind speaker, it may simply be a means of confirming the reality of his marriage, and the significance to him, of the visit to Murano and to the place where Browning died. The 'hard outline' of his wife as she presses close to him seems to play a similar or complementary role. For a writer the pen is always a symbol of creative work, and the speaker claims its very presence vindicates his literary efforts.

This poem, like others, refers to doves, a romantic term for city pigeons, and to bells, and both are common symbols for marriage. Clemo is thinking symbolically, as he often does, and ordinary events

become charged with meaning. To lose or mislay the pen could signal the threat of losing a partner or his creativity, something that might threaten him at the deepest level. His constant recollections of an unhappy past seem to indicate that he is not the most secure person. His wife and his late marriage are of great significance, and in this poem he refers to his wife as 'my faith'.

While the wide range of people and places found in this collection reflect the broadening of Clemo's interests since his move to Weymouth, they do not alter his habit of contrasting and comparing people, both to each other and himself. His tendency to use self praise in his poetry, while denigrating others, seems lacking both in compassion and an awareness of human nature with all its weaknesses. It may simply be, as said in Chapter One, his way of compensating for a deep seated self-loathing and lack of security. Nonetheless, it can incline the reader to question the genuine depth of Clemo's much vaunted Christianity. One might wonder if Clemo has taken on the role of the harsh, punishing and destroying deity found in *The Map of Clay*, by condemning so many other artists who do not measure up to his ideas probity and virtue.

Chapter Three

The Cured Arno

Jack Clemo's final collection, *The Cured Arno*, was published posthumously in 1995, the year after the poet's death. The title refers to the second visit that Clemo, with his wife, Ruth, and Fr. Benedict Ramsden and his family, made to Italy in September, 1993. Clemo was seventy-seven at the time.⁷⁷

Clemo seems to be using the Arno as a metaphor for himself, for his ego. In his poetry Clemo deals with the deep divisions and conflicts he finds within himself, many seeming to stem from the traumas of his childhood attacks of blindness, his very individualistic religious beliefs, and his need to reconcile the spiritual and aesthetic experience. In the Prefatory Note, Clemo writes that

my Italian visits gave me a symbol that illuminated even those poems which have no connection with Italy. The cured Arno may represent the cured ego, and sometimes I have only shown the situation that needed cure. Dante only knew his river in its sick state. It was later "cured" of its erratic and treacherous behaviour... The river image was apt for my purpose, whether I wrote about the *Titanic* disaster, which cured an earlier generation of its blind trust in mechanical progress as the key to a safe world, or about my late marriage which cured my warped and bleak isolationism.⁷⁸

This pretty devastating self-analysis may have arisen as a result of the personal insights he has gained in his work found in previous

⁷⁷ Jack Clemo, *The Awakening: Poems Newly Found*, ed. by John Hurst, Alan M. Kent and Andrew C. Symons (London: Francis Boutle, 2003), p. 14. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses after quotations in the text, where the title is abbreviated to *Awakening*.

⁷⁸ Jack Clemo, *The Cured Arno* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1995), p. 9. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses after quotations in the text, where the title is abbreviated to *CA*.

collections. Perhaps, in his middle seventies, he has begun to understand the extent to which his 'warped and bleak isolationism' has coloured his portraits of other artists, and allowed him to transfer his own deep-seated conflicts onto those he seems to despise. He may even have begun to recognise this was a reflection of his own self-loathing, his guilt over his tainted, pagan Clemo heritage, while asserting that his religious convictions had enabled him to overcome his ancestral legacy.

These conflicts are represented by the Arno with its tendency to destructive flooding in winter, then becoming a stinking dried bed in the summer, as Clemo understands it was in Dante's day and in later years. Clemo thought the river had been 'cured' of these tendencies in modern times, just as he had been 'cured' of his destructive tendencies by his late marriage. But the 'cure' of the river came about from the application of modern scientific, engineering, and management methods. These are not infallible as the destructive floods in the 1980s attest to, though Clemo may have chosen to disregard these events, or may not have learned of them. It is hard to understand how Clemo can compare the engineering of the river with his 'cure' by marriage. Perhaps he thought that God had engineered his marriage to give him a form of spiritual healing. His rather idiosyncratic Christian beliefs do seem to give God a direct role in intervening in human lives, which can be seen as a form of spiritual engineering.

Dante is a new figure in Clemo's pantheon, found in two poems that will be discussed later, appearing in this final collection. Dante may have stood as a representative of an older way of thinking, or in his attachment to the very young lady, Beatrice, as a representation of the younger Clemo with his fascination for and emotional attachments to pre-adolescent girl children. Clemo may also have wished to ally himself with such a major figure in European literature to validate his work in this collection.

Clemo, who died at seventy-eight, could have thought this book was to be his last, and therefore may have felt it important to show an awareness of his personal faults and the means of their correction, or curing. He probably also felt it important to emphasize his conviction that faith in God brought rewards, particularly in marriage. He continues to comment on society and the faults he perceives in it.

The Cured Arno maintains the story of one man's spiritual journey or pilgrimage in pursuit off a cure, not for ills or afflictions of the flesh, such as his deafblindness, but of disorders of the spirit and the soul. Even though he feels that marriage has cured him of warped thinking, the poems show him wrestling with the early life traumas that persist even in this, his final collection.

The collection is divided into three parts and the Publisher's Note states it is presented in the form that Clemo wished, but with the addition of the opening poem, 'Quenched', that had been found at the back of an exercise book. This poem was written in May, 1994, on a final visit to his old cottage at Goonamarris (CA, p. 6).

In the previous chapters most of the poems were discussed in the order found in each collection, but in this chapter they are grouped into three sections; portraits, places and events, home and marriage, and the second visit to Italy. This is because these poems seem to portray his development both as a poet and a person when writing about these subjects.

Portraits, Places and Events

In the introductory note Clemo refers to the *Titanic*, and this is found in the poem 'Voyages'. Clemo had no doubt read Thomas Hardy's poem, 'Convergence of the Twain', about the same event.

In 'Voyages' the speaker reflects on the technological and industrial progress in the early twentieth century, and sees it offering a false hope and sense of security as symbolised by the sinking of the *Titanic*.

Power had been thought infallible
In shipowners, shareholders, blandly claiming:
'Our vessel is unsinkable'.

I write this eighty years later,
Merely hoping that the ship's string band
Kept enough soul to send the hymn-tune soaring
Above the exploding boiler.

The hymn's truth fixed my class (CA, p. 17).

The poem seems to infer that it is the courage of the *Titanic*'s band that triumphs over the failure in engineering design, and religious faith in general that wins over 'slick machinery'. While no one is certain what it was that the band played as the ship finally sank, many believe it to be 'Abide With Me', and this would fit with the speaker's belief in the triumph of faith over material science.

The poem 'Anne Brontë' concentrates more on its subject's attitudes to the troubles of her brother, and the waywardness and folly of the girl to whom she was governess, than on Anne Brontë

herself, or to her novels, both less well known than the other Brontë sisters and their work.

The opening lines describe Anne as:

Timid fawn of the moors, goaded to battle

Against Byronic vice and the soiled lectern. (CA, p. 24)

This suggests that all was not well in the Robinson family where Anne was a governess, and that there were betrayals of virtue and religion against which the subject of the poem protests. One pupil eloped unwisely.

Girl-bud brazen for copulation, [...]

Meek and hymn writing Anne

Awoke and almost fainted, aghast,

Till she scorched her dainty prayer book

With venomous insight, utter disgust

At the race that called itself human. (CA, p. 24)

Clemo's footnote states that Branwell, Anne's brother and a tutor in the house, had an affair with Mrs. Robinson, and her pupil eloped and had a disastrous marriage (CA, p. 24).

Clemo appears to be impressed by Anne's insight and he probably approved of her attitude towards the scandalous behaviour of her brother, her employer and her pupil. The text of the final two

stanzas suggests that she returned to her religious faith when she was dying. 'Anne's faith revived then'. This poem is another example of Clemo choosing to write about another rather obscure artist, this time the lesser-known Brontë sibling. The description of her pupil as 'Girl-bud, brazen for copulation' is another example of Clemo's fascination with child sexuality. There are two references to 'uncured' in this poem. In the first stanza the 'uncured self' relates to the hypocrisy in the Robinson household. In the fourth stanza Emily Brontë is described as 'Stoic, unchecked by evil', but this, the speaker says, is 'another form / Of uncured ego'. This suggests that the author thinks that the ego, including his, is turbulent and changeful if not controlled.

In 'Newman', the distinguished theologian, writer and poet, an Anglican priest who became a Roman Catholic and a Cardinal, receives little respect.

More bruised than a toppled Emperor,
The sick priest paced the deck, watched a distant
Shore-light at night. [...]

He was led by a higher gleam,
But always as a sad exile,
A misfit, target of church storms, [...]

Strange to us now, his wistful
Trust in the mercy of doubts,
His fear of a breezy passage

Through straits where song and laughter
Showed a faith beyond his austere hope (CA, p. 26).

It may have been strange to Clemo, but not necessarily to others. Newman was a life-long celibate, but the speaker in the poem seems to be inferring that his own 'breezy passage' within marriage takes the moral high ground.

Again Clemo appears to be letting the homilectic and personal nature of his poetic vision allow him to disparage others with whom he differs. The tendency to pass moral judgements on the subjects of his verse can be considered inappropriate and somewhat unkind, particularly as Clemo often chooses those who have poor health or some infirmity, but who many consider to be great. It also suggests a rather superficial view of his subjects, their work and their writing. Newman's intellectual ability and spirituality can be seen as far outstripping that of Clemo.

'Stourhead' is an account of a visit to the famous Wiltshire mansion with magnificent gardens that is owned by the National Trust.

I have crossed the eastern border
Into Wiltshire, chosen my emblems
From Stourhead rather than Stonehenge: [...]

A flight of chaste rock steps dropping down
From the nerve-centres, the ancient house,
The temple of Apollo, sleek, unjarred

By cheap discords; the shy grotto
Suggesting a secret vision;
Broad open lake glassing a clear heaven,
Its ducks peaceful beside the flagstones. (CA, p. 32)

Clemo chooses to use a pathetic fallacy in attributing human feelings to inanimate objects. This may indicate a suppressed tendency to hold animistic beliefs, which would not be entirely at odds with his belief in the supernatural. The clay world of his early poems is full of power and the godlike excavator occurs as a motif in later work.

Such grace of art and nature
Troubled me once, a half pagan shadow,
But, like the distant Arno's change
Through guided manipulation,
The Stour's source yields a hint of healing
Unknown to barren Stonehenge (CA, p. 32).

The source of the visual information about Stourhead may have come both from a guide and from his wife, and Ruth Clemo was well practised in describing the environment to her husband, especially the parks that they enjoyed visiting. The comment that such classical-based buildings and landscape had once disturbed the speaker, show how very far he has moved from his early austere opinions on such matters.

Stourhead, and the river Stour, have become symbols of healing and regeneration like the Arno, while Stonehenge represents the barren and harsh past. Clemo appears to have developed over many years an urge to encourage others to see and appreciate a beauty in nature and buildings that is physically closed to him, but which he shares through the eyes of his wife and others who may guide him.

The gardens at Stourhead are carefully designed and display both agricultural knowledge and science. They also include examples of architectural and sculptural art with managed water features. This does suggest the 'cure' can come through technological intervention rather than inner or spiritual reformation. Perhaps Clemo thought that the reformed mind led to the positive or 'guided' use of technologies, and this allowed him to apparently contradict his ideas about the destructive results of science.

He can appear to hold conflicting ideas about some subjects, so in these late poems there is the good science that results in beautiful gardens, or river management, and the bad science that results in the *Titanic* sinking. On the other hand it may be the faith in science to which he objects, as opposed to faith in God. This conflict can be found in other poems being discussed.

'George Müller' is a poem about another of Clemo's Christian heroes. A footnote says that Müller, who 'was a lecherous German student before his conversion, became the most remarkable Christian philanthropist in Victorian England. He built and maintained five orphanages at Ashley Down, relying entirely on faith and prayer, never advertising or appealing for funds' (CA, p. 35).

Before he yielded, reached the Teign

And Keats's shade, there was a kinship

Between wafted poet and plodding, prose-burdened

student. (CA, p. 34)

The juxtaposition between 'wafted poet' and 'plodding prose-burdened student' is strange as Keats had studied medicine, a hard and demanding discipline even in the early-nineteenth century, and served time on the wards of Guy's Hospital. Perhaps the words 'plod' or 'plodding' represent steady progress to Clemo. He uses the term frequently, even if it seems out of context, so he possibly approves of those he considered to be life's plodders and identifies with them.

Wand-waving, word-weaving, the pagan spell

Fierce under delicate fancies – these, for Keats,

Bred torments through the inspirer's caution or scorn;

[...]

He had once been jailed for petty crime

And dead drunk as Keats, [...]

The London poet seemed a sick moth, fluttering

To his grave in Rome and casting on the Teign,

The Exe, the Shaldon cottages,

The venom of a starved, orphaned dream. (CA, p. 34).

Clemo, with his own lifelong belief in the power of faith and prayer, and the ability of God to meet need, may have felt much in common with Müller. Yet he uses the poem to compare Keats unfavourably with the religious philanthropist, again denigrating another poet to enhance the reputation of a person who does not need it. To praise, in such a way, an obscure, though good, figure over a well known one does few favours for the writer or his subjects.

The picture of Keats is rather extraordinary, and makes one question the basis for Clemo's ideas about him. It does suggest, as do other poems about people, that Clemo had very limited access to good sources. Perhaps he relied on his remembered, youthful reading of very superficial magazine articles, or the information found in late nineteenth and early twentieth century publications.⁷⁹

Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopædia* was a favourite reading source, and Garnett's *International Library of Famous Literature*, bought for sixpence a volume in 1935 may have played a part, although he admitted dismissing anyone who had nothing in common with his thinking. He found the history of the aesthetes of the eighteen-nineties 'appalling'.⁸⁰ Indeed he seems quite disparaging of most Romantic nineteenth-century artists.

Müller's care for orphans while depending on God is socially beneficial, and the speaker in the poem appears to think this mitigates the wildness of Müller's youth. Any youthful excesses on the part of Keats are still held against him, perhaps because of his poor health, but the description of him as a 'sick moth' seems unkind, as does the description of his art as 'sick fancies'. Keats did nurse

⁷⁹ Clemo may have depended on the Braille books from the National Library for the Blind, rather than make use of the facilities offered specifically for blind students where more academic work can be found. He might have also used the facilities of the Torch Foundation, which lends Braille books with a Christian religious perspective.

⁸⁰ Clemo, *Confession of a Rebel*, pp. 60 & 125-8.

both his mother and his brother when they were dying of tuberculosis, the cause of his own death at nearly twenty-six.

Müller is praised for his faith in God, while Keats is denigrated, perhaps because the speaker thinks him lacking faith in God. Müller is 'Spurred by his Exeter wife, pregnant in Bristol', to care for orphans, while Keats is a moth 'fluttering / to his grave in Rome'. The two men are used as symbols, and while the information on Müller may be quite factually correct, the information about Keats is being re-imagined and slanted towards presenting him in a poor light, both as a person and an artist. This suggests that unconsciously Clemo is again transferring his own views about physical weakness or imperfection onto his subject. He seems to be continuing to displace his distaste at his own physical imperfections onto other writers, perhaps in order to feel better about himself. This trait appears to recur throughout his career, but it may also suggest that he never changed opinions formed when he was quite young that were based on the aforementioned limited sources.

The following poem, 'Ashley Down', is also about Müller.

The German Müller raised five towers by faith,

Shielding a horde of urchins. His raw mysticism, [...]

Tested eternity with unabashed prayers

For soap and treacle, sacks of potatoes,

Oatmeal, sugar, cans of milk. (CA, p. 36)

Müller has clearly become an important example of faith and belief in the providence of God. The items requested in the poem are very practical and provide for the bodies, not the souls, of the orphans.

Perhaps Clemo thought it best to keep prayerful requests fairly modest, giving God a good chance to fulfil them.

Salieri, the subject of the next poem, is used as an example of the consequences of praying for the wrong things.

He bargained with omnipotence:

He would forego the marital bliss,

Be strict and pious if heaven would make him

Creative in art, a great musician.

He fancied that heaven bowed to this: [...]

Until he heard Mozart. [...]

It is safer to be whimsical

About heaven's irony in the art world's

Gamut of gifts – to enjoy common comforts

While the high bargainers lose all. (CA, p. 37)

The message in this poem seems to be that people should not try to bargain with God, but be content with small gifts in the arts, and not aim too high. Perhaps this is why Clemo puts more emphasis on spiritual gains than on aesthetic ones. For him spiritual gains appear to include quite practical results. In Müller's case food is received, and in Clemo's case there is an end to his long celibacy when he gains a wife. He also gains a few of this world's honours too.

Clemo seems to base this poem on the idea of a conflict between Salieri and Mozart, as enacted in the 1979 play and 1984 film titled *Amadeus* that his wife could have told him about. Perhaps the focus on secondary artists, such as Salieri, is Clemo's way of admitting to, and exploring, a more realistic assessment of his own status.

'Jack London' is a poem about the short and difficult life of that writer, covering his childhood, his travels and experience of the Klondike gold-rush, then his success, marriage and child, and his final ending.

He felt the loud wall, the hot smear,
The sting of his child-labour's wages
And his mother's tongue. [...]

Slum-twist of the misbegotten,
Uncured by a faith, set the trail to a sorry end.
The rich artist preened in his mansion
Before the flames clawed it down, while the torn
Bride-bond had brought him his only offspring. [...]
There was a blind defiance, smell of liquor and ashes,
Then the white silence at forty. (CA, p. 54)

The implication in the final stanza is that London lacked the faith of the speaker, and was therefore doomed to a sad end. The last line

could also refer to the speaker, who also found himself in 'white silence' at forty as a result of his deafblindness.

Clemo may have thought himself 'misbegotten' like London, but saved due to his and his mother's religious beliefs, and 'cured' by his faith. He had called himself 'poor Caliban Jack' in a diary entry on his twenty-first birthday, having spent a sleepless night crying after a little tiff with the very young child, Barbara, with whom he played. In the same passage he states that soon after he had surrendered, [to the will of God], sure of 'divine mercy behind all the enigmas of Providence'.⁸¹ Perhaps the Caliban image of himself, derived from Browning's *Caliban upon Setebos*, had remained within Clemo's subconsciousness throughout his life. He might not have been fully 'cured' of being a misfit, despite his faith.

The poem 'Cloud Over Bugle' returns to the theme of modern science and its impact. A footnote explains that plans to build a nuclear power station were abandoned after mass demonstrations (CA, p. 43).

We know pollution in these parts: [...]

Stack-fumes fouling sunshine and mist,

White clay-dust clogging lawns and door-mats, [...]

But this would be worse, the sinister

Elaborate spell of the nuclear chamber, [...]

And the chilling fascination

Of the mute mushroom over Hiroshima.

⁸¹ Clemo, *Confession of a Rebel*, p. 141.

Must we taste, beside clay, the freaks of science
In new ways of maiming the unborn,
Planting cancer through radioactive air (*CA*, p. 43).

In some way the consequences of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima brought fears that using nuclear power, even for peaceful purposes, could result in similar effects, and damage unborn children. For Clemo the latter would have a real significance, as his own disabilities appear to have been the result of damage before his birth. The implication here is that nuclear science is 'bad' or 'wicked' science.

The poem 'T. E. Lawrence' is written in a ballad form of seven quatrains. It refers to a visit to Lawrence's 'crabbed Dorset hut' and reflects on his life.

You loved red barren sand,
Detesting marriage and St. Paul:
Even at your door I cannot understand
Such a creature's world at all. [...]

There was, of course, the fact
That your birth was illegitimate.
This must be said with tact:
It was, in your day, unfortunate. [...]

...Still, this house is empty,
Voiceless to me. I have no taste for a grope. (CA, p. 57)

The speaker is very clear that he can find nothing in common with his subject, even dismissing his as 'such a creature'. The reference to Lawrence's illegitimacy attempts a kind of pitying humour at both the condition, and the social stigma involved, at the turn of the century.

The speaker, whose deafblindness seems to makes him very sensitive to the atmosphere of a locality, finds the place empty. The unkindest words are the final ones. The speaker has no desire to touch anything, when touch is his main sensory contact with the world, indicating distaste for anything connected to his subject. There is a parallel in this poem with Clemo's views on Byron found in 'San Lazzaro'.

Home and Marriage

The first poem to be discussed in this section is 'Quenched'. As mentioned earlier, this was found in the back of an exercise book after Clemo's death. The poem recalls Clemo's final visit to his old home in Goonamarris.

I have returned in fitful spring rain
To the knot of hills that will never untwist
In trick lighting again, [...]
The hill-knot fantasy has been abolished (CA, p. 11).

The remaining text of this stanza makes it clear that the speaker is referring to the effects of the clay industry on the landscape. The lights on the buildings around the hills may have played tricks on the young observer whose sight was damaged when a child.

No current jabs at the clotting shadows

With strange hints of industrial magic.

Tip-flare, pit-spurt, tank-twinkle –

They thrilled me for years, but they have gone. [...]

I am glad I escaped this blow:

The clay fantasy blazed around my cottage [...]

But I avoid the house now:

Its dark night has no message for me. (CA, p. 11)

The final lines suggest that the speaker wishes to dissociate himself with from all physical manifestations of his past life, and perhaps also from his deafblindness that began in the house. His dependence on touch for communication seems to make him reluctant to make contact with what displeases him. There may also be a certain surprise at the way he feels about his old home. It is curiously similar to his feelings about Byron's bed and T. E. Lawrence's home. This seems to support the argument that Clemo uses displacement to reject his younger self in the same way that he judges and rejects people like Byron and Lawrence. The words, 'The clay fantasy blazed',

probably refers to the effect of light on the white clay landscape for him.

In 'Silver Wedding' the speaker affirms his faith in the Providence of God and the rewards for his spiritual beliefs.

We started cramped in a grey clay gut,
Midlife worn, though with a salvaging trust
In Providence; and, years ahead,
Rich palms appeared, broad white-ribbed beaches,
Enchanting as our destined touch of Venice, [...]

Our Weymouth sherry slides pure on the lips,
Cresting the mature pledge. (CA, pp. 18-9)

Clemo's wife had actually left the palms and beaches of Weymouth to live in Cornwall when they married, so the move to Weymouth was really a return for her. It is the faith and trust of the speaker and his wife in their religious beliefs that accounts for their marriage, its happiness, and their rewards as manifested by their visit to Venice. It is their spiritual progress that makes their destinies so much happier than those of 'men of word-pouring vision -- / Hardy, Hugo, Byron -- who were yet / Split, exiled from anniversaries...'

Once again Clemo compares himself favourably with great writers who did not have happy marriages. This makes him appear rather smug, but may only be a symptom of a deep-seated insecurity, perhaps even a fear that he will never be considered among the literary immortals.

Hugo is a new figure to appear in Clemo's pantheon. He may have been included in this poem because Clemo found his work, *Les Misérables*, to be one of the classics he read after the second attack of blindness, despite being told not to read by the doctors. Clemo wrote that the work was one that introduced him to a 'realistic, adult knowledge of the world' and 'the tragic overtones in life'.⁸² Hardy's novels would also have served to introduce Clemo to the harsh and tragic side of life. The linking of three important writers, Hugo, Hardy and Byron, may serve as examples of great men who had unhappy marriages in contrast to his own, perhaps because he feels that they are diminished because of it.

The reference to drinking sherry in the final two lines is surprising, as Clemo declares in the last line of the poem 'Diggings', in a collection of dialect stories and humorous verse, 'I was raised teetotal'.⁸³ Perhaps the move to Dorset has even changed a life time of abstaining from alcohol, or the event of his silver wedding allowed for an exception to be made.

'Dorchester Ward' is a poem referring to a period in hospital. This is likely to be the stay of 'several nightmare weeks' in 1992, when he had prostate surgery that he mentions in a letter to his friend, the poet Brian Louis Pearce, dated 15 June 1993.⁸⁴

My soul breathed a more genial air
Than that of average sufferers: I was nourished
Only by joy and the years of exemption
When no ill-wind cut to the heart. (CA, p. 50)

⁸² Clemo, *Confession of a Rebel*, p. 69.

⁸³ Clemo, *Bouncing Hills*, p. 96.

⁸⁴ Pearce, p. 53.

Here the speaker assumes a position over his fellow patients, though he can hardly know in what state of grace or joy they may be during that time. It is unlikely that any could communicate with him, so he would have depended on any observations being made to him by his wife.

This poem does suggest that despite his illness, which is being treated by medical science, he feels himself to be in state of grace. There is a sense that he is still something of a misfit, as he thinks he does not feel like the others in the ward. There is a note of smugness and self-satisfaction in the late poems, as if he feels he must convince his readers of his moral superiority.

Poems Associated with the Second Visit to Italy

'The Tower', draws on Browning's connections with the Italian landscape, the village of Asolo, and with the character Pippa, the silk winder, in Browning's *Pippa Passes*, and Browning's desire to build a Pippa Tower at Asolo. Pippa goes around the town on a day's holiday singing songs, including the one ending: 'God's in his heaven - / All's right with the world'.⁸⁵ In the footnotes to *Pippa Passes*, Pettigrew says the play was first published in 1841. Revisions were made in 1847 and there were also some later changes. Browning had fallen in love with Asolo on his first visit to Italy in 1838, and in later life he visited it several times. The main street is named after him.⁸⁶

In October 1889 Browning returned to Italy and Asolo, having sent the manuscript of his last collection of poems, titled *Asolando* in honour of the town, to his publisher, George Murray Smith. While travelling around Asolo on foot or by carriage, Browning saw a piece

⁸⁵ Browning, *Poems*, Volume One, pp. 297-343.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1069.

of municipal land with an unfinished building on it and resolved to buy it. He was very excited about the idea and decided that it should have a tower from which he could see Venice everyday and that he would call it "Pippa's Tower". At the end of that October Browning and his sister went to Venice to stay at his son's house, the Palazzo Rezzonico, where he died on December 12th.⁸⁷ While the potential tower would have allowed Browning to see Venice, he would not have been able to see Tuscany or the Arno from Asolo. The poem is titled 'The Tower', so has significance, which makes the speaker's geographical error quite strange, unless he confused it, deliberately or otherwise, with the tower at Pisa.

The first stanza begins with 'South of the Arno / The cheeky cicadas are shrill', setting the poem a long way from Asolo. In the second stanza the speaker says he can 'understand Browning's last whim, / planning a tower, a Pippa memorial / High on the crest of Asolo'. In the remaining two stanzas the speaker then goes on to imagine what Browning would have seen from the tower. Unfortunately, from Asolo he would have been unable to see 'sprawled Tuscan splendour', or the Arno valley. Nor would he have seen:

The unwearied river pushing into Florence,
Corrected and stately, entering the shadow
Of medieval stone visions, holy or grotesque
As lizard or cicada. (CA, p. 15)

⁸⁷ Iain Finlayson, *Browning: A Private Life* (London: HarperCollins, 2004), pp. 690-4.

The thrust of the poem is on Browning's impossible view in both his time and in the future. Clemo has rewritten lives and history in other poems, and now he is changing geography to suit his idea for a poem about Browning. The reader has to question the reason for this, and also ask why his wife felt unable to correct him. Perhaps neither felt it mattered, that it was the words of the poem and not the facts of geography that were important. Perhaps if death had not intervened the publishers would have questioned it, allowing Clemo to rewrite the poem. It is possible that Clemo felt there was no need to let an inconvenient geographical fact get in the way of the poem he wanted to write, though this again shows a tendency to arrogance. Because 'The Tower' was the original opening poem in the collection, until 'Quenched' was found, it makes the geographical error seem very odd. It does appear that no one felt able to question Clemo on the information found in his work, even if they knew it to be wrong. It is possible that because the tower existed only in Browning's imagination, that Clemo felt he could move it within his own mind from the Veneto to Tuscany and the Arno valley.

'Fever Zone' recalls a visit made to Vallombrosa while cicadas are being 'scorched to cinders' in southern Italy.

I will not celebrate dead cicadas, [...]

Fierce heat ends the grotesque chirps,

So loud and lovable, and as it saps

A human bliss too, I am fulfilled

Without the far south- [...]

Some tourists seek a fevered start

To a casual romance – [...]

For the brief leap, the sun-blared freedom. (CA, p. 27)

The cicadas symbolise people who allow the heat and sun in holidays to trap them into foolish romantic dalliances. This, the speaker infers, leads to them getting metaphorically burnt. He prefers the safety of more temperate zones, without any fleshly temptations. He implies that the relationship found in marriage is better than some casual, short term romance found on holiday.

This image of the burnt cicadas could have its origin in Milton's lines on the fallen angels in *Paradise Lost*, Book i., 302, but Clemo claimed to have found *Paradise Lost* unreadable, only admiring Milton for giving up poetry to write religious pamphlets, and finding comfort that he married when blind.⁸⁸

When being enriched by Italy

I stay in its temperate zones

Where cicadas don't get trapped by a long drought. (CA, p. 27)

The speaker possibly imagines himself crunching the burnt bodies of the insects, or sinners, underfoot if he were to go south. The poem is full images of heat, crowded places and jostling, burning bodies, while the narrator remains aloof, distant and removed from the masses.

⁸⁸ Clemo, *Marriage of a Rebel*, pp. 91-2.

'Journey North' is an account of a journey from Florence to Venice that was threatened by a rail strike. The title itself, and some lines in the poem, indicate that Clemo was aware that Venice is on the coast of Italy, and a long way from Florence and the Arno. This does make the geographical errors found in 'The Tower' very puzzling.

A fumbling rail strike started,
Threatening to leave us stranded
Amid costly tombs of Dante, Michelangelo,
Mrs Browning and other notables. (CA, p. 28)

The poem begins in quite a journalistic manner, though it should be noted that Dante is not buried in Florence like Michelangelo and Mrs Browning. Once again, no one has corrected this detail. Perhaps no one dares to suggest that the writer might be wrong, even his wife.

The Arno pulsed so blue and tranquil
That morning, a hot Sunday, and the breeze
Alerted stuffy corners with joyous bell-peels. (CA, p. 28)

The uncertainty is combined in this stanza with the stifling heat as the travellers feel 'clogged in crisis', and are relieved by the breeze from the river. Clemo is very aware of the weather, much of which can be experienced by touch and contact with the whole body. Weather, the press of his wife against his side, and movement within the environment are his most immediate sense impressions.

One daring train had not joined the strike,
And we caught it. Three hours of wonder
Glowed for us even in the tunnels
That hollowed the dark green Tuscan hills.
Rails had replaced some grapes and olives,
But we thanked heaven for the open way,
Sealing and healing a pilgrim purpose. (*CA*, p. 28)

The train is described as daring, when really it was the driver who dared to break the strike. Perhaps the speaker uses the pathetic fallacy because he understands inanimate objects to be the instruments of divine Providence. In this case, Providence ensures that the party can continue their journey to Venice.

We sped on in unshaken sun-blaze
Till the familiar dream islands glittered
And mundane threats no longer mattered. (*CA*, p. 28)

The movement of the train, through the countryside and through tunnels, and the journey being explained on his palm, seems to give real pleasure. The description of Venice appearing as dream islands is apt. The visual descriptions given by Clemo's wife seem to enable him to add both visual and auditory images to his poetry so that the reader might not know, from the work, that the artist is deafblind. His wife functions as much more than a human guide dog. She is also an

interpreter of the world around him. The last two stanzas seem less journalistic, perhaps because of the use of rhymes and half-rhymes like 'sealing' and 'healing', 'glittered' and 'mattered', and the alliterative 'pilgrim purpose'.

The title of the poem 'Headway', suggests progress and forward movement. The theme is the ancient conflict between Pisa and Florence that has long been resolved. The predominant images are the leaning tower and the river Arno. Pisa's tower has been supported and somewhat straightened through modern engineering, and the Arno does not flood as often as it did in Florence.

...brains grew alert

With engineering skill,

And the tower looks straighter today. [...]

In Florence you feel the depth

Of a trusted rhythm, the hour of repair

Turned timeless. [...]

No city now plots a raid

On its neighbour, only a valley's breadth distant. [...]

But the heart stays vulnerable, in flux,

Or prone to an off-centre pull. (CA, p. 31)

This is one of the few poems in which Clemo expresses open admiration for modern science, and also comments on social developments in an historical context.

It is quite a contrast to his comments on the Titanic found in the Note at the beginning and in the poem 'Voyages'. Perhaps Clemo felt that the engineers and scientists who managed the river, and worked on the tower in Pisa, had less blind trust in their skill than those who built the Titanic. Perhaps his travels during his two visits to Italy have broadened his mind and opened his thinking to wider issues beyond the parochial, the religious, and the narrow confines of his earlier life. But set against this, the last two lines indicate an awareness of the human condition, and how vulnerable people are to the feelings of the heart that cannot be imposed by human will or science. These lines display an unusual vulnerability, with the recognition of his shared human frailty. It is also quite a courageous admission.

'Casa Guidi' is an account of a visit to the home of the Brownings when they lived in Florence.

These pale blue walls look unperturbed,
Not robbed of essential treasure, nor drained
Of the vibrant magic that pierced me in Cornwall
With my first Browning pages, read in crisis. (CA, p. 46)

Here the speaker expresses very directly the debt he owes to Browning, not just to the poetry that showed him a more colourful world than he knew in Cornwall, but to the Browning marriage that he has taken as a model for his own. This poem could have been

discussed in the section on home and marriage, but it is placed here because it relates so directly to the Brownings and their life in Italy.

I am an odd shoot among this hollowed splendour –
A clot from among the workers, [...]
Under the cracked slates my raw quirks tallied
With his perception of divine truth
Growing more firmly lucid through an uncouth style. (CA, p. 46)

Here the speaker acknowledges that while his earlier style of writing might have been that of an uncouth and working class person, it still enabled him to work his way towards finding Browning's divine truth for himself. He may be referring here to the ideas found in *The Invading Gospel*, the statement of his religious and spiritual beliefs. This had been written under great difficulty, as he finally lost his sight completely, at the age of thirty-nine. His mother, who had never typed and was 'very doubtful about spelling', helped him, only perhaps typing out one hundred words in an hour.⁸⁹ As the book contains many quotes, including some from Browning, his mother must have found her task most demanding as she tried to find them.

The use of the term 'hollowed splendour' is puzzling. Perhaps he really meant 'hallowed' in the sense of it being a place he held as sacred to Browning, and the 'o' is a misprint, or just that the rooms, stripped of furniture, felt hollowed or empty. In the opening stanza the reader is told that the study and drawing room are neglected, but a fresco 'cancels the emptiness', so it is unlikely that the splendour is

⁸⁹ Clemo, *Marriage of a Rebel*, p. 89.

being thought of as empty. It could simply be that being deafblind, his footsteps on the floor of the empty room felt hollow.

Between the church chants and the Arno

His pen was turbulent, [...]

His tangle of key meanings, clues to God,

Led straight to the heart of my marriage.

Soon I shall stand on the balcony,

My wife's hand and mine on a roughly-carved cherub.

(CA, p. 46)

This is a direct homage to Browning whose life has great significance for Clemo, and this becomes enhanced by both visits to Italy. The speaker seems awed to be in the rooms once occupied by the Brownings. He attributes his own understanding of God to Browning's writing, and infers that Browning's 'truths' are central in his own marriage. The image of the speaker and his wife standing where the Brownings stood on the balcony, their hands on the cherub, an obvious symbol of love, is quite romantic. He is identifying with the love story that thrilled him in his youth, and led him in his mind, to his eventual marriage.

The poem 'Nutshell' recalls the second visit to Italy as he handles two chestnuts he has brought back to Weymouth.

My hand, rarely uncertain,
Dives to the wrinkled leathery skins,
Lifts from a drawer two hard brown chestnuts, [...]

These chestnuts had their season at Vallombrosa,
Swelling their limp shells in sub-tropical heat,
Or dripping in Tuscan rainstorms. [...]

I gather all these images
Of Italian river and forest [...]

There's a glad gain in measuring
Our trivial trophies against the ache
Of a vast, ever-flowing maturity. (CA, p. 49)

Chestnuts are very evocative of nature, the potential for new growth, and the pleasure found in handling and playing with the shiny spheres. They may symbolise the two visits to Italy, their touch bringing back memories of shared pleasures, safely kept within the mind. One could question if Clemo was totally unaware of the potentially lewd meaning in this poem, just as in the 'The Pen and the Ring' and even the grope in Lawrence's house. Perhaps these are a type of Freudian slip.

As the Arno stands as a symbol of the speaker, the third stanza suggests that he too is no longer capricious or out of control. He has

reached a certain maturity of growth, a position where he can safely take out his memories, examine them, and then return to their place, as in the fourth and final stanza.

The last few lines show the recognition that a lifetime's gains, be they published work, or the honours of being made a Bard or given a Doctorate, mean no more than the gathered chestnuts. Such things may indeed seem trivial at the end of the speaker's life, when he seems very conscious he is close to death and understands his mortality.

The final stanza includes two contrasting alliterations, 'glad gains' and 'trivial trophies'. Clemo quite often uses such poetic devices, along with rhyme or half-rhyme, near the end of a poem. This can be seen in 'Journey North', and in 'Cloud over Bugle' where the last line speaks of 'brides breeding in the pure breeze'. He seems to use the device like many people who play an instrument by ear do, (as he did when young), choosing to have a few good chords at the end.

'Fitting in' reflects on both Cornwall and Italy, is focussed on Florence, and features the rivers Camel and Arno.

A heave of the car and I am across the Camel

In a gaunt Cornish autumn, [...]

And soon I stepped bemused

Above an incredibly different river. (CA, p. 56)

The opening line conveys vividly the sense of sudden movement and change and the contrast between the two locations.

Nothing gaunt there: hot sunshine relaxed us [...]

Where Michelangelo's probing nude of David

Has ceased to shock English tourists.

Fingering a medieval stone buttress,

I felt myself a native of both worlds,

Cornish bleakness and Latin charm, [...]

I still ate English food in Florence;

I brought back works of Tuscan craftsmen

To adorn my English lounge: [...]

Neither by the Camel or the Arno am I split. (CA, p. 56)

In this poem the speaker asserts that he is no longer divided within himself, nor cut off from others wherever he may be. There are homely touches in the reference to eating English food, though it is hard to imagine Cornish pasties being available in Florence, or why he should chose not to eat Italian food. There is a certain pride too, in the buying of Tuscan goods for his lounge, as if this signifies his new cosmopolitan outlook, even though it does not extend to diet.

This poem expresses a climactic moment of wholeness in the body of his work. This is perhaps a testament to his 'cure', a sign that he is no longer divided, 'split' between the aesthetic and the spiritual, and separate from others. He no longer feels that he is a misfit. The

poem 'Nutshell', discussed earlier, also hints at this resolution. Perhaps he is foreseeing the end of his mortal journey and is content.

'Morning Call' also expresses a resolution in political and religious sectarian differences. A footnote to this poem says that Mikhail Gorbachev visited St. Mark's Cathedral, Venice, on 20th September 1993 (CA, p. 61).

Stubbornly non-political in England,
I had never breathed in a tent or hall
While a statesman of any brand breathed the same air.
It happened in Venice, in St. Mark's Cathedral, [...]

A crowd jostled outside, [...]
...eager to cheer the Moscow visitor
Who had striven to lift his people from a cold nightmare,
Soul-drained steppes, dead-eyed robot cities,
Into a morning of free speech and action.

Was my faith's fibre more at home there?
Would Bunyan have felt closer to St. Mark's
Than Lenin? I'm classed as heretic, [...]
...the Russian leader who was being shown
The Church's wealth, became conditioned,
As I did, by a broader concept

Of unity, transcending

A personal taste, party line or iron curtain. (CA, p. 61)

This poem demonstrates how far Clemo has travelled from his early restricted and narrow religious viewpoint, to a broad ecumenism and a tolerance for the differing means by which people express their faith. There is also the recognition of the impact of political belief systems on societies, and an awareness of the issues of the time. Despite his deafblindness, the speaker is in touch with the broad spectrum of human life, probably because his wife keeps him informed by writing the news on his hand. He also appears to be less detached from other people or events, wanting to know what is happening in the wider world. Like Gorbachev and his people, he has reached out beyond the confines of his particular heresies, his belief systems, to embrace a broader, more humane, vision.

Clemo includes St. Mark's cathedral in a number of his poems on Italy. Perhaps it had taken on talismanic properties for him, and become a symbol of the tolerant ecumenism he enjoyed as he and his wife joined in worship with others of different Christian faiths. This may not be entirely surprising, as he had written in his first autobiography when in his early thirties, that if he had discovered the works of Francis Thompson and G. K. Chesterton in his teens, he would have been drawn towards Roman Catholicism. 'My theological outlook was nearer to the Roman Catholic spirit', he wrote, 'than to that of current Protestantism'.⁹⁰

His poems on several Roman Catholic saints, and other figures from that faith, suggest a life-long leaning in that direction. He stresses that he is a heretic, suggesting that he feels either consciously or subconsciously, that his Protestantism, and early

⁹⁰ Clemo, *Confession of a Rebel*, p. 105.

loudly claimed form of Calvinism, is actually heretical. It is appropriate then, that the final poem in his last collection is titled 'Heretic in Florence'.

...This is not Geneva,
Where broken spirits took the divine graft
Clear of Churchdom, Papal patronage of art,
Soiled motives of the maker. I am a poet
Of Calvin's trend (CA, p. 62).

This poem seems to be a statement of the speaker's long held views on religion, art and artists. In this first stanza he refers to his early interpretation of Calvin's ideas and their influence on his work.

Creative minds may trespass, leave the soul
Dry as the Arno's bed that gaped each summer
Before Dante's day and even while da Vinci
Plotted to cure the unruly river
Which gushed, flagged, whimpered, turn to cadaverous

mud -

As art does when proudly scorning
Heaven's grace (CA, p. 62).

In this second stanza he appears to warn of what happens if artists let their minds wander from a concentration on God, so they behave like the Arno did, sweeping away truth perhaps, in their unguarded practices, or letting their art become perverted by self-will. It does seem a little extreme though, to dismiss the work of those whose religious and spiritual views differ from his, or who are atheists or agnostics, as 'cadaverous' or deadly mud. Such ideas dismiss a great deal of the world's art.

There were Florentine monks, [...]
Who showed the Virgin chaste on canvas
And hated rival painters who got more pay.
There were weaklings, swindlers like del Sarto,
Serving the Holy See, correct in technique,
Never inspired, drained by their pagan wives.
I was awed by towering Michelangelo
On his abnormal verge. I shrank from Dante
As he barred his wife out, let the idol phantom
Guide him to a classic paradise. (CA, p. 62)

Possibly because the speaker has never been able to see the work of any of the artists referred to, except perhaps in Arthur Mee's *Childrens' Encyclopædia*, he feels able to dismiss their work on too little evidence. Because he thinks their lives were less than moral, he derides their technical skill. He may even think that his own lack of technical skill and mastery of all poetical forms, will be forgiven

because of his morality. He may prefer this to having his artistic faults overlooked because he is deafblind.

The massively oversimplified comments on Dante suggest a lack of real knowledge of Dante's great and complex work. Virgil may guide Dante through Purgatory, but Beatrice guides him to Paradise. To call Virgil an 'idol phantom' shows a great misunderstanding, or more probably a lack of knowledge of Virgil, his times, and his place within the development of Christian theology. He may have classed Virgil with the 'idol shepherds' in the poem 'Broad Winter' about Spurgeon found in *The Map of Clay*, thinking that Dante was idolising Virgil. It is possible to wonder if 'idol' is a misspelling of 'idle', but this is unlikely. Clemo gave a prominent place to Dante in his Note at the beginning, so his dismissal of his work in this poem seems quite strange. Perhaps he thought that Dante's work, like the uncured river, was mud. While Clemo makes strong statements in his poetry, he often is commenting on very profound issues and serious works of art of which he has only a very superficial knowledge, and this can be seen as a weakness in his work.

How far can God's grace move the beholder

Of mere cold skill or twisted vision? [...]

The cured Arno sings in freedom. (CA, p. 62)

The final stanza questions the validity to the viewer, or the reader in relation to the literary arts, of work that is the production simply of skill. The suggestion here is that art produced by a passionate and emotional belief system, such as his, is preferable. Then, like the Arno, the artist can sing in freedom. The problem with this idea is that neither the song nor the singing may be very good.

Conclusion

Throughout his poetry, Clemo seems to be arguing that spiritual achievement is preferable to aesthetic achievement. Many of the poems provide a stage on which that conflict can be acted out between his chosen subjects. Examples of this can be found in 'A Choice about Art', featuring the artist Van Gogh and the preacher Oswald Chambers, in *A Different Drummer*, and the Christian philanthropist George Müller and the poet John Keats in 'George Müller' in *The Cured Arno*. Clemo sets many of his poems up as a stage on which he manipulates his subjects, making them perform to scripts he has devised without adequate research and a disregard for facts. This does tend to invalidate his work to some extent. Impartial and objective readers, who are not accepting of Clemo's agenda and religious bias may think he is trying to manipulate them and force them into accepting his premises as accurate, and this may well alienate them.

Browning is elevated to a kind of sainthood, and seen as a source of spiritual wisdom and guidance, while Byron, Hardy and others appear demonised. Browning's main poetic influence on Clemo can be seen in the use of the monologue, and sometimes in a borrowed form, as in 'A Calvinist in Love'.

While his religious views, and his attitude towards the spiritual, the aesthetic, and to disability, have broadened, it is his firm non-conformist belief in God's revelation to him and his mother as individuals, without the intervention of clergy or formal church practice that underpins his work. Yet many of the poems discussed in his last collection actually argue that human intervention, in the form of technological and scientific knowledge, brings a cure as it did to the Arno. Human intervention is acknowledged in the poem referring to the leaning tower of Pisa, and in Clemo's own life, there is

considerable human action. The influence of Browning's thought and marriage on Clemo's development, the support he received from C. Day-Lewis and people like Charles Causley, and the influence of his wife, are all the result of human action. While he may have felt better for people's prayers, faith healing did not cure his deafblindness, although medical intervention probably prevented him from losing his sight earlier than he did.

Clemo said his late marriage cured him of his 'warped and bleak isolationism' in his final Note, but this must have involved a great deal of action on his wife's part. She and his mother earlier were the ones who took care of him and his needs, and patiently spelled on his hand day after day, and led him around. Their faith may well have helped, as did his own, but none of it can be entirely attributed to belief and faith in God, or spiritual intervention. It can also be seen as a disservice to the many people who gave him generous financial and practical help throughout his life. His wife probably did not think that God did all the work.

Many of Clemo's poems can be seen to be testimonial, stating what God has done for the speaker and how faith in God brings rich rewards. The danger here is that he can be seen as preaching to his readers. To those who already share his views, he is preaching to the converted, but others may feel that Clemo's agenda is not to give aesthetic pleasure in an art form, but to change their way of thinking, even to convert them to his brand of Christianity, particularly in his early work. There seems to be too much emphasis on his own virtue, on his own faith, and not enough on God's greatness or mercy, as might be expected from one who thought of himself as a 'Bunyan type'. He appears to modify this approach somewhat in his later poetry, particularly in the last two poems discussed. Perhaps as they are the last poems in this collection, they can be seen as his final comment on the subject. He has found reconciliation within himself, in both spiritual and aesthetic terms.

What decisions Clemo came to in his attitude to disability, be it of his own or others, is less clear. Perhaps the most important point is that he made the most of his talents in the development of his poetry, despite the limitations of his deafblindness, his village education and his social isolation. In his poetry Clemo has to find a balance between those things he could experience through touch and through his memory of things once seen and heard, and his wife's descriptions of the visual and auditory world. His ability to present his reader with visual, auditory and tactile images in his poetry is remarkable, and he must have worked very hard on it, but it is not unique.

Poetry gave Clemo a voice and a platform through which he could communicate with many people, and he would have attributed that more, as said earlier, to his faith in God than to the efforts of his publishers, or supporters like the Laureate, C. Day-Lewis, and Charles Causley. Others might argue that it was the power of human creativity, the urge to be a maker of something lasting and of some beauty, which enabled him to overcome profound deafblindness. Clemo would probably say it was all due to being invaded by the Gospel and surrendering to God, and that his disabilities have no relevance. Both views have some validity. The main focus in this thesis is on the poems and the mind of the man who made them.

The first two collections, *The Map of Clay* and *Cactus on Carmel*, show the influence of a number of feminine contacts from his teens up to the age of fifty-one. In this time he moves away from expressing his passionate feelings about God and small girls, and his hatred of the natural world, to celebrating the beauties found in the countryside he cannot see, and the experiences of Roman Catholic Saints like Bernadette, and child evangelist, Renée Martz.

The remaining five collections were published after his marriage at the age of fifty-two. *The Echoing Tip*, published in 1971, shows

how his marriage has broadened his perspectives and widened his subject matter. It is likely that his wife, also a devout nonconformist Christian who influenced Clemo's return the shared worship in chapel and various churches, also suggested some of the characters he chose to write about.

The Barrett/Browning romance is the subject of two poems, but it is not until the final two collections, written after both visits to Italy, that the significance to Clemo of that marriage becomes clearly expressed in poetry, although it is heavily documented in his autobiographies.

The many internal conflicts experienced by Clemo in his attitude to himself and others have been traced through the poems selected for discussion in this thesis. Although he attempts to present himself as a model of Christian virtue, an apparent lack of compassion and charity towards others suggests a certain hypocrisy and self-righteousness, unlikely to endear him to the twentieth and twenty-first century reader. If they are disabled, many are going to be alienated and shocked by his views on disability and his attitude towards it.

It can be argued that the move away from the isolation of rural Cornwall in the clay district, to the seaside town of Weymouth, certainly broadened his world view and introduced him to greater interaction with others, and this is reflected in the poetry written during his last ten years.

It must have been very hard for someone with a limited formal education, who was indoctrinated by this mother's dogmatic religious ideas, and disabled by deafblindness from normal social intercourse, to produce such prolific and wide ranging poetry throughout his life. The very diversity of his often conflicting ideas, his spiritual journey from a rigid, though individualistic, form of Calvinism, to the pleasures found in a Roman Catholic Cathedral in Venice, or a revival

meeting at the seaside, formed a rich source for his poetic imagination and creativity.

Clemo should be seen as much more than someone who overcame limiting disabilities. He can be seen as one who was not afraid to develop his creative talents throughout his lifetime, not afraid to state his case or beliefs. He struggled to find peace of mind and contentment in the midst of internal conflicts, and while he may be critically considered a minor poet, he was remarkable in making his work rich in sight and sound, in personalities and thought.

He can probably be best understood as a working class autodidact working within the non-conformist tradition. This tradition, reaching back to Puritan times, has an emphasis on God's revelation to the individual that must be constantly reiterated to reconfirm its 'truth'. While Clemo may be seen as a poet working at the margins, he may find a new audience among the fundamentalist Christian movement, particularly in the United States where there is strong belief in the Bible as fact and in creationism.

Clemo gained the respect and admiration of fellow poets like Charles Causley, C. Day-Lewis, Brian Louis Pearce, and academics and poets like Ronald Tamplin and the American, T. R. Hummer. His novel, *Wilding Graft*, is the subject of a chapter in Dr. Pete Lowman's thesis on *God in the Novel*, and his work and life are recorded in Dr. Stephen Lane's thesis, *Jack Clemo, Cartographer of Grace*, completed at Newcastle University in 1989.

Clemo continues to be a subject of interest and research at several levels, so is established as a poet of some influence within the literary world beyond Cornwall where he is highly respected. That is a considerable achievement for a deafblind person with little formal education, who lived for most of his life in a tiny isolated hamlet in the Cornish clay district. His interaction with the wider world was through his writing, and through the intercession of his mother, and

then his wife, who acted as his constant guide-interpreters to facilitate his communication with people from many walks of life. In 1988 the Newcastle based publishers, Bloodaxe, produced Clemo's *Selected Poems*, which includes work from *the Map of Clay* to three poems written after his first visit to Italy. Finding a new publisher when in his seventies, who later published his last two collections, can be seen as a significant factor in consolidating his poetic reputation.

Stripping the Cadaver

A Collection of Poems

Introduction: Linking the Critical and the Creative

Introduction

The title of my poetry collection is *Stripping the Cadaver*. This is also the title of the opening poem. It reflects the experience of closely examining and analysing a poet's work over a period of time. There is also an element of 'stripping' when commenting on my own work.

My composition process

An idea or image may come to mind, and as I reflect on them in combination, words and phrases form. If the words begin to press in, I will draft by hand until I have a rough outline. My approach is rather sculptural, like working first in clay, modelling, and then casting. I move words and lines around, and unless I have decided to use a certain form, I wait for the poem to dictate what shape it takes. The final shape and final text is only reached after several rewrites. Sometimes I will think of a character or place and then do as much research as possible around the subject. These poems were written under the supervision of Prof. Sean O'Brien who made me consider and re-evaluate the creative process, made me alert to outdated language, and aware of the need to be precise and thoughtful.

This collection has an agenda. The subject of the thesis is the poetry of the deafblind poet, Jack Clemo, so I knew that some poems would address him, some would pick up from his subjects, and others would be the result of my response to ideas found in his work. Because the process of composition differed somewhat with individual or groups of poems, I will discuss that as I write about each section. The collection is divided into Part One and Part Two. Each Part contains sub-sections which are given the title of a poem found therein. The poems are discussed in the order of their appearance.

Part One

Stripping the Cadaver

The opening poem is 'Stripping the Cadaver'. The title came to me during a supervision session with Prof. Bill Herbert when I was discussing how I felt about making such a close examination of Clemo's work.

This poem considers what happens when poets and their poetry are analysed and deconstructed. The images are from my memories of watching a post-mortem during my training as a nurse. Scenes of such events are seen on television quite frequently, but they are not the same as watching in a mortuary, seeing the skull sliced open, and experiencing the smell of a dead body.

The poem questions where the creative drive is found in someone, dead or alive, and just what, physically, makes a person a poet or any other kind of artist. I think I am actually asking where the 'soul', whatever is meant by that, is found. Was it washed out with the blood, or is it in a pickling jar, and which one? Any connection to the re-assembled skeleton seems unlikely. The examiner can see the cause of death, but the cause of life seems more complex than simply an egg and a sperm.

Jack Clemo in Purgatory

The sixteen poems in this section engage with Clemo at different stages throughout his life. Some are written in Clemo's voice, some in mine. They form a dialogue, responding to ideas expressed both in his poetry and his autobiographies, though the latter can be seen as a formative back-drop to his work. The poems follow and examine Clemo's development from his lonely and isolated youth, through middle age and his late marriage at fifty-two, to his last years when he visited Italy twice, and continued to write and publish poetry.

Byron Recalls San Lazzaro

There are two poems in this section which respond directly to Clemo's interpretations of the lives of other poets, these are 'Byron Recalls San Lazzaro' and 'Shelley Reflects Upon his Death'. Both are direct responses to poems by Clemo in which he re-imagines and reconstructs periods in the lives of some of his famous subjects. I discuss this at some length in Chapter Two of the thesis. 'Byron Recalls San Lazzaro' draws upon Byron's letters to his editor. 'Clemo Visits Venice' with the lines 'my fantasies / of Byron as a cloistered celibate', responds to Clemo's poem 'San Lazzaro'.

Muse in the Abyss

There are three poems in the final sub-section that consider the impact of deafblindness on peoples' lives. The title, 'Muse in the Abyss', acknowledges that the muse of poetry does not withdraw from those with sensory impairments however severe, and may indeed enter the abyss to join them. The poem reflects on the impact of blindness on some one who has always been deaf. 'Usher's Ghost' gives a voice to Usher's syndrome in which early deafness of various degrees is followed by sight loss that can lead to total blindness. It is a fairly common condition, but in the past its full implications for the young people with the condition were not always recognised.

'When the Silence Came' is about the experience of profound hearing loss on a blind musician. The gender of the subject's lover is deliberately ambiguous. The characters in the three poems are composites, although I did have a few individuals in mind when writing them.

Many of the poems can be read as an expression of my own, far less certain views on religious and spiritual matters. Unlike Clemo, I have no wish to preach, nor am I convinced of my own righteousness or correctness. I do not wish to judge Clemo, but I

think some of the poems do challenge, obliquely perhaps, many of his convictions and certainties.

Poems Engaging Clemo in Part Two

In these poems I have tried to approach Clemo in an empathic way. Many show a warmth towards him that is not always found in the critical analysis, but I suspect that is because I am addressing him as someone who has to deal with profound deafblindness, possibly one of the loneliest conditions encountered by humans. The fact that I know many deafblind people is also a factor in my more gentle approach to Clemo.

My interest in dual-sensory loss is a result of a number of factors. My professional work with elderly people with impaired sight and hearing, my own sensory loss with its marked impact on my life in my late thirties, and my involvement with the charity Deafblind UK over the last sixteen years. As a Board member of Deafblind UK, then the Vice Chair, and now the Chair, I have come to know many deafblind people. In my role as editor of the charity's quarterly magazine, I am in contact with deafblind people, many of whom are leaders in their own communities, in the United States and Canada for example.

My professional and experiential knowledge of dual-sensory loss does underpin my sympathy for Clemo, but it does not prevent me from challenging his views on religion, his own self-righteousness, and the image he projects about himself as a husband, a religious poet, and a human being. I find his attitude to disability and to those who are disabled particularly challenging.

The opening poem, 'Young Clemo', considers him as a young man with strong opinions on subjects he probably knew little about, but thought he understood. It also acknowledges in the final stanza that he did moderate his views over time, and that he was struggling with deafness and visual impairment, while 'despairing / Of success, the blessings of the marriage bed'.

'Hermit' examines Clemo's presentation of himself as tormented mystic, wandering around the lunar-type landscape of the clay pits, obsessed with religion and the Bible, particularly the writings of St. Paul. I feel that there is something very medieval in his quite simplistic religious beliefs. His interpretation of the world he lives in seems to be quite primitive.

...you saw
The broken pit-head as a cross,
The thorn bush as a crown.

There are echoes of my title poem in 'Reading Clemo' as I imagine exploring inside Clemo's brain. It refers to Clemo's long wait for marriage, and the influence of the Brownings and their Wimpole Street romance on his life. It also comments on Clemo's sense of being pursued relentlessly by God.

Clemo's late marriage features in 'Beyond the Clay'. The marriage appears to have softened his attitude to many things, enabling him to accept a Cornish Bardship, and an Honorary Doctorate. I think this must have amused him. He may even have been flattered to discover himself the subject of academic study. His gifting of books and papers to Exeter University during his life indicates that his early views on scholarship, learning and academia had been modified. His actions may not have been entirely due to the wish 'to please your wife'. Rather than leave such things to God or divine providence, he seems to have wished to ensure that his literary efforts were remembered and documented. He may have also been encouraged in this by his friends, including the poet and academic, Ron Tamplin, a teacher at the university.

The idea behind 'Clemo Encounters Christ' is that Clemo found his poetic voice as a result of a mystical encounter with Christ in the clay-pits. Christ is often referred to as the Word, and it is this Word that invades the deaf Clemo as he is finally losing his sight. It also

reflects the title of his book *The Invading Gospel*, written as a statement of his religious beliefs.

'Reflections on Jack Clemo' is a particularly empathic poem. In this I link my own experiences of glaucoma attacks with Clemo's accounts of his experiences during the attacks of blindness he suffered at the ages of five and twelve. Such attacks, accompanied by photophobia and excruciating pain, appear to have left a residual trauma that seems to have always remained with him. Indeed the references found to 'white glare' in some of his poems suggest that some degree of photophobia, or an acute sensitivity to light, were frequent events before he went blind. He might have continued to have problems with glare even after the white mist obscured his sight, leading to him nearly always being photographed wearing dark glasses.

The penultimate and final stanzas relate to Clemo's poem 'The Child Traitor'. While being deeply sympathetic towards Clemo, my poem suggests that he had to actively resist the erotic/sexual emotions that small girls raised in him. From both a feminine and feminist perspective, Clemo's attitude to females, particularly little girls, is disturbing.

Who defied the serpent
In your little Eden fantasies?

'Homage to Jack Clemo', a poem written early in my studies of him, recognises his religious faith, his courage as he lost both hearing and sight, and his trust in those who had to lead him everywhere. It also acknowledges the moderating of his early harsh brand of Calvinism, developed in his twenties after rejecting his mother's Cornish Methodism, and his later interest in the Roman Catholic faith and its Saints.

You touched, beyond

Grim Calvinist,
The blue of Mary's robe.

'Clay Caliban' is one of several later poems in the collection. It draws on Clemo's account of his almost obsessive relationship with the child called Barbara, referred to in his autobiographies and recorded in his early poems. It is based on his reference to a diary entry made on his twenty-first birthday, in which he calls himself "Poor Caliban Jack!". Here he is referring to Browning's Caliban, found in the poem 'Caliban upon Setebos'.⁹¹

The poem 'Clay Caliban' returns to Clemo as a young man, emotionally involved with a very young child. It suggests that he was somewhat psychologically disturbed and deeply distressed at the time, although that is not surprising as he had lost his hearing two years before. The final line suggests his developing interest in Calvinism, although this is what he interpreted Calvinism to be, rather than what it is. Underpinning this poem is the suggestion that the causes of his saddle nose, and his deafness and blindness, were possibly due to a venereal infection acquired by his father during his time in America, and passed to his mother. Clemo was deeply influenced by the differences between his very religious mother and his 'pagan' father. The marriage lasted four years, with his father being blown up at sea during the First World War in 1917. Clemo refuses to give details of the full story, even if his mother had told him everything, but does refer to what he calls his father's 'sexual disharmonies'.⁹²

In the poem Clemo is portrayed as identifying with Caliban's strange parenthood, and his distorted nature and body. Clemo's perceived differences between his parents can arguably be the cause of him constantly creating dichotomies. These, when internalised, are

⁹¹ Clemo, *Confession of a Rebel*, p. 141.

⁹² Clemo, *Confession of a Rebel*, pp. 16 & 18.

projected onto others. This poem is in two voices. The octet is an impartial account of events taking place around Clemo's twenty-first birthday. It paints a picture of him as a young, emotionally disturbed youth. The sestet is in Clemo's voice, as he reflects on the internal conflicts arising from his origins. In the final line he says 'Yet I was saved before my birth', indicating his developing interest in Calvinism.

'Clemo Considers his Many Burials' picks up the idea that he saw himself emerging from death-like situations during his life. The line in the final stanza, 'Ruth is the angel who rolled away my stone', links to Clemo's identification with Christ, particularly in his poem 'Modelled in Passion Week' that I discuss in Chapter One. It also draws on Clemo's autobiographical accounts of his childhood attacks of blindness, and his early understanding, expressed in his early poems, that God was cleansing the world of sin by destroying parts of it. The idea that the Devil has power in Cornwall is found in his novel, *The Shadowed Bed*. Clemo's concept of God, the Devil, and heaven and hell as being ultimate realities is discussed in chapter one. I find something very medieval in these ideas, along with Clemo's belief in the supernatural and the 'facts' of the Bible. It seems to suggest an over simplified and reductive approach to the complex problem of good and evil.

'Clemo Goes Paddling' attempts to convey the pleasure taken by the deafblind poet in a fairly simple activity. It can be all too easy to see deafblindness, or perhaps any serious disability, as leading to a life without joy or pleasure. Clemo's later poetry, particularly after his marriage, does express a lot of pleasure in his life. This poem seeks to express Clemo's use of his remaining senses, notably touch, to enjoy his life, without any attempt to patronise or deny his limitations.

'Clemo at Murano' acknowledges the impact of the visit by Clemo to the glass producing island near to Venice. It picks up my discussion of his poem 'The Model' found in Chapter Two. It also

suggests that the love he found with his wife was a powerful influence in giving him a less distorted or jaundiced view of life.

'Clemo Visits Venice' is another poem influenced by the poetry written by Clemo about his first visit to Venice. It draws on 'Festal Magnet', 'Palazzo Rezzonico', and 'A Slant from St. Mark's', poems found in *Approach to Murano*. The visit is seen as a very enriching experience with its links to Browning whose work was so influential in Clemo's life. The poem also links to Clemo's 'San Lazzaro', discussed in some depth in chapter two, with the re-imagining of a period in Byron's life.

...my fantasies
Of Byron, as cloistered celibate.

In 'Clemo Walks on Chesil Beach' I am attempting to convey the physical experience of walking, arm in arm with a guide, over the sliding stones of the beach, when deafblind. Balance can be a problem for many people with dual-sensory loss, and Clemo seems to have depended mainly on his wife for support and guidance. It can be speculated that he may have used a cane or walking stick sometimes, particularly in his later years, but there is no indication given of his doing so. Chesil Beach, near the Weymouth home where he spent his last years, must have presented quite a challenge to his wife when he wanted to walk there. Walking on a sliding and unstable surface can be difficult for anyone, but even more for Clemo and his wife who was guiding him. This poem can be seen as a companion piece to Clemo's poem, 'Chesil Beach', found on pages 66-67 in *A Different Drummer*. I have capitalised Ruth Clemo's words in the second stanza in an attempt to demonstrate the difficulties of conveying information by printing capital letters on someone's palm. Only the main points of information are given to assist with clarity, and it is likely that they had to stand still when Ruth told him something, particularly when on an uneven surface. My motivation for writing

poems like this, and 'Clemo Goes Paddling', is to try to convey the practical challenges of life without sight and hearing for an individual and their partner or guide. Anecdotally, the sighted and hearing partner of a deafblind individual is under great pressure and stress. There is no quick verbal communication, no exchange of glances. According to Clemo, his wife would press herself to him, hold his hand or poke him playfully, when enjoying the visit to Venice for example.⁹³

'Poet's Eye View' is an impressionistic interpretation of an account of a visit made by the American poet and Professor, T. R. Hummer, to Jack Clemo in the company of fellow poet, Ron Tamplin.⁹⁴ Professor Hummer gives the impression of Clemo as a tiny figure, sitting in the corner, surrounded by books, receiving his guests as if he is royalty. I think this reflects my own impression of Clemo as a rather imperious character, whose wife sits at his feet, and who demands the attention of those around him.

'Jack Clemo in Purgatory' is a monologue, in Clemo's voice, describing the imagined experiences of purgatory. Underpinning the poem is a response to Clemo's ideas about Dante expressed in his poem, 'A Heretic in Florence', the last poem in his final collection, *The Cured Arno*. In my poem Clemo finds himself in a very different afterlife to the one he probably imagined. In the poem he encounters a loneliness far beyond anything he felt in his rebellious and isolated youth, but he is in a place where he can learn and gain a greater understanding of himself. In this purgatory, he says:

I cannot feel my wife, nor can I recall
A single line I ever wrote.

⁹³ Clemo, *Marriage of a Rebel*, p. 174.

⁹⁴ T. R. Hummer, 'Available Surfaces VII: In the Palm of the Poet's Hand', *Mindbook Blog*, 30 August 2009 <<http://mindbook1.blogspot.com/2009/08/available-surfaces-vii-in-palm-of-poets.html>> [Accessed 08/10/09].

In one sense this could be read as a concept for hell, except it is not for eternity. The poem imagines that Clemo is surprised not to meet people whose work had influenced him, and that he expects to be greeted with applause in the afterlife.

'Jack Clemo has a Vision of Heaven and Hell' also deals with speculation on an afterlife. In this poem he is given three visions. The first is of heaven, where he is deafblind, but can understand what is happening. He is surprised to find artists he despised are more welcome than he. In the second vision Clemo finds himself with sight and hearing, but in hell. It is Death who shows him the consequences of spiritual arrogance, and the imposition of self-construed religious beliefs on others. I thought the inclusion of the sexually tempting girl children was an appropriate image for him to have in hell. The final vision is of his grave, suggesting that this may, in fact, be his ultimate reality. The poem is considering other alternatives to those of some accepted beliefs found in many religions, including Christianity. It does not deny or argue against the idea of heaven and hell, but suggests they may not be as Clemo believes. In a sense he is being shown the lessons he will have to learn in the purgatory of the previous poem, if he does not pay attention to his vision in this one.

Both these poems are also a response to what his mother wrote at the end of her short book *I Proved Thee at the Waters*. She said:

While I have lived to see my son honoured by the nation in the granting to him of a Civil List Pension for his contribution to English literature, and by the county in making him a Bard at the Cornish Gorsedd for his work as a Cornish poet, [...] I believe Jack's greatest honour is yet to come when he will hear his

Master's words, "Well done, good and faithful servant...enter thou into the Joy of thy Lord".⁹⁵

Byron Recalls San Lazzaro

As said earlier, 'Byron Recalls San Lazzaro' is a response to Clemo's poem, 'San Lazzaro', found in *Approach to Murano* and discussed in Chapter Two. I was fascinated by Clemo's interpretation of Byron's life. My poem was written after reading Byron's letters about that period of his life, and draws on the information in them. The poem places Byron in the traditionally imagined after life of the Immortals, along with Shelley. It contrasts with Clemo's representation of Byron who had translated unknown Gospel pages, wanted them to be published, and thought that the ecclesiastical hierarchy in England might have wished to suppress them.

I am a better Christian than those
Who are paid to be. [...]

Perhaps Byron's religious convictions as a Christian, and his translations of some Gospel pages, would have surprised Clemo.

'Shelley Reflects Upon his Death' includes references to Keats, whose book Shelley snatched up before drowning. Clemo speaks harshly of Keats in his poem 'George Müller', and I discuss this in Chapter Three. Again I am responding to Clemo's ideas about some Romantic poets.

Muse in the Abyss

The three poems in this section deal with dual-sensory loss. Their subjects should be seen as composites, because they all have

⁹⁵ Eveline Clemo, *I Proved Thee at the Waters: Testimony of a Blind Writer's Mother with Poems by Jack Clemo* (Ilkeston: Moorley's Bible and Bookshop, 1976), pp. 68-9. NB. The pagination is according to a hand-written, large print copy loaned by the Torch Trust for the Blind.

things in common with people I know or have known or have read about. While I had certain people in mind at the time of writing, these should not be seen as portraits of specific individuals.

'Muse in the Abyss' is an early poem that I have amended. In the process of selecting and eliminating poems for the collection, I have maintained an ongoing editing process with all the poems written during this period of study. Initially I had thought that the title might work for the thesis as a whole, but decided to use it for a poem as I considered the task and the subject undertaken. At that time I was considering two other deafblind poets, before deciding to concentrate my study on Clemo.

The poem contains references to both fairy tales and mythology, because I wanted to show the ways that individuals may try to explain why unthinkable disasters have befallen them. In 'Muse in the Abyss' the subject is a deaf person who loses their sight. I wanted to convey how it might feel for someone who has always used sign language or lip-reading to become unable to do so. Many people may never consider the possibility of life without both sight and hearing, so this, and the following two poems, may hopefully give an inkling of the experience. The final two lines refer to the spiritual or numinous experiences that some deafblind people have reported, including Clemo himself when deaf and going blind.

Maybe in this great loss
The human and the numinous may meet.

'Usher's Ghost' gives a voice to Usher's Syndrome. I know, or correspond with a number of people with the condition, including three PhDs. It can be particularly distressing for those growing up in a signing environment. There is something quite arbitrary in the way that diseases affecting the main senses occur. Even though many are the result of genetic or familial conditions, people may not be aware of them. When they do occur, more people than just the individual

are affected. Usher's Syndrome, like all conditions affecting both sight and hearing, demands hard work from those affected, particularly within the educational system.

The final stanza is a response to a question many people asked when I was working. "Why me? What have I done"? All too often people think God is punishing them. Clemo thought that the Devil caused his problems to prevent him marrying, something he thought God had ordained for him. I always used to emphasize that there is nothing personal in such events.

I am impartial, and quite
Indifferent to humankind.

The subject of 'When the Silence Came' is someone who was blind and then loses hearing quite quickly. While the subject is a composite, I did have two people in mind that I have met or correspond with. One is a blind musician who had a very high profile in the music world, but went deaf quickly due to a viral infection. The other is a young blind woman who lost her hearing, again quickly, six months into a PhD. In the first stanza the subject feels that he is drowning, and in the second he tries to remember the fingering for a piece of music and what his lover feels like. Again, the aim of the poem is to ask people to think about the challenges of dual sensory loss, but in a practical, not a sentimental or pitying, way.

Part Two

Introduction

The poems in Part Two are divided into five sections. The first is a monologue expressing my views on my own disabilities. The second has poems recalling my childhood, the third deals with landscape and portraits, the fourth draws on religious figures from the history of the north east, the fifth deals with personal relationships, particularly my

marriage, our separation and the death of my husband. While these poems may not engage Clemo directly, they draw on his themes. They can be understood as the result of Clemo's influence on my poetry.

I am Happy to Discuss Disability

There is only one poem in this section. 'I am Happy to Discuss Disability' is a response to a request to write more about my own disabilities. While my work might be informed by them, they are not a dominating factor. On the other hand, my decision to study the work of deafblind people who wrote poetry was a result of my own dual sensory impairment, and my roles in Deafblind UK. My decision to concentrate on the work of Jack Clemo, who was profoundly deafblind and who had produced a considerable body of work, was made in discussion with Professor Sean O'Brien, who supervised my poetry.

I think that both Clemo and I take a rather unsentimental attitude to disability, and strongly reject any attempts at pity. I do detect some parallels in Clemo's poem, 'Affirmative Way', discussed in Chapter One. Although aware of what is lost, I consider myself to be the more fortunate. Because of one very able ophthalmic surgeon, I have useful sight, and that is more than Clemo had. Unlike Clemo, I have worked to learn the skills needed to live an independent life, but as someone who worked in the field of rehabilitation, that was probably to be expected after the initial shock wore off. In any case I had a career and three children to support, while Clemo was looked after by his mother and did very little when not writing, a pattern continued by his wife.

This poem reflects my views and my attitude to my own situation. As I do not see myself as a victim of any condition, I find myself unable to write a poem that portrays me that way. Unlike Clemo, I do not think the devil causes such things, neither do I blame

God. I do not believe that any supernatural force causes unfortunate events, as it is often human folly and ignorance that is a main contributory factor, or it is the result of the genetic lottery, an encounter with an accident or disease, or the result of the earth's normal, but often catastrophic, activities.

Unlike Clemo I can hear clear speech, with hearing aids, if the speaker is close enough. Clemo turned from novel writing to poetry because he had problems with dialogue, being unable to hear speech for so many years. The main impact for him in learning Braille was that he gained access to more modern poets than the Victorian ones like Browning, and the Edwardian ones like Hardy, and this influenced his composition and style.

Clemo was probably able to deny that his deafblindness had any impact on his approach to his writing because he denied it had any impact on his life in general. His mother, and later his wife, protected him and enabled him to deny the problem, and his friends seem to have supported this approach. Clemo's independence only stretches as far as his ideas and thinking; in all practical matters he was highly dependent, but that may have been due to his upbringing, his generation as someone born in the early part of the twentieth century, and his gender.

The greatest contrast between Clemo and myself is that I have lived and worked in the real world, have had contact with and interacted with a wide variety of people, and have had to work at solving my problems. Much of Clemo's communication was either by letter, or through a third party. His early social isolation was compounded by deafness following already impaired vision. His only means of reaching others was through his writings and the occasional intervention of some sympathetic contact. My approach has been to accept, adapt and adjust to disability, to accept help gracefully, yet fight to maintain maximum independence and freedom of spirit.

Love Apple

Because Clemo wrote about his own life and was highly autobiographical in his work, I decided to examine my own life, particularly my childhood. 'Love Apple', 'Beyond the Green', and 'Uncle Joe' are from a series of poems drawing on childhood memories of time spent in the small north Yorkshire village of Romanby during the Second World War.

Having decided to write on this theme I consciously called up memories from my childhood. I was quite surprised at the images that arose from my sub-conscious mind of events, places, and people I thought were long-forgotten. Although the first drafts came quite easily, the shaping and the finishing of the poems took a lot of time and work, but I find that happens very often. There always seems to be a sense that each poem can be improved, that it may never be quite finished or perfected.

'Love Apple' recalls a visit to a green house full of tomato plants and being given 'A tiny orange fruit to eat'. In the poem this event foreshadows the eventual awakening of sexual desire, relating it to Eve in the Garden of Eden when 'she took / Her first sweet apple bite'. This poem can be seen as a healthy response to Clemo's concern with the Fall and his attitude to child-sexuality. I am certain the gardener who gave me the little tomato in the presence of family members did not have Clemo's interest in little girls. On the other hand, the Garden of Eden image with its implication for future adult sexuality, did emerge during the composing of the poem. The event took place over sixty years ago, yet remains a vivid memory. I was surprised at my recollections while writing the first five poems in this section, yet I am aware that the memories of my past may be no more accurate than Clemo's memories of his.

The Green in 'Beyond the Green' symbolises a safe place or a refuge, but one that is also close to danger. The railway line being crossed represents the risks taken in life. Although it was a little used branch line, and not the main north-south line which is nearby, it still

had hazards, but I crossed it, thinking I would be safe. The tunnel is a symbol for the war, a dark threat that I was aware of, even if a little vaguely, as a child. It may also represent those strange childhood fears that can haunt the young, partly perhaps, because we have no language for them, just as the five year old Clemo had no language for his first attack of blindness.

'Uncle Joe' is a commentary on social life in the 1940s when patriarchal Victorians like Uncle Joe were still common. Though benevolent and kindly, he was a bit of a tyrant and all his relatives were in awe of him. Perhaps he was a little like Clemo in the control he had over others in his life. He was not a man with whom people argued. I used to wonder why he could smoke indoors when his sisters' husbands had to go outside. I think we all accepted him as a force of nature. While 'Uncle Joe' is a portrait poem of a real person, I include it in this section because he was a strong figure in my childhood.

The setting for 'The Drove Road' was one of my favourite childhood walks when I lived just outside the boundary of Darlington. It is still there and is one of the many ancient routes used by drovers to take animals to market. I always found this road had a certain mystery and an ancient atmosphere. The particular area that I describe in the poem is between the main road and the main train line that runs from London to Scotland, but it seemed to me to be close to a more ancient place. I felt myself removed from real time, and to be somewhere between two realities, the mid twentieth century and the past with the ancient gods. Perhaps this is where I did my 'mystical musings', as Clemo might have described them. Perhaps it gave me similar feelings to those Clemo had as he wondered about the clay-pits.

I was between eight and fourteen when I took the walks along the drove road. The approach was between an avenue of tall trees forming a high tunnel and this led to my first attempt to express my feelings in poetry when I was probably about ten. Clemo continued to

wander around the clay-pits until he finally went blind at thirty-nine, so perhaps he maintained his childhood habits longer than I did. His life was certainly much more limited and constrained than mine, and I certainly do not have his angst for my youth. I certainly have no sense of the kind of isolation he experienced over many years, even though my life has not been entirely trouble free. I may have often felt lonely or misunderstood, but that is not uncommon when young.

Clemo's feelings as he wandered about may have been the result of the dominant non-conformist religious nature of his upbringing. God, his mother told him, would teach him. My feelings at that time were more influenced, I think, by a passion for history, and the myths, legends and folk-tales of the north-east. Church and Sunday school were a part of my young life, but in Clemo's case, he and his mother seemed almost obsessed with religion, though this may not have been uncommon within the Cornish Methodist tradition in the early part of the twentieth century. Clemo's obsession with God and sex are probably less common.

The penultimate stanza relates to the war. Some bombs were dropped near the railway line and their craters were visible in the 1940s. The railway line and the locomotive called the Flying Scotsman, are symbols of human travel and journeying through time. The final three lines express my feeling of not being alone on the road, although I never saw any else there. There is a sense of the displacement of people over time and of diaspora, and a blending the past and present together.

I never saw a soul upon the path,
Yet thought I moved
Among a company of ghosts.

Memories of war time holidays in Redcar are the subject of 'Redcar Beach'. The idea of dancing a hornpipe with the drowned sailors when the world had ended occurred during the process of

composition and quite surprised me. The influence may be Clemo's belief in an afterlife, or the words from the several Christian funeral services I have attended in recent years. I think that ideas emerge from the subconscious during the process of writing poetry, and that it is only afterwards that you can reflect upon their source.

Aycliffe Angels

The themes in the following eight poems include portraits, landscapes, and armed conflict. 'Evening Flight' attempts to capture events that took place while having dinner outside during one summer. I was staying with friends at their Rectory in Northamptonshire when a flock of geese suddenly flew overhead. The poem celebrates a very self-sufficient life style in the countryside where most of the food is home grown, where hospitality is important, and the seasons are respected. The event had a timeless quality to it, and this was reinforced by the chiming of the various clocks after the sun had set, and the church was flood-lit as darkness fell. The geese regularly flew over the house at that time of the year, and I had heard them often during the twenty-five years I had stayed there. The poem also celebrates the love of friends and the English countryside. Clemo also enjoyed visiting rural places, particularly gardens as discussed in chapter three.

'The Sleepers' reflects my love of the ancient geologies found in England. Clemo grew up among the industrial landscape of the clay-pits that were formed from ancient rock, and during his last ten years he lived in Dorset near the Jurassic coast. Although he could not see the scenery, he had enjoyed his visits to the Lake District and written about them. In this poem I wanted to capture the power, majesty and magic of the earth that has constantly changed over countless millennia, and the ever evolving lives of long-dead creatures, both great and small. Clemo, who was dismissive of science, and who did not agree with Darwin's theory of evolution, would probably have had a very different view of the way the earth was formed. He appears to

have taken the Bible literally and I suspect he was also a creationist. His poems in *The Map of Clay* show a deep concern with, and acceptance of, the Biblical Flood story.

My acceptance of the theory of evolution, and the scientific knowledge of the probable age of the earth, is inherent in this poem. I think that scientific facts are more marvellous and exciting than any religious mythology. I think that Clemo's attitude to science may have limited his understanding of the world. In this poem I acknowledge some pagan belief systems.

The gods
Walk here, and write their ancient names
Upon this wilderness.

The influence for 'Aftermath' is the many reports of sudden uprisings and invasions of territories that appear regularly in the media. Events in the former Yugoslavia, Kosovo, the Palestinian territories, and parts of the former Soviet regions, were in my mind when writing this poem. The idea that apparently quite normal and ordinary people can suddenly do horrendous things to other people, that a uniform can transform a friend into an enemy, seems one of the most sinister features in human life. That such events can be repeated over and over again throughout history, strikes me as tragic and something worth commenting on.

Poems about fictional and non-fictional characters

While Clemo may have written about imagined events in the lives of historical and religious figures, he rarely writes about fictional characters. I have written poems about both. My fictional characters are usually composites drawn from my own experiences. I think my approach in such poems owes much to my reaction against Clemo's judgemental attitudes towards his subjects, and his tendency to present them as either good or bad people, according to his

evaluation of their particular virtues or non-virtues. I wanted my portrait poems to be something of a contrast to Clemo's. I like to write poems that reflect the warmth, richness and variety of the human condition. I also hope that they show compassion, tolerance, and an understanding of how people can be both frail and strong.

'Harriet Lane Paints Flowers' is the result of a creative writing exercise during my first year, but I have made later changes to it. I randomly chose a photograph and Harriet Lane walked into my head. The poem is really a tribute to those women academics who devoted much of their lives to teaching girls, and to the men who left their university posts, as well as their wives, to fight in the Second World War. It celebrates a generation of women who never gave up being active and creative into their older age.

'The Courtier' draws on visits made to royal palaces and the people encountered there. The subject of the poem, the courtier, developed his own life and family history during the process of writing. I suspect there is something curiously artificial about the lives of those who work in palaces, yet at the same time they are human beings with real problems, joys and sorrows, like the rest of society.

'Her New Gloves' is a commentary on the social conditions in Victorian England. The subject of the poem has no idea of the conditions her soldier dancing partner will encounter in battle, nor does she know anything of the lives of the less fortunate in society. She knows her gloves are beautiful, but not how they came to be so. She is the product of her upbringing and class. She is not like the female social reformers or missionaries that Clemo would write about. I lived and worked for many years in Bermondsey, a centre of the leather trade, in a building built on a former tannery. Older people living in the area remembered when children and the poor collected and sold dog dirt to soften the skins, particularly those used to make fine kid gloves like those in the poem.

The poem 'Aycliffe Angels' is written as a tribute to the many women who worked during the Second World War, in the dangerous munitions factory at Aycliffe, a village near my home town. It is only recently that their work and sacrifices have been recognised and acknowledged. Clemo does write about that war in both his autobiographies, and some of his poems, but he seems more concerned with himself, and seems to consider his literary efforts to be of greater importance. I discuss this attitude in Chapter Two. I wanted to take a broader, more compassionate view than he appears to do, recognising the impact of conflicts on the lives of many people, and the sacrifices made by ordinary women.

The subject of 'The Man Who Killed Archimedes' is an ordinary Roman soldier, angry about the losses on his side. He kills the man who invented the weapons being used against the Romans, because he will not stop writing. It was probably, like so many in such circumstances, an act of impatient brutality, although he knew, as the Centurion did, who he was killing. He justifies his act by listing what he might have termed the war crimes of Archimedes, in inventing the weapons.

Durham Story

The next three poems all deal with north-eastern history. I had learnt about Caedmon, Bede, Cuthbert, and the building of Durham Cathedral, during my primary school days. The teachers were very keen on poetry, mythology and northern history. I knew from an early age that Caedmon was one of England's earliest poets, so wanted to acknowledge this. Clemo considered himself to be taught by God, and Caedmon, according to legend, was given the gift of song and poetry by God. Both can be seen as part of a line of working class artists who were able to rise above their original positions in life. In the poem, in contrast to Clemo, Caedmon is a humble man whose main aim is to praise God. In his poetry, Clemo often seems to be praising himself, rather than God.

In 'Homage to Bede' I present the subject as a medieval polymath, who is also a poet, and he too is more concerned with God, his fellow priests, monks and students, than with himself. Bede read to learn more, but Clemo read to see his own ideas reflected back to him. Perhaps it is unfair to contrast Clemo with such figures, and I am doing what I dislike Clemo doing. While I am not using Clemo as a subject in these poems, I do think that I am responding to the constant comparisons between his concepts of good and evil, and his critical attitude to greater people than himself.

'Homage to Bede' is set in Jarrow, and influenced by a visit to the modern museum, Bede's World, and St. Paul's church, which I include in my Deafblind Millennium Award project, *Touching Art, Touching History*. The breadth and far-reaching and lasting impact of Bede's work is so impressive, that I want to celebrate it. In his own way, I think Clemo also wanted to celebrate his religious heroes, like Oswald Chambers and George Müller, only he chose to denigrate other people when doing so.

'Durham Story' celebrates the Norman Cathedral built high above the river Wear. It recognises that work and worship have continued there for close on a thousand years, and that even today artists continue to beautify the building. Embroiderers do receive a special mention in recognition of the very long history of their art and work in the north-east, and because ecclesiastical needlework can be understood as a form of prayer and meditation. The concept that Christ can be hurt by human acts, even if done with the best intention, is also in the first stanza in the reference to the piercing of Jesus by thorns and spear while on the Cross.

Many stitch their faith [...]

Piercing with steel the Saviour's face

And crown. [...]

The second stanza celebrates St. Cuthbert, a major northern Saint. It emphasises his preference for the austerity of the hermitage over the later richness of his plundered tomb. While writing this I was thinking of the contrast between Cuthbert, and Clemo's claim to being a hermit when young. Indeed Clemo's pride in his virtue was in my mind when I considered how humble Caedmon, Bede and Cuthbert seem in comparison. The third and final stanza acknowledges the north's history of work in stained glass, the role of church music, and the symbolic iconography of Christ's image illuminated by the rising sun.

The latter, like a number of other poems in the collection, uses an unrhymed sonnet form. I think that fourteen lines, with the octet and a sestet, can assist in disciplining the mind towards succinctness and brevity of expression. It also contrasts with the longer monologues that I have found myself using, under Clemo's influence, for many of the poems.

I Thought of You

There are four poems in this section. The first, 'Salute to Cavafy', takes a look at adult sexual relationships that would be unacceptable, I think, to Clemo. The final line, 'Perhaps forgetting keeps us sane', suggests that we may prefer to forget some of our romantic liaisons. There is a slight hint of regret in this comment, as well as the recognition that we may not have always been very wise in our choices.

The subject of 'I Thought of You' is my husband. It was written more than thirty years after we separated, but I was surprised at the level of love and affection that it expresses. It is a factual account of a love affair that began nearly fifty years ago in Paris, in the sixties. I wanted to capture the impression of the way in which a couple can grow apart, yet retain a strong bond for the rest of their lives. There is a different kind of regret being expressed here to that in 'Salute to Cavafy', which has a casual sexual encounter as its subject.

We came apart quite slowly,
Cell by living cell, until the space
Between became immense, [...]
But my hands
Remember you, [...]

My husband liked this poem when I read it to him over the phone, and I mention it in 'It's Strange', the final poem in my collection.

'On the Telephone' also has my husband as its subject. He was, I think, similar to Clemo in his stubborn attachment to his religious beliefs. I knew from our sons that he was having problems with his eyesight, although he only admitted the extent of his sight loss to me a few weeks before he died. The row we nearly had was because I wanted him to seek medical help, and he became quite angry with me because of his belief in Christian Science. I refused to respond to his anger, but the poem expresses my feelings. While I think that prayer and religious belief can be helpful when dealing with illness or disability, both my training as a nurse, and my personal experience of various health problems, makes me prefer conventional medicine and surgery. My anger at my husband was also grief, and his belief that illness and disease did not exist except in what Christian Scientists call Mortal Mind, was a contributory factor in our separation. There are a lot of mixed emotions around the writing of this poem.

The following poem, 'It's Strange', written very shortly after my husband's sudden death in June, 2010, deals with the problem of managing grief when family members are separated from each other, and have to communicate by phone or email. I was surprised that some of the strong feelings expressed in 'On the Telephone', disappeared in the immediate aftermath of learning my husband had died. I find I cannot be angry or cross about what I think is someone's folly when they are dead. I do feel regret though, perhaps because he has never left my heart and my head.

I hope this collection forms a balanced dialogue and response to the themes and subjects found in Clemo's work. I suspect that personal elements in my work are there because studying Clemo has enabled me to take a more personal approach. The last four poems are, I think, the most personal, because they deal with quite intimate, and usually private feelings relating to love, death and human folly. I also hope that the poems engaging Clemo show my respect and regard for a remarkable and resilient figure, one who pursued his art, despite poverty, little education or social skills, and disability, until his death at seventy eight.

Stripping the Cadaver, A Collection of Poems

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Part One

1

Stripping the Cadaver

Stripping the Cadaver

The stainless steel gleams

Beneath the lamp.

The body lies unflinching

As the knife is drawn

Firmly down from throat to groin

The skin is pared aside.

There is excess fat – we call

This tissue adipose – on belly,

Thighs. Look how the muscles

Weave in wonderful array,

Sinews showing white,

Liver, spleen and guts

So neatly placed inside.

The smell's not nice.

The ribs are cut, the spongy lungs
Revealed, the heart lies still.
You can hold it in the hand.
A blade across the hairline
At the neck, then the scalp
Pulled forward down the face.
The saw spins, sings in circles
Through the skull, reveals
The seat of thought. The brain
Resembles thick grey tripe.
Organs are placed with care
In jars of strong preservative
For use in learning and research.

The bones, produced by honeycombs
Of fragile cells, are threaded
Back to form the skeleton;
Beneath the light they gleam
Like ivory. All has been revealed,
Deconstructed and made plain.
But no microscope has found the soul,
Nor where the poems began.

Jack Clemo in Purgatory

To Young Clemo

Self-styled hermit, mystic,
Bunyan-type, did such titles
Justify your deep contempt
For nature, beauty, academic men?

Jacob wrestled with an angel:
You wrestled with a terrifying God
Who seemed malevolent and cruel,
A dark avenging force.

Admiring Nietzsche and the Fascist creed,
You thought they'd bring Calvin's city here,
Free Cornwall from corruption, sin.
You spoke in praise of Hitler too.

Well, you were young and arrogant,
Faithful to your vision then. You did move on,

Struggling, deaf and going blind, despairing
Of success, the blessing of the marriage bed.

Hermit

The mind was medieval;
Faith in dogma, interpreted
By Calvinistic creed.

God's millstones ground all doubt
To crumbling clay. You saw the earth
Torn up, grass, flowers destroyed.

Then you did rejoice to see how Christ
Tore sin from human hearts.

For you, earth's beauty was anathema,
And Eden spoiled.

Before the snow mist turned you blind,
Your ears were closed to human sound.
You trembled by the great abyss,
Went in rags, grown wild, unkept.

You wept on Paul's Epistles, raged at God.
God took your pain, purged you
In revival's flames, forced surrender,
And then invaded you. A broken shelter

Formed your oratory among the domes of clay,
The silence of the wild birds' song
Rose on the night wind's wave,
As the high uncaring stars looked down
By the white moon's sightless stare.

With little creatures of the night
You hid among the dunes,
Or walked the ranges of the man-made hills
Where black shadows fall.
Against the lowering sky you saw
The broken pit-head beam as cross,
The thorn bush as a crown.

That was your proving time,
Your burning time,
Your self-consuming time.
It passed, in God's good time.

Reading Clemo

Excavating within the skull,
The coils and canyons
Where your flesh formed words,
I wonder at your God-sex
Obessive mind. I taste
The bitter bread, hope-leavened,
Often dry, for all the tears you shed
Waiting for her to come.

She broke the barriers of your
Wimpole fantasy, made you feel equal
In your marriage joy to those blest poets
Of past Italian feasts, the Brownings,
Your exemplars of conjugal bliss.

Browning, guide-companion of your
Solitary rag-tailed youth and arrogance,
Never dreamt interpretations such as yours
Could bring a strange deliverance.
For you the trusting Pippa always sang

That God's in heaven, all is well with man,
Pompilia was ever pure and fair –
You never spoke of opium and the Portuguese
With her dark spaniel hair.

Through your labyrinthine dreams
Of pagan practices beneath a Cornish moon
And legacies of dark paternal sins
I crawl, wondering who taught you shame.
Huddled in broken huts among the clay-fields'
Mire, you screamed at God, tears streaming
On your Testament. He would not let you go,
Pursued you to the fire, the hanging tree,
The dreadful engine of His wrath.

Beyond the Clay

Stepping outside the poems,
Taking a view beyond
The wild imaginings of youth,
Your vision cleared. Now blind
Within your silent world,
You tried to pass beyond the early
Conflicts and your childhood's pain.

Love humbled you, but not
Too much. You still dismissed
Milton and Shakespeare's gifts
As never guiding you.

Reluctant scholar who despised
School teaching and the discipline
Of academic minds, now find yourself
Archived, analysed and criticised.
You entertained yourself with silent
Hymns at your Doctoring, an honour
Taken then to please your wife.

Clemo Encounters Christ

A hawk, hooded,
Deaf and going blind –
Then the words released
Him to the sky.

He climbed prayer's pillar
Seeking his abusing God,
That old shape-shifter
Of the mountain tops.

Then Christ came walking
On the white clay tips.
Prayer had pierced
Through heaven's floor.

The Word invaded him
With Pentecostal fire,
Released his earth-trapped
Soul with holy joy.

Reflection on Jack Clemo

I know the light that stabs

With scarifying pain,

I know the narrow chink

Through which hell's fires can blaze

In blue-white-yellow strobe.

I know the fear that breaks

The rocks of sanity.

Child, locked into the dark

By terror of the light,

Afraid, without the words

That could express the loss,

The desolation when no comfort

Came, but blessed sleep.

You rode the whirlwind,

Lost as child, youth, man,

Submitting to God's plan,

His awful discipline, the teaching

Of the Lord that moulds,

Then fires the fragile clay.

Who rolled the stone away
From your harsh burying?
Who defied the serpent
In your little Eden fantasies?
The innocents who played
Their games with you,
Threw bitter orange peel
That you would chew while they
Consumed the sweeter fruit?
I think you walked the path
With tears. The serpent came
So close you breathed
Its breath, and tried to love
The things you might detest,
And hate all earth's loveliness.

Homage to Jack Clemo

There was no choice.

The journey along

That precipice

Could not cease.

Think Olivet, Golgotha,

Samson at the wheel

And Eden shut.

Moving in your silent

White-snow world

With trust in hands

Invisible, words scribed

Upon the palm,

Letting child, friend,

Wife, lead you

Where the waters

Bathed your feet,

Along rough cliffs,

Up old carved steps,

Towards your harsh

Clay world, earth scars

Erased for you.

You kept a faith

In holy joy

Where sacerdotal

Love is realised.

You reached beyond

Grim Calvinist, to touch

The blue of Mary's robe.

Clay Caliban

Alas, poor Caliban Jack,
His mind distorted by a girl-child's
Pettish pout and small stamped foot,
And wildly weeping through his birthday night.
Lone wanderer among the clay-pit slag,
Unwashed, unshaved, dishevelled,
Screaming at a fearsome God,
Near mad within his silent hell.

*Who made me thus? A demon god
Thrust upon my sainted mother,
Bewitched by her, pouring his poisoned seed
Into her flesh. I was misbegotten,
Yet I feel no shame. I am as I am made,
Yet I was saved before my birth.*

Clemo Considers His Many Burials

I have known so many burials.

At first there was that childhood grave

Where only darkness held

The terrifying light and pain at bay

While thick cloth pressed

Like earth upon my face.

When the second little death

Arrived, my tomb became

A board across the stairs.

Light did not come there

As I floated, drifting deep

Within my youthful mind.

Then clay encroached upon my world,

And that too buried me. God was forcing

Me into the cleansing kiln. He showed me

His hatred of this world; I learned

To hate it too. I saw that churches were

The devil's house, that Cornwall was his home.

Ruth is the angel who rolled away my stone.
I find a gentler God, and safety, in the harbour
Of her flesh. I keep rising
From the ashes of my deaths,
To sing of light and sun upon the sheltered bay
Within my white and silent world.

Clemo Goes Paddling

My wife takes my hand

And leads me to the sea.

Dry grains tickle at my feet,

A light breeze tugs my cap.

Now the sand is damp, wave-ridged,

The ripples flicker at my shins.

The cleansing water moves

Across my feet,

Its subtle power tugs through

My toes, my heart is filled with glee.

Led back to sit within the sun

To dry my sand-stiff trouser legs,

I am so alive within my sight

And soundless world. I am a man.

Clemo at Murano

Island of fire's transforming power –
Molten sand transmutes to glass,
Reds and orange blaze in twists and swirls
As blown breath blooms the liquid light.
No angels cast their crowns
Upon this glittering sea.

From this auspicious place
A small translucent gondola
Set out, a powerful talisman
Of love that burns and clarifies
The dross that blears the mind,
Distorts the clearer view.
This vessel found safe harbour
On the poet's Weymouth desk.

Clemo Visits Venice

So Venice came within my grasp.

Here my hero, Browning, died,
His last book, *Asolando*,
Open to his touch.

I thrill to the vaporetto's beat,
A gondola's smooth glide,
The chop in the passage
To San Lazzaro, my fantasies
Of Byron as a cloistered celibate.

Such grim phantoms crowd this city's space,
And infiltrate my waking dreams; and yet
I turn to sit
Inside St. Mark's broad candle-warmth.
Pressed against my wife's assuring side
I, Puritan and heretic, feel at home.

Clemo Walks on Chesil Beach

Beneath his feet, the curved stones

Slip and glide. The wind stings

His face, flattens clothes

Against his flesh. He thrusts close

To his wife's plump side, fingers

Gripping on her arm.

Their bodies move as skaters

Over ice, adjusting

As the pebbles slide.

For him the sea, the gulls

Are mute. The voiceless wind

Sleeks across the pebble beach.

His world is quite invisible.

They pause. She takes his hand,

Writes quickly with a finger on his palm.

S-E-A-C-A-L-M-T-O-D-A-Y

W-I-N-D-R-U-F-F-L-I-N-G-L-A-G-G-O-O-N

S-U-N-S-H-I-N-I-N-G-O-N-C-L-I-F-F-S

B-O-Y-I-N-R-E-D-R-O-W-S-T-O-S-H-O-R-E

B-I-G-S-H-I-P-O-U-T-A-T-S-E-A,

A-P-P-R-O-A-C-H-I-N-G-P-O-R-T-I-T-H-I-N-K.

Perhaps he will make some use of this.

Poet's Eye View

(*From an account by the American poet and Professor,*

T. R. Hummer, of a visit to Jack Clemo)

At first he did not see

The tiny figure dressed in brown, with cap.

He merged with cupboard doors, wooden shelves,

And heavy books with faded gilding on their spines.

Condensed into a corner chair, the poet

Bent his head towards clasped hands.

Imploded, frail, oblivious

Even as his wife spelled upon his palm,

Then he waved like royalty

Acknowledging petitioners,

And he spoke too loudly

Like the *ancien régime*.

And no one dared to disagree.

Jack Clemo in Purgatory

No stars, no sun, no moon.

The silence weighs like Everest;

You could scale its dreadful walls

And fall forever down the icy clefts.

The darkness is black light

Multiplied by ten black suns.

This place is soft as fresh-thrown clay,

Hard as faience from the flame,

And yet untouchable by hands or feet

Or mind. I crossed no river coming here,

No trumpets sounded in my praise.

The hanging God did not appear.

Perhaps he is not as I once thought.

Where are the guides? No Spurgeon,

And no Barth, not even little Renée Martz—

Though she may not be dead,

Just disappeared -- no Browning,

Illuminator of my youth who showed me Italy.

Here I cannot count
The cupboard doors, the boxes filled
With poetry on A4 sheets, the steps towards
A favoured tree, the paces to my bed.
I cannot feel my wife, nor can I recall
A single line I ever wrote.

These are the wastes of time,
Sans day, sans night, sans seasons.
Nothing turns. Loneliness
Is spun within. I swing
From nothing, as a timeless
Pendulum.

This is the needle's eye
Through which I cannot pass,
And I am not myself,
But dreamed by someone else.
I did not think
That it would be like this.

Jack Clemo has a Vision of Heaven and Hell

1

So this is heaven, and there's no one here I know.
Who will guide me, write upon my palm?
Ah, now I understand. The words will flow
As water through my mind. There are children,
The dispossessed, and those who spent their lives
In fear and knew no joy. But where among them
Are the saved, elected long before the Fall?

Where are the angels tossing down their crowns,
The thrones and palaces, the special place for me?
There are no gold or shining crowns, nor palaces
Of bright delight. The self-elect and righteous
Don't stay here. Their souls are not yet made,
Their pride's too strong. They are in bondage still.

For those who find their happiness within
The marriage bed, their heaven rests on earth.
So it is, perhaps, for me. There is a barrier.
Just a little pause beyond, the great immortals

Stand, joined by those I most despise
For careless sex and self-indulgencies in art.

Yet they are closer here than I can ever be,
Whose only sins are those inherited
From Eve. I am once more a misfit
Where I thought to be at home,
Bidden to the Lord's right side.
Why are sinners welcome more than me?

2

The cacophony of hell breaks
On my long-deaf ears. Light now burns
My once blind eyes. All around me
Preachers shout as in some Babel's tower.
'Hear my truth, learn my way, be saved for me
Today. I hold heaven's key'.

Little girls with naked limbs prance and dance
About the floor. They smile their naughty smiles,
Purse their lips for kisses, wicked in their innocence.
All my little Edens gather here to mock and tempt

My flesh, while the preachers cry to God
To bring down fire, thunderbolts and death.

But Death just smiles, passing unhindered
Through the mob. He takes my hand, leads me
To a cliff's high edge, shows me a desert
Without end. A group are gathered at the cliff,
Crying in protest and dismay. 'Why us, why us?
We are the righteous ones. We are not as others.

We have not sinned. We punished the wicked,
Judged the ungodly, made our children fear
The Lord, be terrified of God. We are the good'.
Yet as I watch, they fall towards the arid sand.
I know now they erred in pride, rejoicing
In their holiness and other people's pain.

I turned my back on sorrow years ago,
Naming it the Devil's gain. I was determined
To know only joy, and find my God-picked wife
As Browning found his bride, Elizabeth.
I found both God and heaven in my marriage bed.

Why should I now see Hell?

3

I lie in silent darkness here in Dorset's soil.

I have escaped the clay-world's thrall.

The symbols of God's wrath no longer rise

As cruel machines beneath a brooding sky.

Demonic powers have fled, the wilderness restored,

And earth grows green and fertile once again.

Decades ago I prophesied I'd find in Dorset's land

A richer harvest yield than I had known before. I saw,

Though blearily, Sturminster bridge and sun-gold fields

Laid out to welcome me. This is my new frontier.

I wait now for my elected bride to come and join me

In the grave, to sleep within the earth's embrace.

Byron Recalls San Lazzaro

Byron Recalls San Lazzaro

In the pearly light
Of winter mornings
I took my gondola
Across the shimmering lagoon.

Long smooth strokes
Led me to San Lazzaro
Where cypress trees and olive groves
Made me welcome,

And the friendly learned
Monks were pleased I studied
Their hard and complex tongue,
Fastening my mind upon Armenian

Glyphs. I helped them with the English
Grammar book. God knows we need

Such men as these to show a better
Way beyond our worldliness.

I found some Gospel pages there
Not known to us. Though the Latin
Was corrupt, I translated them
Into our tongue – but I suspect

They have been lost through
Someone's carelessness and fear
Of small ecclesiastic minds.

I am a better Christian than those

Who are paid to be. No matter
Now, we all are dead; poor Shelley
From the lake, whose unburnt heart
Was snatched from out the pyre,

And me from fever in a righteous
Cause. I am glad I died for Greece.
Remember us sometimes when you pray.
Now let me sleep again.

Shelley Reflects Upon his Death

This time I was Shelley-bait
To all the force of wind and wave.
We could not outrun the storm
To reach Lerici, we were not fast enough.
Mary always said my schooner was unsafe.

With hindsight now, I know
The ballast meant we carried too much weight,
I should have taken down some sail.
But I knew this was my fate the day
My doppelganger came
And pointed to the sea.

How strange the things we grasp
When facing death. I snatched
John Keats's book, thrust it in
My coat to keep it safe.
Well, we're both safe now, Keats and I,
Beside the pyramid of Caius Cestius

Where the wild flowers bloom

In the Roman spring.

Safe too from calumny, the jealous gripes

Of those who write pitch-black reviews

To please the taste of would-be

Intellectuals. You John, who did

Much good and never harm to those

You knew, were welcomed home

By great immortal souls who welcome me.

I take no thought of what

The future thinks. Our work

Alone will speak for us.

Muse in the Abyss

Muse in the Abyss

Rapunzel had not let down her hair.

There was no witch, no piercing thorns –

Yet he was blind, had never heard.

Beyond his hand and foot the world

Had disappeared. He was suspended

In a great abyss. Air moved, a warm

Breeze touched his face. He raised

His hands to catch the sun, the rain,

The snow – whatever came.

A forefinger, extended by a cane,

Descartes said, could learn the true

Dimensions of an eye-deceiving room.

What cane could probe the height,

The depth, the width of this strange void?

He seemed to swing, like Whitman's spider,
In a vast and empty tomb. Perhaps some wide-
Winged Muse would aid him in the pit.

Had they blinded him for pride in speaking
With his hands? Was Polhymnia jealous
He could always read the mime?

Angels, Muses, gods, they recognise
Our human fear. Mind and brain
Can whirl as spinning tops when nothing
Breaks the dream. This place is not made
Of gingerbread. The poisoned spindle waits.

Those who can reach out to touch,
Communicate, share the exile in life's
Lone brokenness. Maybe in this great loss
The human and the numinous may meet.

Usher's Ghost

I am the ghost within the genes.

I lock up sound inside the womb,

I tie the tongue to knotting speech,

Bring the dimming of the day's bright light,

The slow implosion of the wider sight.

This is circumstance. The brain and intellect

Must leap to break the chains, to grasp

A life ahead. I bring no easy path.

Ambition's goal is just the hard

And lonely slog to grasp the symbols

That the mind must comprehend

When sound is never heard.

I slip silently towards the playground

And the class. The missed goal,

The slipped ball is mine.

I make the teacher's voice grow faint,

I blur the words upon the board.

You can ignore me. I am

The elephant within the room.

Why should I come for you?

I am impartial, and quite

Indifferent to humankind.

When the Silence Came

When the silence came

It took his breath away.

The light he'd never seen

Laid shadows on the bed.

When the silence came,

The waters closed about his head.

No sound or music broke

The quietness. He was afraid.

When the silence came

It bound him, helpless in its grip.

He forced his fingertips

To memory of once played notes,

The pleasure of his lover's flesh,

When the silence came.

Part Two

1

I am Happy to Discuss Disability

I am Happy to Discuss Disability

I am happy to discuss disability

In a thoughtful, professional and academic way,

Aiming to get some laughs and soften

What others think a frightful thing,

Fearing the mirror image that suggests,

'God, it might be me'.

Smiling and giving out good vibes is best,

It works for me. Most people smile,

And many chat and really want to help –

You must enable them, anticipate and plan.

Be firm in what you need. Leave people feeling good.

The personal, experiential side

Needs close rein. Yet like a bouquet garnie,

It flavours all the rest. Distilled,

It brings a piquant dish.

My nature's happy. I don't do
Performing crip. Though technically blind,
I'm no computer savvy blink.
Being so gregarious, I don't
Like being quite so deaf.

I have no wish to retrace my steps.
Anger, grief and pain have passed,
And I am grateful for what is left.
These ills that flesh is heir to
Interact with age, so there's little
Leeway there, only the will, as Kipling
Says, to hold on hard and hope
The mind still works. Dementia can take it all.

A long time since, I forced myself
To make the sacrifice of praise,
Keep faith with life and seize the day.

Bodies may grow weak, eyes blear

And sound grow faint, and we no longer
Dance, except in sleep.

This is the human lot.

Do not be disconsolate,
For death releases us from this,
Our fleeting, insubstantial dream.

Love Apple

Love Apple

Sun-bright windows glazed with dust,
Scent of hot soil. On the wooden slats
Above my head, a forest of tomato plants
Draped like Christmas trees with red,
Green, yellow baubles shining in the light.
The man with grimy fingers handed me
A tiny orange fruit to eat.
Crisp skin and flesh burst against my teeth
And tongue, filled my mouth with such
Delight I thought my heart would sing
As Eve's had done, the day she took
Her first sweet apple bite.

Beyond the Green

Beyond the green, a path led
Towards a low bridge across
A shallow stream, then a field
And the distant railway line.
Avoiding cowpats, I'd reach
The stile leading to the lines
And cross with care. You had to listen
For the humming of the trains
That ran quite slowly then on steam.
I was ignoring warning signs,
Knowing I took a risk.

Between the hedges and the cereal crop
In the next field, a track led towards
A five-bar gate, the road, and a long
Dark railway arch where brick walls
Ran with damp and pigeons fluttered,
Frightening in their flight. If I shouted out,
My voice would echo in a spooky way,
Making me more afraid. I was relieved

To see the light ahead, the Golden Lion pub,
The wide and friendly green.

Uncle Joe

Uncle Joe was king in his sisters' homes.

Spent six months in Darlington at Edie's place,

Six with Rose in Romanby. He had the best chair

In each living room, could smoke indoors,

While their husbands had to go outside. He liked

A pipe or good cigar.

His hair was thick and wavy, but had

Turned quite white the day his mother died,

Leaving him five sisters to bring up. He ruled

Their lives. His word was law, he was their

Patriarch, their guide.

He managed two theatres, in Peterborough

Then Carlisle, knew the Shakespeare speeches

Off by heart, liked vaudeville, fell in love with movies

When they came, but caught a flea in the Empire,

Darlington, and never went again.

I helped to nurse him as he died, using all

My Junior Red Cross skills. He was a heavy man
To roll across the bed. He left me five pounds
In his will. I thought that I was rich.

The Drove Road

If you take the sudden turn
Off the pavement by the Great North Road
Between Darlington and Coatham Mundeville,
Past the dingy bungalow surrounded
By dark trees, you'll find yourself
On an ancient drovers' track,
Dipping beneath tall elms where rooks
Caw and roost at evening time.
A low-walled humped-back bridge
Spans the little beck that runs
Between wide fields of meadow flowers.

I used to walk there with my little dog
Many years ago. On the right,
A sandy crater pierced by rabbit holes,
Made by a German bomb that missed
The rail line ruled by the Flying Scot.

On the left, hawthorn bushes climbed
A slope where I'd sit among the purple vetch,

Buttercups and celandines, threading
Daisy chains, splitting stems with a fingernail
As the clouds piled like mountain
Ranges in the sky.
I never found where that road led
And never saw a soul upon the path,
Yet thought I moved among
A company of ghosts.

Redcar Beach

Gray concrete pillboxes peered
Square-eyed towards the cold North sea,
Seeking covert German ships, the wicked
Snake-head of a periscope, the levelling shell.
Barbed wire coiled the coarse grass dunes
And rabbit holes, catching incautious legs.
Near-empty sands, flecked black with engine oil
From blown-up ships, stretched beneath
A lowering sky, while drowning sailors
Danced their hornpipes fathoms deep.
When the seas give up their dead will they
Dance with me on Redcar beach?

Aycliffe Angels

Evening Flight

There was a huge sound

As the geese flew high

Above the rectory lawn.

Their wings smashed

The vectored air. The leader

Changed his place.

Far below, we ate

The home reared lamb

Killed in a local abattoir,

The fresh picked beans,

Young broccoli, potatoes newly

Pulled from out the ground.

The sun dropped, and all around

The country settled for the night.

Around the church, a sudden flare

Of light. The steeple clock

And those within the house struck

Time, echoing the beats of flight.

The Sleepers

The rocks are sleeping in the sun.
They dream, remembering
Earth's deep fires, and how they ran
With fluid ease within the steep core's veins
To rise in crimson plumes beneath an ancient sky.
They have hungered. Consumed small creeping things
In pretty shells and monsters thundering
On misted shores. Strange birds with dragon heads
Have nested on their steepest crags and screamed
Defiance at the youthful sun.

The rocks are sleeping in the sun.
Wind and fire, ice and rain, have shaped
Their forms. Lightening strikes have split their seams,
And oceans drowned their peaks before they rose
In thunder to the skies again. The gods
Walk here, and write their ancient names
Upon this wilderness. Step here with care,
The rocks are sleeping in the sun.

Aftermath

The sky was lit by orange flares.

White tracer lines of bullets

Etched the glare –

Then the crump of bombs.

We hid beneath the stairs.

Even the atheists remembered

Long forgotten prayers.

Afterwards we watched black

Body bags loaded onto carts

By men in yellow suits.

Soldiers gazed stolidly,

Machine guns poised.

Some smoked cigarettes.

They looked like us.

A thin rain fell as a brown bird

Sang . Someone touched my arm,

Said: "It's always like this.

Go home, if you can".

Harriet Lane Paints Flowers

Delphiniums are very tall
This year. I'll use cerulean blue,
A tiny dot of crimson lake
Within each fragile bloom.

Delphiniums were very tall
In summer thirty-nine,
The sixth form too. Good girls,
Lots of A's, prizes too.
Most went for uniforms, not gowns,
And now lie underground.
I'll use burnt umber for the soil
Beneath the dark green leaves.

So many gone, even my John
Who left his hard-earned Chair
To die outside Tobruk.
Tears puddle the crimson lake.
Sometimes they fall upon
His crimson robe, kept in

My old school trunk, strewn
With lavender, and rosemary
For remembrance.

'Always take your fences straight!'
Mother said at Pony Club.
I always did. Rode hard, rode straight,
Felt the powerful muscles clench
Beneath my knees, fell hard at times.

Today I ride my life. Years fly
As clouds, fences still loom high
And delphiniums grow tall,
Shedding their tissue flowers
Across my painted lawn.

The Courtier

He waits, patient and still,
Notices how the page's buttons
Widen above his bum,
Notices a golden fringe
Is hanging loosely from
The heavy velvet curtaining—
He must remind a maid
To tuck it in.

He waits, silent as the busts
Of long-dead generals,
Princes, ancient poets, an old
Queen, with pursed lips
And vacant gaze. He sees
The tiny beads of sweat along
The Minister's close-shaven jaw;
Smells his fear, the stench of sin.

A sudden itch between
His genitals presents a small

Insistent irritant. It challenges
His calm impassive stance.
He clenches muscles, hoping
That his bow relieves the stress.
Beyond the window where
The torn fringe hangs, a clutch
Of little dogs frisk round
The back stairs page. One dashes in
And quickly nips above the ankle bone,
Dodging a covert kick.

The courtier thinks he's stood here
All his lives in these vast
Powerless corridors.
He knows that walking backwards
Is a well-learned art, requiring
Balance and an iron will. Silently
He watches practised lies emerging
Smoothly from half-smiling mouths.
His discretion is quite absolute
Concerning lovers smuggled
In by limousine at night.

Later he will visit his young
Catamite, a pretty lad with peach-
Bloom cheeks for pleasuring.

His wife will greet him with
A distant kiss beneath the photos
Of their sons in kilts beside
A royal bride. They have their pride.

Her New Gloves

Smooth nosed, the ivory stretchers
Press inside each closely folded
Orifice. Lightly squeezed, soft skin
Expands. Fine milled powder puffed
Within facilitates the path
Of each white hand.

She stands, admiring in the glass
Her slender silk clad form,
The lustrous pearls around her neck,
The orchids winding in her hair.

With pointed toes she moves
Within the clustered candles' heat,
Held lightly by his military grasp.
They swirl together
In the daring, gay new waltz.

She does not think about
Her partner on the field of war,

Though she may dream of him
With sword unsheathed and poised,
A young Achilles at another Troy.
Nor does she wonder how
Her supple gloves were made so fine
From life that leapt in summertime.

Thin blades have stripped all flesh and hair,
And urine cured the hard dry skin
With dog shit carefully rubbed in.
Children pick the stinking dirt
Down Abbey Street and Willow Walk,
To carry a few pennies worth
To Horney Lane where tanners work.

From dirt of earth we all may come,
To dirt of earth return, while some
Will dance in mirrored halls
With gloves of finest skin.

Aycliffe Angels

In the cemetery

Angels have chipped wings,

Missing fingers, noses clipped

By frost, carelessness or vandals'

Mindless 'fun'.

On buses running

Up the Great North Road,

In markets, shops and living rooms,

Women sometimes hide their wounded

Hands, a missing eye, memories

Of exploded friends.

Think of them,

Their lipstick brightly red,

Tight-rolled hair and gravy-browning legs -

Those eye-brow pencil seams

Required a steady hand -

Dancing to the swing-time band.

In low-lying huts
Between the shock-absorbing bunds
Where dandelions and daisies bloomed,
Seven hundred million cartridges were filled
With flowering death in secret,
Out of view.

Between the clean and dirty shelves
No fags or matches were allowed,
No metal zips, or Kirby grips to hold the hair,
Nothing that could cause a sudden spark,
A lethal flare. Knotted headscarves,
Ribbon-fastened overalls, were body-armour
For those girls.

Uncelebrated and unpraised, forgotten
Through the years, they played
A lethal game, more dangerous
Than whipping-top or knuckle bones.
They still had kids, ate powdered egg
And spam for tea, and dug their gardens
For our victory.

The Man Who Killed Archimedes

"You've killed Archimedes,"

The Centurion said.

"Aye, he's right proper dead,

But he did for our lads

With his great balls of lead

On our ships in the Med.

If he'd left off his scribbling,

He wouldn't be dead!

"Kept a nice drop of wine,

Good honey and bread

And I watched as the flies

Fed on his head.

Drank some of his beer,

Wrote 'Lucilus woz ere',

Then had a great night

In a pretty whore's bed."

Durham Story

Caedmon's Song

Caedmon sang the Lord's creation song;
He sang because the Lord had loosed
His tongue, given him the maker's gift
To praise and magnify His name.
He sang of heaven and the pains of hell,
Man's fall and Christ's redeeming work,
And how God's glory fills the middle earth
Beneath the canopy of sky.

Abbess Hilda took him from the stable shed,
Placed him in the fellowship of holy men
To learn the Gospel's words. A humble soul,
Of lowly birth, he sang at heaven's command.
Death took him gently from this world,
God's praise upon his tongue.

Homage to Bede

How shall I praise you, Bede,
When honouring you?
Child of Jarrow monastary, you watched
Monks and masons in their daily tasks,
The merchants travelling to the coast
With creaking wheels and clipping hooves,
The flight of birds against the northern sky
And how they swirled and tumbled in the light.

You noted how time turns its shadow
On the walls, as the sun's shafts move
Across the floor. You marked our years AD,
And how to calculate the date of Easter Day.
You knew the cycles of the moon, the rise
And fall of tides, and that the earth was round.

You understood the poetry of common men,
But sang Gregorian chant in choir and taught
Poetic metre in the Latin tongue.
Despite your learning and your intellect,

You were, I think, a humble man
Whose joy was praising God
And teaching from His Word.

Durham Story

Each massive pillar squares faith's circle here,

Where skilful hands still shape this house

Of prayer throughout the centuries.

Many stitched belief in silks, with gold and silver

Threads, piercing again the Saviour's face

And side with sharpened steel.

Beyond the altar, beneath a simple heavy stone,

St. Cuthbert lies, no longer incorruptible.

This seems right for one who loved his hermitage

Of rock and sky, despising riches later lavished

On his plundered monument. He treasured most

His simple cross and Gospel in fine minuscule.

Where earth's sands are turned to glass,

Richly coloured in the rainbow's tints,

The early morning sun illuminates

The risen Christ, circled by his saints,

Within the eastern window rose. The bells ring out,

While here below, the choir begins its antiphon.

I Thought of You

Salute to Cavafy

A cheap room

In Rue de la Huchette.

Bed, bidet, Turkish

Toilet on the stairs.

I can't recall his name,

Names have fled.

The bad men, the con men,

The good men, the one man.

Some are dead.

Do they remember me?

How we came so close in breath,

In sweat, shining slippery

Flesh, the quick release?

Perhaps forgetting keeps us sane.

I Thought of You

I thought of you gazing
From your twelfth floor rooms
At Puget Sound and Mount Rainier,
And how we watched Notre Dame
From cheap Left Bank hotels.

We walked hand in hand as lights flickered
Like coloured candles on the Seine,
Seeing the Louvre, Mazarin's dome
And all the steep-roofed ancient houses
Black against the luminous far sky.

We ate cold chicken with tangerines,
Crisp, soft baguettes, drank sparkling
Wine and then made love.
All that was long ago, yet still I miss you
As an amputated limb. There is
An emptiness, so I am pleased
We meet sometimes in dreams.

We came apart quite slowly,
Cell by living cell, until the space
Became immense, ocean and continent
Lying in between. But my hands
Remember you; your flesh,
The pattern of your body's hair,
The warm softness of your beard
And how I'd plait and roll it up,
Making it look neat. Now your photos
Show it loose, very long and white.

When we last embraced in LA's
Departure lounge, I thought you felt
So frail, delicate as leaf-lace,
You who'd been so powerful, so strong.

We are unwound by time. Those tiny
Minutes grind the gears of youth.
There is no magic key for turning back
The years, nor should there be.
You watch the boats on Puget Sound,
Our grandchildren at play,

While I turn words and words around.

On the Telephone

On the telephone the other night

We almost had a row, the first

For quite some time.

Anger sizzled up the air to hit

The satellite that turned impervious

And calm. As usual he tried to justify

His action of non-action, his habit

Of ignoring things, believing

Christian Science-style the problem

Was not there. I wanted to shout:

"Diabetes took your toes, now it steals

Your sight – and you do not resist". He said:

"I deal with things my way". "Well, yes,

You always did". I felt the rage

Coil inside my chest, and knew

Its other name was grief.

It's Strange

It's strange that your sudden death
Should bring a loss of pain, anger and regret.
There is a sense of peace. A long-lived life has closed.
Your son and grandson found on your knees in prayer.
I can imagine that, and how swiftly your soul
Would seek its God, finding harbour there.
I'm glad I read that poem to you a second time
When last I called. It spoke of Paris, and once shared days.

We who are left move on. Voice speaks to voice,
Bounced of satellites, words fly through cyberspace.
We are so far apart. It is the modern way.
But I would not wish it so.
After the fire, you will be given to the earth,
The water and the air of Mount Rainier's paradise.

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