ABSTRACT

Jack Clemo's Vocation to Evangelical Poetry and Erotic Marriage:
an Examination of his Poems of Personal Tribute and Critique

Heather R. Martin, Ph.D.

Director: Ralph C. Wood, Ph.D.

Jack Clemo, whose dates are 1916-1994, calls to us from the margins: a working-class voice from deep within in the china clayworks of Cornwall, having been educated outside the conventional system, contending with deafness and blindness for most of his life; a believer whose fierce Evangelical non-conformist religiosity was at odds with an increasingly secularized Britain; a poet who, insisting that his art serve God no less than the world, embraced the erotic as a necessary component of Christian faith and life; and thus a man whose yearning for both marital and poetic companionship is as heartfelt as it is unyielding.

Clemo believed he had a divine calling to be an evangelical poet and a married man: a dual vocation that seemed impossible given his physical, social, and educational limits. In the process of fulfilling that vocation, which he did despite poverty, blindness, and deafness, his poetry often "gives testimony" through the varied artistic and spiritual influences he encountered. These portrait poems and dramatic monologues generally fall

into three categories: theologians and preachers, saints and missionaries, and artists and writers. For Clemo, these testimony poems document the verity of the Christian faith that he both aspired to and lived by.

The predominant themes that connect these poems are evangelism and marriage, reflecting Clemo's concern with fulfilling his twin vocation. This dissertation concentrates on how Jack Clemo's quest to fulfill his vocation intersects with his dramatic monologues and portrait poems, demonstrating that his aspirations shaped these poems and in turn that these poems helped Clemo to imagine and define what it means to be an evangelical poet and a priest of erotic marriage. He did so by constantly testing his voice against others, writing himself into their lifeworld and allowing them to inhabit his poems. His portraits of actual personages also provide concrete expression of Clemo's evangelical witness to the "good news" and the redemptive possibilities of a Christ-centered marriage. Moreover, these figures, whether they affirmed, challenged, or revised Clemo's vision, offered the poet a way to interact with the world through an artistry of encounter, dialog and imagined community.

Jack Clemo's Vocation to Evangelical Poetry and Erotic Marriage:
an Examination of his Poems of Tribute and Critique

by

Heather R. Martin, B.S., M.Div.

A Dissertation

Approved by the English Department

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Dianna M. Vitanza, Ph.D., Chairperson

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Approved by the Dissertation Committee

____
Ralph C. Wood, Ph.D., Chairperson

____
David Lyle Jeffrey, Ph.D.

____
Luke Ferretter, Ph.D.

____
Barry A. Harvey, Ph.D.

____
Joshua S. King, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School
December 2010

____
J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

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CHRONOLOGY FOR JACK CLEMO

Date	Event	Poems Considered in Dissertation
1916	Born in Goonamarris, St. Stephen-in-Brannel, Cornwall, U.K.	
1921	First attack of iritis	
1929	Second attack of iritis; met Evelyn	
1935	Permanently deaf	
1947	*Wilding Graft* (novel) Atlantic Award in Literature	
1949	*Confession of a Rebel* (autobiography)	
1951	*The Clay Verge*	“Neutral Ground,” “The Clay-tip Worker,” “The Excavator,” “Sufficiency,” “A Calvinist in Love,” “The Burnt Bush”
1951	*The Wintry Priesthood* Arts Council Festival of Britain prize for poetry	“Cornish Anchorite,” “The Broadening Spring,” “A Thorn in the Flesh,” “The Two Beds,” "A Kindred Battlefield,” “The Broad Winter,” “Priest Out of Bondage”
1954	Permanent white blindness	
1958	*The Invading Gospel* (theological manifesto)	
1961	*The Map of Clay* Awarded a civil list pension	“Tregerthen Shadow,” “Max Gate,” “Daybreak in Dorset,” “Lunar Pentecost,” “Beyond Lourdes”

Date	Event	Poems Considered in Dissertation
1964	*Penguin Modern Poets* (several poems included)	
1967	*Cactus on Carmel*	“Massabeille,” “The Riven Niche,” “Charlotte Nichols,” “Friar’s Crag,” “Carmel”
1968	Married Ruth Peaty in October	
1971	*The Echoing Tip*	“I Go Gentle,” “Genevan Towers,” “Mould of Castile,” “Mary Shelley in Geneva,” “Ste Gudule and St Agnes,” “Simone Weil,” “Harpoon,” “Alfred Wallis,” “William Blake Notes a Demonstration,” “Katherine Luther,” “After Billy Bray,” “On the Death of Karl Barth “
1975	*Broad Autumn*	“Wart and Pearl,” “Toyohiko Kagawa,” “Testament,” “John Wesley,” “A Night In SoHo,” “Josephine Butler,” “Comeley Bank”
1977	Eveline Clemo dies	
1980	*Marriage of a Rebel* (second autobiography)	
1981	Honorary D. Litt from University of Exeter	
1983	*The Bouncing Hills* (humorous dialect tales)	
1984	Move to Weymouth, Devon	
1986	*Different Drummer*	“Charlotte Mew,” “Virginia Woolf,” “A Choice About Art,” “Holman Hunt,” “Eric Gill,” “Henry Martyn,” “Juan Diego,” “At Hardy’s Birthplace,” “Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” “Jim Elliot,” “Mappowder Revisited,” “Florence Barclay”

Date	Event	Poems Considered in Dissertation
1987	Trip to Venice, Italy	
1988	*Selected Poems* - Poetry Book Society Recommendation; Reprint of *Confession of a Rebel* and *Marriage of a Rebel*	
1989	*Banner Poems* (local descriptive pieces)	
1993	*Approach to Murano* Trip to Venice and Florence	"Link At Oxford," "Reception: Pope John Paul II," "Jean-Pierre de Caussade," "Hudson Taylor to Maria," "The Kilns," "Festal Magnet," "Palazzo Rezzonico"
1994	Jack Clemo dies on July 25th	
1995	*The Cured Arno*	"Beatific Vision," "Newman," "George Müller," "Casa Guidi," "Jack London"
2000	*The Clay Kiln* (novel)	
2003	*The Awakening – Poems Newly Found*	"Charles Haddon Spurgeon"

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ATM: *Approach to Murano* (1993)

AWK: The Awakening – Poems Newly Found (2003)

BA: *Broad Autumn* (1975)

CA: *The Cured Arno* (1995)

COC: *Cactus On Carmel* (1967)

COR: *Confession of a Rebel* (1949; 1988)

DD: *Different Drummer* (1986)

ET: *The Echoing Tip* (1971)

IG: *The Invading Gospel* (1958)

MOC: *The Map of Clay* (1961)

MOR: *The Marriage of a Rebel* (1980; 1988)

SP: *Selected Poems* (1988)

WP: *The Wintry Priesthood* (1951)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

One of my favorite lines of poetry comes from the King James Bible: "Every good gift and every perfect gift cometh down from the father of lights, in whom there is no variableness neither shadow of turning." My debt of gratitude to the "father of lights" is inexpressible, but to paraphrase Saint Augustine, it is better to make the attempt rather than remain silent.

And speaking of saints, there is my dissertation director Dr. Ralph C. Wood, whose kind heart and savage pen it has been my great privilege to work with. With patience and professional integrity he would alternately nurture a good idea and annihilate bad prose. Dr. Wood's depth of commitment and dedication as a mentor and teacher has indelibly formed my own standard, which I shall strive to achieve even if I cannot hope to do so.

The gentlemen making up my committee have more merit in both professional scholarship and personal character than I have space to acknowledge. For that reason, I will mention but a single contribution that has been the most meaningful to me out of the many these generous men have made. I owe sincere gratitude to Dr. Jeffrey for offering guidance far, far beyond what I had a right to expect and for one of the most inspiring letters I have ever received; Dr. Harvey for believing in my abilities when I found it difficult to do so; Dr. Ferreter for saying "I trust you" at the perfect

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Finally, there are the three people to whom this dissertation is dedicated. There is great pleasure and pride in acknowledging my husband, Alan, without whom there would be no dissertation (or anything else). His constant emotional, spiritual, and practical support was a revelation in selflessness and love. My darling Henry, who arrived during the process, has been patient and forgiving. And, the prayerful support of Colleen Douglass remains of inestimable value as a demonstration that all things are possible.

To Alan & Henry
for never faltering

&

To Colleen
for never doubting

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Thus far, no one has explored in depth the significance of Cornish poet Jack Clemo's literary work. Though there have been some serious scholarly articles on Clemo, there has been only one dissertation to date.[1] Perhaps this inattention is due to Clemo's having what Rowan Williams calls "a difficult and contested legacy" (199). It is not that Clemo's poetry is inaccessible or intellectually rigorous so much as that it is raw and unapologetically religious and, more often than not, unabashedly erotic. Clemo, whose dates are 1916-1994, calls to us from the margins: a working-class voice from deep within in the china clayworks of Cornwall, having been educated outside the conventional system, contending with deafness and blindness for most of his life; a believer whose fierce Evangelical non-conformist religiosity was at odds with an increasingly secularized Britain; a poet who, insisting that his art serve God no less than the world, embraced the erotic as a necessary component of Christian faith and life; and thus a man whose yearning for both marital and poetic companionship is as heartfelt as it is unyielding. For these reasons and more Jack Clemo stands on the margins and his work is

[1] Andrew Symons has an excellent essay, "Jack Clemo's Mystical-Erotic Quest," in *Cornish Studies*, Second Series, Vol. 13, 2005, pp. 70-98; Stephen John Lane's dissertation for the University of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, entitled " Jack Clemo: Cartographer of Grace," was submitted in 1989.

thus labeled "difficult"—yet it is for just these reasons that he needs to be rediscovered as a remarkable minor poet. Brian Louis Pearce, a fellow Nonconformist poet and admirer rightly points out there should be cause for concern when the literary world denies readers

> the width and force of creative work on offer by this tendency to ignore original work that is not 'main stream' [. . . .] But it is a challenge that the Nonconformist esthete must face up to if he or she is not to succumb (a) to silence or be unpublished; (b) to write meekly to formulae directed by the literary establishment; or (c) to write edifying paperbacks (worthy in every sense but that of creative achievement) on the Christian Martyrs, the Christian Home, the Christian and Family Life [. . .] or on How to Pray in Forty Easy Lessons. (80)

Clemo neither gave up nor gave in to the various pressures he faced as a marginalized writer. The result is a highly personal poetry imbued with vivid energy and immediacy that transcends his material circumstances while remaining firmly rooted in them.

Clemo believed he had a divine calling to be an evangelical poet and a married man: a dual vocation that seemed impossible given his physical, social, and educational handicaps. In the process of fulfilling that vocation, which he did despite poverty, blindness, and deafness, his poetry often "gives testimony" about the varied artistic and spiritual influences he encountered. These portrait poems and dramatic monologues generally fall into three categories: theologians and preachers, saints and missionaries, and artists and writers. The historical figures he takes for his poetic subjects range widely; some are well known and others provincial. For Clemo, these

testimony poems document the verity of the Christian faith he both aspired to and lived by.

The predominant themes that connect these poems are evangelism and marriage, reflecting Clemo's concern with fulfilling his vocation. For Clemo, his writing talent was meant to witness to "the gospel of God," as St. Paul calls it, and his experience took the form of a "mystical-erotic quest," to use the subtitle of his second autobiography. This dissertation concentrates on how Jack Clemo's quest to fulfill his vocation intersects with his dramatic monologues and portrait poems, demonstrating how his aspirations shaped these poems and in turn how these poems helped Clemo to imagine and define what it means to be an evangelical poet and priest of erotic marriage by constantly testing his voice against others, writing himself into their lifeworld and allowing them to inhabit his poems. The real irony – a wonderful irony—is that Clemo's physical and cultural isolation seems to have produced a poetry of encounter, dialog and imagined community. I will be examining particular poems from across his collection thematically rather than chronologically, as I seek to clarify his dual vocation.

Clemo would not have lived as he did or written his poetry had it not been for his unusual background and Christian faith. One cannot isolate his poetry either from his life or his faith. His belief is such an intrinsic force in his work that it cannot be ignored or discounted. Clemo is in good company in this respect, as one could not faithfully consider Herbert, Donne, or

Hopkins without examining their religious beliefs. However, unlike those three poets, Clemo does not fit neatly into any specific, cohesive theological or intellectual tradition. Though Clemo identifies himself as the "Calvinist," others have called him a Calvinist-Methodist, a term that demands some clarification. The Methodism of Clemo's maternal grandparents and his mother, his early childhood faith, left a favorable impression, but "Wesley taught that there was always a chanciness about faith: though God gave it, He did not guarantee that it would last" (IG 53). It was through his reading of Calvin, Jonathan Edwards and particularly C. H. Spurgeon, who "affirmed God's predestination," that Clemo came to call himself a Calvinist (IG 54). For Clemo, this means belief in a sovereign God who through grace alone draws his people to repentance and faith, and through the Bible has given truth that can be expressed as dogma.

Yet the way in which Clemo understands Calvinistic theology through personal experience is more reminiscent of John Wesley and his "strangely warmed heart." Also, his declaration that "I am concerned only that my theology should be in complete harmony with the Word of God and the facts of observation and experience" (IG 146) seems approximate to three of the four items in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, reason, and experience (minus the tradition).[2] Clemo offers: "Though Calvin had more exactly

[2] David Bebbington observes that both the Calvinist Evangelicals and the Methodists in England believed "the holy life had four salient characteristics . . . it opened with conversion, it was sustained by the power of the cross, it was fed by

defined the creed which God had forced upon me, it was always to Luther that I turned for the human warmth and life-blood of that creed" (COR 226). Clemo is attracted to Luther mainly because of his earthy confessionalism and happy domesticity. Many of his poems combine the traditional subjects of Calvinist theology, such as the total depravity of creation (man and nature), election, divine providence, and prevenient grace with raw imagery and the passionate voice of personal experience.

Clemo's Protestantism is without structure and governance except for its exaltation of the Bible as the final authority in matters of both faith and practice. The drawback to this theologically thin formation is that it gave Clemo no framework for discerning the mainlines of the Christian tradition—how they develop, when they overlap, where they are in conflict, etc. Hence he puts Billy Graham alongside Karl Barth, Charles Spurgeon next to Robert Browning, as well as drawing liberally from the Catholic tradition those elements that support his pursuit of erotic marriage. Clemo draws on influences so disparate that there are outright clashes that no unified mind could encompass. Yet it was intrinsic to his evangelicalism (as well as to his being an autodidact) that he adopted whatever was useful at the moment, without regard to such clashes. The majority of his poetry, however, overcomes the limitations of his inchoate evangelical theological tradition,

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reading the Bible, and it issued in vigorous activity" (*Holiness in Nineteenth – Century England* 41). Clemo's profession of faith embraced all of these.

partly because he learns how to sympathetically encounter other perspectives through his dramatic monologues and portrait poems.

His life was such a powerful shaping force on his theological and artistic insights that it merits special attention. For these reasons and because American audiences do not know him well, the beginning chapters of this dissertation give some biographical information on Clemo, discuss some of the most important shaping influences on his understanding of his vocation, and explicate a few of his early poems to show how his life and belief were translated into his poetry. Chapter two of this dissertation recounts the aspects of Clemo's story that are relevant to this dissertation. His two autobiographies, *Confessions of a Rebel* and *Marriage of a Rebel: A Mystical-Erotic Quest*, along with his "theological manifesto" *The Invading Gospel,* as well as his mother's spiritual autobiography, *I Proved Thee at the Waters*, all serve as primary sources.

The third chapter deals with the major forces that shaped Clemo's sense of vocation and how it took poetic form in his early poetry. Clemo states, "I found most of my literary stimulus in theology, evangelism, and erotic mysticism" (*Contemporary Authors*). The prime influence of the Victorian preacher C. H. Spurgeon is considered, as is Clemo's experience of mystical eros. In Clemo's youth, as he struggled to find a way to harmonize his erotic passion with his Christian faith, he discovered in the marriage and

work of the Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning a "life-pattern" that resolved the tension he felt in his vocation as a Christian artist.

His path toward a full-bodied Christianity was atypical because he was a Dissenting mystic oriented towards the erotic. Though I will address Clemo's specific use of the term "mystic" in chapter one, it is helpful to clarify here that Clemo is not guilty of the modern mistake of making mysticism into a rarified means for uniquely encountering God through a subjective experience. Rather it was essentially a way of seeing and a process of living with fervent Christian commitment, a practice thoroughly grounded in the traditional medieval idea: "Christian mystics may be said to be those who believe in and practice their faith with particular intensity" (McBrien 901). Intrinsic to Clemo's idea of living out his most intense experience of the Christian life was through the vocation of marriage.

Though Clemo's view on mystical marriage is highly personal, it is not his own invention; one need only look to Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Coventry Patmore to find similar echoes of a mystical *eros*. Though Elizabeth Barrett Browning is not a mystic, the spiritual vocation and marital calling of the Christian poet is a prominent theme in her work, particularly the final books of her *Kuntslerroman, Aurora Leigh.* Aurora's poetic and romantic struggles have their resolution in the arms of her beloved Romney, allowing her a vision of the divine through the unifying love of two human bodies, as Romney says: "First God's love. / 'And next,' he smiled, 'the love of wedded

souls, / Which still presents that mystery's counterpart" (Book Nine, l. 880-882).

Patmore shares a similar vision in "Dieu et ma dame" from *Religio poetae, etc.*, where he lays out the analogies between Divine and human love. (His poetic expression of these ideas is found in the *Unknown Eros*, particularly "De Natura Deorum"). However, it is in *The Rod, The Root, and The Flower* that Patmore's ideal seems very similar to Clemo's vision. Patmore exclaims, "Lovers are nothing else than Priest and Priestess to each other of the Divine Manhood and the Divine Womanhood which are in God [. . . a mystical relation] which represents and is in little the union of Christ with the Church" (113). Clemo states that he read Patmore's poetry in 1950, which would be well after he wrote his earliest "Christian" erotic poems (Diary 1945). It is worth comparing an earlier fragment of Clemo's writing on sex and marriage[3] with Patmore's thoughts on marriage from *The Rod, The Root and The Flower*. Bear in mind the comparison is Clemo's unpolished and unpublished fragment from his very early days, likely the time when he was writing his first juvenile poetry in his late teens, with the published prose of a mature writer's later work. First, Clemo's musings:

> There is a trail in the world, beginning back in Eden. It will continue as long as life itself. I have trodden it, but away there in the twentieth century people will forget that. Good people. My people will forget it. Go tell them. Tell them my feet have trodden it, that little despised trail of sex. Tell them my

[3] This piece is pasted on an inside cover of the manuscript for *The Invading Gospel* (1954-1957), with his mother's handwriting: "copied from an earlier fragment" (*The Invading Gospel* MS 68).

> footprints is [sic] there, red in a ? [sic] blood mark, all the way step by step from Eden until the End. It is there, but they cannot see it because of the ignorance which grows like a tangle of thorns about it; because of the lies the devil [h]as instilled into them, generation by generation, they cannot see the glory of the Father in that path which every human must tread. But go & you shall see it. I myself will show it you, but that guidance of my Spirit will come to you through a human like yourself, such love as that I sacrificed that you might have it more abundantly.

And then Patmore's thoughts on the subject:

> That human love which is the precursor and explanation of and initiation into the divine, that purity of purities which rebukes the purest by the revelation of their own unworthiness and incapacity, has been so deeply branded with the charge of impurity, with the charge of being itself the impurity which its celestial candour rebukes in its mortal subjects, that modern preachers and pietists have studiously ignored or positively condemned as carnal and damnable the greatest of all graces and means of grace. "The song of the Bride and the Bridegroom" is no more "heard in the streets" of Jerusalem: these builders have refused the stone which Prophets, Apostles and Saints regarded as the Head of the corner ; and the doctrine of the Incarnation has been emasculated and deprived of its inmost significance and power [. . . .] for mortal love has retained and cultivated the sanctification which religion conferred upon it of old, though religion seems in great part to have forgotten having conferred it. (201-202)

The similarities between Patmore, the Catholic Victorian, and Clemo, the 20th century evangelical Dissenter, suggest Clemo's vocation to an erotic Christian marriage has deep roots going back to the Victorians and ultimately the medieval mystics.

The succeeding chapters focus on those figures who are at the center of his poetry and who give coherence to his many dramatic monologue and portraiture poems. The fourth chapter surveys the writers and other artists

who elucidate Clemo's evangelical vocation as a Christian and an author. It breaks down into two sections: the first deals with poems about non-Christian artists whom Clemo assesses, while the second considers those poems about Christian artists. The fifth chapter centers on the saints and missionaries in Clemo's poetry as they are linked to his vocation for a Christian marriage, which he understood as uniting *eros* and *agape*. The sixth chapter concentrates on the theologians and preachers to whom Clemo is indebted for the shaping of his poetry of conversion and confession.[4]

The arrangement of the chapters marks a progression from the least successful poems in which Clemo's occasional subjective pomposity or moralizing inhibits the reader's sympathy to those more compelling poems that enable readers to make their own engagement with Clemo's chosen historical figures. Though his poetic failures are not common, they tend to occur more often when his subjects are artists and writers. Clemo's poems concerning saints and missionaries are a good deal more successful. Yet there he filters his regard for them through his own concerns with marriage, sometimes yielding unexpected insight and at other times overpowering his subject with his own concerns. In the chapter on theologians and preachers, Clemo combines greater objectivity coinciding with greater nuance. Of course, there are poetic exceptions that contradict this arrangement;

[4] Clemo's confessional poetry is not to be confused with the 20th century school of Confessional poetry, whose notable adherents, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, W. D. Snodgrass, and Anne Sexton used the poetic self to address intense autobiographical experiences of death and traumatic relationships.

however, the categories are useful as a means of focusing on Clemo's vocational concerns of evangelical poetry and marriage. In a concluding final chapter, I consider the implications of Clemo engagement with an imagined community through dramatic monologues and portrait poems as he fulfills his vocation.

Clemo engages historical figures from a position of radical isolation, and so he seeks, in part, to create a supportive community for himself through poetic encounter with artists and writers, saints and missionaries, and theologians and preachers. The way Clemo participates in this created community has the qualities of what literary theorist Norman Holland would call self-replication. In *5 Readers Reading*, Holland offers four principles of literary experience that constitute his reader-response theory. In general, Holland argues that if a reader responds "positively to a literary work, he has been able to put elements of the work together so they act out his own lifestyle. Alternatively, if he has no reaction to a literary work, or a negative one, that tells us he has not been able to use the work to reenact his own style" (Holland 113, 114). As Holland's theory applies to Clemo's case, a "literary work" or text, may be something written or it may be the life and character of the people themselves he is responding to. A favorable response to a text (or person) indicates that the reader found something in the text that mirrors his own defensive mechanisms or way of coping with fears and needs (Holland 115). If the reader is able to match his defensive structure,

then a reader will take material from the text "to create a wish-fulfilling fantasy characteristic of himself" (Holland 117). Finally, the reader synthesizes and translates the story into some kind of interpretation that is pleasing to him or her (Holland 122). "Each act of reading is constructive. It makes something new, something human, something personal—or else no real act of reading takes place" (Holland 121-122). Clemo's character sketches and dramatic monologues exemplify Holland's fourth principle, as he both synthesizes and transforms the stories of historical figures whom he encounters.

While Holland's theory is a helpful hermeneutic tool, it fails to account for the ways Clemo is himself transformed by his engagement with these artists, writers, saints, missionaries, theologians and preachers. Clemo proceeds by seeking to understand his own perspective and be shaped by those figures with an overarching pattern of belief that is not reducible to the privatized theory of reading elaborated by Holland. He is not merely using them as a reflecting mirror, if only because he seeks out those who have themselves have been transformed, whether negatively or positively.

I am engaging in a style of criticism that is at once theological and literary and therefore requires me to deal quite specifically with large theological questions/doctrines, as well as with the specifics of Clemo's prosody. Therefore, against the grain of the so called New Criticism this dissertation might be called an exercise in the old criticism – i.e., Clemo's

own stated intentions will be taken with utmost seriousness, while not finally governing or limiting the critical assessment of the poems. Though the author is front and center, nonetheless careful attention will be paid to the social, political, and religious circumstances that shaped Clemo's life and work. This is but to acknowledge that the poems exist somewhere between the author and the reader—namely between what the poet purposes and what the reader receives. Finally, such a method is not neutral, for it must confess its own outlook and viewpoint. This dissertation therefore is grounded in the Christian tradition wherewith I seek to make not only critical assessment of Clemo's poetry, but also critical retrieval of Clemo's insights into Christian faith and life for our time. This is a legitimate acknowledgement that there is no view from nowhere; all seeing is lensed; all argument is rooted and grounded in one tradition or another. To stand within the Christian tradition is thus to stand in so far as possible where Clemo stood—within a faith that is both personal and testimonial—while acknowledging the character of one's own perspective.

CHAPTER TWO

Clemo in Context: Biographical Overview

> Waters of Meribah.
> I proved thee at the . . . .
> I proved thee.
> Baptized into the death . . . .
> O Shepherd
> Of green pastures!
>
> Jack Clemo: "Growing in Grace"

To fully understand his poetry, one must be familiar with the circumstances of Clemo's life that helped to create such a unique perspective and vision. This chapter will rely primarily on Clemo's two autobiographies, his mother's brief personal memoir, as well as his own personal diaries covering most of his seventy-eight year life span. As this is an introductory chapter rather than a biography, I shall focus only on those biographical elements that have the greatest impact on his poetry, such as his disabilities, working class roots, romantic attachments, and religious formation.

Jack Clemo was born at Goonamarris, near St. Stephen-in-Brannel in the middle of Cornwall, on March 11, 1916, to Eveline (Polmounter) and Reginald Clemo in a four-room clay-miner's cottage that had no electricity, water, or backdoor. The contours of both the looming china clay-dump and the family history would powerfully shape him for the rest of his life. Clemo's mother, Eveline, was born into a loving, devout Methodist family, while Reginald Clemo, his father, grew up with an alcoholic father in a violent

home. Jack Clemo was reluctant to speak openly about his father, though he refers to "ugly secrets" and "tragic disharmonies" attributable to the Clemo bloodline (COR 4, 16). Reginald and Eveline's marriage was unhappy and short-lived: Reginald died in action aboard the H.M.S. Tornado in 1917 before his son was two years old. Clemo saw himself as inheriting the Polmounter kindness, devoutness, and restraint through his mother, while also acquiring the Clemo cruelty, darkness, and sensuality from his father. His struggle with these opposing forces – "brutality and refinement" - greatly influenced the way he discerned both his own life and his vocation as a poet.

Eveline's father, Jack's grandfather, had been a local preacher and there had been three Methodist ministers in her family. (Minister and novelist Joseph Hocking was a cousin.) His mother was a very devout Methodist whose faith was crucial to Clemo, both as a means of support for herself as a widowed mother and as an example to him. It was her faith that helped her through the loss of her first child and the death of her husband. A promising and unusually intelligent boy, Jack suffered his first bout of iritis only a few days shy of his fifth birthday.[1] The disease would eventually blind him by age thirty-nine. His mother recounts in her autobiography, *I Proved Thee at The Waters* (1976), that in this period of deep distress she was on her knees praying and that she was given a revelation of God's presence as she was led to open her Bible at Isaiah 54:13: "and all thy children shall be

[1] Iritis is inflammation predominantly in the iris of the eye. It causes great pain and sensitivity to light.

taught of the Lord, and great shall be the peace of thy children." Clemo acknowledged the significance of this event and later wrote that it was the foundation of both his and his mother's life.[2] The stress that Clemo lays on personal experience of God, his or someone else's, rather than theological doctrines, accounts in part for the intimacy of his poems.

This initial encounter with blindness was traumatic, causing a change in the previously outgoing child: "Those few months of isolation, with the mental nightmare of inarticulate terrors and panics, a reality to which the fears of normal children are mere shadows, had changed me into a thin, pasty-faced brat, dull-eyed, silent and morbid" (COR 28). His teachers were at a loss as to what to do with his withdrawn personality. He returned to school (the infant class) intermittently, but he was a self-described "'problem child' . . . [with] the temperament of one who is vaguely aware of realities beyond normal consciousness, realities unfolding in spiritual light or breeding deep in blood-darkness" (COR 31-32). Though Clemo experienced loneliness and isolation, even then he felt some measure of security because "there was always One who understood . . . [who] was so important that it did not matter much if others misjudged me [. . .]" (COR 34). This faith sustained Clemo under the emotional and mental pressures that accompanied the temperament so at odds with his peers.

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[2] Letter to Andrew C. Symons, 4/10/87, printed in *The Awakening: Poems Newly Found* 8.

There was a second attack of iritis, in his thirteenth year, so that Clemo spent several months in complete darkness on the staircase of his home, where the day "became entirely one of meditation" (COR 60). During this second blindness, the young Clemo developed a romantic attachment to a young cousin named Evelyn, after first encountering her at a wedding at Penrose Veor Farm – the only time he had left the house except to visit the doctor. She expressed platonic physical affection for Clemo that, since he had spent months in isolation, had an electrifying effect on him:

> I was hypersensitive and felt the vivid, romanticized thrill of my situation—a blind boy at a wedding, caressed by a strange girl, hearing her assurance that the darkness would pass. My mind, growing dull and stolid through lack of external prompting, was challenged to express new and magical possibilities, all the more persuasive because their sensuous impact was only through sound and touch, a voice penetrating the wall of blackness that hid the speaker and left me free to idealize the mental image of her, changing it with the moods of my imagination. (COR 63)

Almost immediately after this encounter, his sight began to return. Later the young Clemo read the story of Dante and Beatrice in Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopedia* and indentified himself with it, attributing the return of his sight to his romantic regard for Evelyn (COR 63). This pattern of seeking divine grace in feminine form would continue his whole life. The mature Clemo recognized he was not in love with Evelyn, but "I felt for her that entirely unholy reverence, that 'desire of the moth for a star' [. . . .] I wanted only to live in the mingled bliss and agony of this creative fire [. . .]" (COR 83). The influence of this young woman on Clemo's emotional life and

his religious and artistic imagination can hardly be overestimated. By Clemo's own account his "obsession" with Evelyn resulted in over half a million words over the following six-year period (COR 61).

His romantic attachment to Evelyn made Clemo feel the "impact of destiny"—the conviction that he was specially called to write novels and poems (COR 69-70). Irritated at the prospect of being unable to earn a living, and frustrated at Evelyn's cool response to him, he began writing in order "to come to terms with abnormal circumstances" (COR vii). Clemo's mother sent in his first story for consideration to a religious weekly and it was returned: "the first of two hundred rejection slips" (COR 70). However, Clemo discovered he had a talent for writing popular comic tales in a broad Cornish dialect, and he thus acquired his first paying job at fourteen.[3] Stories such as these, along with controversial letters to the local newspaper mostly about sex and religion, were the only things he published for the next fifteen years. The irony is that Clemo was writing light verse during what he called "the most painful years of my mystical development" (COR 73).

Clemo's unrequited attachment to Evelyn initiates a period of romantic, pantheistic mysticism as well as an internal struggle between religion and romance. Clemo stopped attending church, even as he had already stopped going to school because of his iritis. Left to search for answers on his own, he continued to read his Bible along with literary texts

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[3] Many of these tales are in the collection *The Bouncing Hills*.

while spending much of his time in solitude amidst the huge clay tips near his home. His first poems, as he later confessed, were "the early idolatry of ideal womanhood seen in a vague romantic Christian light." These poems often featured the character of Brenigan, the fictional stand-in for Evelyn (Clemo Preface). Clemo later burned a book of religious essays written during this time entitled *Christ or Eros?* An early fifty-poem manuscript was concerned with *Poems Christian and Erotic*.[4] Clemo neatly sums up this period as devoted to "the mystical excess of the adolescent conception of love, the idea of the girl as an 'appearance' of the Infinite" (COR 102). Though Clemo would outgrow his adolescent vision, the intersection of the erotic and the Christian would remain central to both his life and his work.

Clemo use of the terms "mystic" and "mystical" can be confusing because they have more than one meaning, often depending on whether Clemo is using them before or after his conversion. Of his pre-conversion idealized, mystical-erotic romanticism, he gradually came to have severe misgivings: "the natural mystic is no nearer to Heaven than the natural materialist [. . .] my spiritual preoccupations in so far as they derived from my own temperament, were not Christian at all [. . .]" (COR 61). The key here is the word "natural," which Clemo uses to identify fallen, unredeemed man. In his case mysticism was simply a channeling of teenage angst into wooly religious expression.

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[4] The collection was subsequently titled *The Clay Verge* for publication and edited considerably (*The Clay Verge* MS 68).

After his conversion, Clemo uses the term "mystical" to point to realities that lie beyond the natural world. In Clemo's case, he is looking for, and finding, the hand of God or the working of Providence in his life. He explains: "I had an inner vision that gave transcendent meaning to the external world, not an inner vision that was independent of the external world. And there was a wayward, often erotic element in both the vision and the realism [. . .]" (MOR 107). Though he is decidedly considering the natural world as he searches for clues to God's will, be it a clay pit or the female body, Clemo finds there evidence of what he considers to be the radically Other God.

He often uses the term mystical to denote a very personal experience of the divine in keeping with a more traditional understanding.[5] However, Clemo rejects the intensely subjective nature of such experiences if they are not tempered by theology: "If I have strayed into by-ways of mysticism I have at least learnt that mysticism is not a mark of election or even of surrender" (IG 154). Clemo's mystical insight, like his erotic romanticism, would need to be purified by what he calls "the saving stress of Dogma" (Clemo Preface). Clemo wrote poems dealing with Catholic saints such as St. Teresa of Avila and St. Bernadette who had mystical experiences; he expresses an affinity for Juan de la Cruz in the shared experience of the dark night of the soul. Yet

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[5] While the definition of "mystic" has been the subject of interpretation for hundreds of years by various faith traditions and has been discussed, debated, and defined by academia for what may seem like hundreds more, the focus here is a working definition that reflects Clemo's multivalent use of the term.

Clemo never mentions or even alludes to mystical contemplation or the stages of mystical ascent toward any kind of beatific vision or direct contemplation of God such as is found common in the works of Bernard of Clairvaux or Bonaventure. Despite his affinity for the monastics and his own personal experiences of God, Clemo claims that Christianity has "no room for the contemplative recluse" and he also rejects the *via negativa* (IG 42). Yet as one attracted to solitude, he spent a good portion of his youth in isolating spiritual struggle.

Having gone through immense inward suffering for the sake of his faith, the question of whether Clemo himself was a mystic is important because it would frame his view of suffering as part of an essential stage for spiritual ascent. Clemo believed his own suffering was necessary, but only as evidence for the crucial purification of original sin. He declared that "suffering in itself had taught me nothing; it had merely created the conditions in which joy could teach me, and so it could never be the last word or even the vitalizing word in my Christian adventure" (IG 125). This painful spiritual interim lasted for the six confused, tortuous years it took for Clemo to realize that he meant nothing to Evelyn.

During this time Mrs. Clemo hoped to correct her son's increasingly heterodox view of morals and marriage that "championed free love," so she revealed the story of his father's familial cruelty along with the general

Clemo tendency to brutality (COR 90).[6] These unsavory revelations about his father filled Clemo with self-loathing, "awakening something malicious and cynical" that caused him to court disapproval by adopting the persona of the village idiot: he grossly exaggerated his working class dialect, he was intentionally clumsy, and he ceased to maintain personal hygiene. Emotionally immature, he gave himself over to the degradation he felt had been imposed on him by his Clemo inheritance.

During this awkward time, Clemo attended an evangelistic meeting in hopes of courting Evelyn again. There he encountered childhood hymns by Ira Sankey that he had learned to play on the organ, as well as the deeply "honest" faith of the congregation: "The congregation was similar to that which Browning describes in *Christmas Eve*—old women who twiddled their thumbs and old men who rocked themselves and squeezed their eyes shut as they sang" (COR 106). Clemo began to see his "whole spiritual development from a new angle," one that embraced the raw, simple religion of "primitive Christianity" (COR 107). He would eventually be drawn to this elemental, emotional, evangelical Christianity. In the meantime he suffered another attack of blindness, which, though temporary, was followed by the onset of deafness before his eighteenth birthday.[7] This meant that the only contact

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[6] Mrs. Clemo was also wary of her son's involvement with the Cornish Celtic movement and hoped to correct his "attempt to explain [his] idiosyncrasies by the magic word 'Celtic'" (COR 90).

[7] Clemo did experience partial recovery in one ear and was "freed from the horror of stone-deafness" (COR 120). A consequence of his deafness was the

with the world was his mother, his crippled aunt Bertha who also lived with them, and a young girl named Barbara Rowse who lived nearby. His romantic idealism disintegrated when his hopes for Evelyn were finally dashed, but after a period of anguish at the rejection, Barbara became the emotional center of Clemo's life, as well as the source of romantic and artistic inspiration that he had once found in Evelyn. Clemo confessed that he had become "absurdly childish" and irritable in the face of crushing isolation, rejection, and poverty, so that only Barbara could reach him:

> If a man's psychological life has been disintegrated as a result of blindness, if he is the barred off from normality by deafness, and if, in addition, he as a strong creative urge and is trying to write novels in working-class poverty—what, according to rationalists, ought he to do? The reply would probably be [. . .][he] should be placed in the care of a psychiatrist [. . .]. [God] placed me, during my "convalescent" period, very largely in the care of a girl less than seven years old—and the results were astonishing. (COR 131)

Clemo credits this highly unusual, though not immoral, relationship with Barbara as bringing him to a renewed sense of his Dantesque election to divine grace, and thus his eventual return to dogmatic Christianity in its Calvinist expression. The relationship with Barbara, and later with two girls whom Mrs. Clemo billeted, was also the only spiritual and tender human connection Clemo experienced. These relationships were at once a rehearsal and the promise of a mature adult romance. Clemo derived poetic inspiration from Barbara, and also from other female children for a period of years.

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eventual abandonment of the novel as an art form, since he felt he no longer had the ear for dialogue (COR 154).

These young girls were the inspiration behind such poems as "The Child Traitor," "The Plundered Fuchsias," and "The Burnt Bush," in which Clemo treated spiritual matters in an erotic manner.

"The Burnt Bush" recounts Clemo and a girl climbing up a clay dump, when in a moment of spontaneity, the girl sets fire to a gorse bush that had strangely managed to take root:

> She fired the gorse — fired too
> One gnarled old bush of Adam's seed
> Which in a cleft of naked need
> Within my soul had fouled indeed
> White purity, and as it grew
> Spread doubts in scent and hue.
>
> Her hand held mine – and then
> The flame leapt in and burnt the bush:
> My soul knew smoke and fire, then hush
> Of clay delivered from the push
> Of Nature's sap: now in God's ken
> I stand unsoiled again. (MOC 25)

The flaming bush recalls Exodus 3:2-12 when an angel appeared to Moses "in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush" to signal God's presence. God then declares deliverance of God's chosen people from the Egyptians: "Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee [. . .]."[8] The gorse bush serves as a metonym for "nature" as purified by the fire of divine grace through the touch of the girl's hand. His faith restored, the poet is at peace: "now in God's ken / I stand unsoiled again." The sexual imagery here is undeniable: words like "bush," "Adam's seed," "cleft," and "naked" are all

[8] All excerpts from the Bible are from the King James Version.

images suggesting genitalia and sexual desire. One reviewer's interpretation of the poem was that the poet and his lover "have sexual intercourse" besides a flaming gorse bush on a clay dump.[9] This is an example of a one-sided reading of Clemo that this essay seeks to correct. A complementary way of reading this poem is not to deny the clear sexual imagery but to understand that Clemo is recalling carnal passion that was redeemed by grace.

It was after the war that things began to change for Clemo. Following a difficult fifteen-year struggle to publish something other than humorous dialect tales and provocative letters to the local newspaper, Chatto & Windus accepted his novel *Wilding Graft* in 1947. Through the novel's fictional character of Garth Joslin, Clemo dramatized his own anticipation for his destined bride. The novel won the Atlantic Award in Literature in 1948 and was soon followed by his first autobiography, *Confession of a Rebel* in 1949. It dealt with Clemo's life up until age thirty, emphasizing his religious conversion. In the preface Clemo notes his hope that the book will be spiritually edifying, a testament to his faith, however unusual his "blend of Calvinism and erotic mysticism" may seem (ix). The book was fairly successful; however, Clemo then turned his attention to poetry.

His first books of poetry, *The Clay Verge* and *The Wintry Priesthood*, were published in 1951 (*The Wintry Priesthood* won an Arts Council Festival of Britain prize for poetry the same year) and were later gathered together

[9] *Poetry Quarterly*, December 1951.

with *Frontier Signals* in the collection *The Map of Clay* (1961). The title of the collection is taken from a poem written about Clemo by the celebrated poet Charles Causley, who also provided the introduction (MOR 111). Because the poems of *The Map of Clay*, with their passionately raw voice and vivid imagery, dramatize the development of Clemo's early theology, they commanded the attention of the poets and critics of his day. However, one of the prominent themes in these poems, his "savage glee at the destruction of earthly beauty," was misinterpreted as an anti-nature polemic, and his preference for the bleak, grey refuse dumps of the nearby china clay mines was sometimes baffling to his critics, though they acknowledged that his poems were compelling.

Clemo argues against natural theology in many of his early poems. He opposed its attempt to derive knowledge of God without divine revelation but through human encounters with creation.[10] In particular Clemo rejects the idea that human beings can know God, who is completely Other, through the glories of nature. "Neutral Ground" thus begins:

> God's image was washed out of Nature
> By the flood of the Fall:
> No symbol remains to inspire me,
> And none to appal. (MOC 20

[10] Clemo had read Karl Barth's *The Epistle to the Romans* and *No!,* which was Barth's response to Emil Brunner's statement that human beings are capable of receiving natural revelation, if only negatively, by recognizing their own sinfulness and thus their need for redemption. Barth stated that what mattered for Christian theology and practice was the *revelation* of God even to fathom the nature of human depravity.

Original sin is central to Clemo's Calvinism, with its strong emphasis on depravity and guilt. The natural world is as fallen and corrupt as mortal man; consequently, Clemo "rejects all analogies between nature and Grace, and the concept of natural law on which such analogies are based" (Middlebro 108). Clemo thus rejects the idea that the natural world can serve as a poet's inspiration. God is not reflected in Nature; therefore, to embrace it as a path to the divine is self-deceiving at best and idolatrous at worse. It is this temptation that prompts Clemo to write: "Of springtide beauty menacing the sod" (MOC 34).

In place of the typical Romantic setting of spring flowers and verdant meadows, he constructs his own aesthetic, a landscape of the claylands that remains faithful to his Christian vision. Clemo found God in the clayworks because the landscape revealed the disruptive violence to one's "self" that must be experienced before redemption—St. Paul's putting off the old man that one may put on the new.[11] Clemo's experience of "irresistible grace" that is a tenet of Calvinism was one of overwhelming, even harrowing, invasion. To describe his experience, he uses the metaphor of disembowelment more than once in his early poetry.

Clemo reveals the heart of his theology in this declaration: "The claywork symbolism, sensuous Calvinism, creedal sexuality—all

[11] "That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that you put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness" (Eph. 4:22-24).

idiosyncrasies of my writings—were produced through my renunciation of the "natural" vision of the poet" (COR 222). This "natural" poet would be romantically sensitive and even sympathetic to earthly beauty and the spiritual thrill to be found inside Nature and so be in peril of forgetting the Fall and the need for redemption. For Clemo, therefore, any easy link between poetry and earthly beauty becomes an ally of natural theology and that will lead astray those artists who do not come under Christian discipline. He continues in "Neutral Ground":

> *His* hand did not fashion the vistas
> These poets admire,
> For He is too busied in glutting
> The worm and the fire. (MOC 20)[12]

Fallen nature offers only the illusion of beauty or truth or goodness, because it does not stand under the final revelation of God given in Christ.

Such poems as "Christ in the Clay-pit," "Quarry Snow" and "The Clay-tip Worker" celebrate the destruction of the earth. "The Clay-tip Worker" dramatically recounts this process with a certain glee—"I love to see the sand I tip / Muzzle the grass and burst the daisy heads"—as Clemo envisions him doing God's redemptive work, correcting those who would make natural beauty, and the poetry which celebrates it, into false gods. The clay-dump is "a finger of God / That wars with Poetry," and so, the clay-tip worker

[12] "And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:47-48).

declares, “I feel myself a priest” as “I advance to pour / Sand, mud and rock upon the store / Of springtime loveliness idolaters adore” (MOC 34).

In the barren and bleak landscape of the clayworks, Clemo saw the symbol of the redemption of the world, as the clay-tip worker exclaims at the end of the poem:

> ‘Praise God, the earth is maimed,
> And there will be no daisies in that field
> Next spring; it will not yield
> A single bloom or grass blade: I shall see
> In symbol potently
> Christ’s Kingdom there restored:
> One patch of Poetry reclaimed
> By Dogma: one more triumph for our Lord.’ (MOC 33-35)

Clemo is not a Gnostic believing that the world was created by an evil demiurge, only that it stands in drastic need of Christ. Perhaps because the poem “Sufficiency” is less acerbic it most clearly and persuasively states Clemo’s position by way of rhetorical query: “Is there grass / That cools like gravel, and are there streams / Which murmur as clay-silt does that Christ redeems?”(MOC 38). He also shows self-awareness and humor about his clayland images, recognizing that they cannot sustain him forever: “Yes, I might well grow tired / Of slighting flowers all day long.” However, he is assured that God will provide him a new “personal pulse of prayer” in the warmth of “a human flower” (MOC 38). The first flower of the poem signifies humanity’s corrupted, fallen, and unredeemed nature; the second “flower,” unlike the first, will indicate the efflorescence of Christian truth because it will be ordained by God.

One of Clemo's abiding concerns in his poetry (and his life) from his teens onward is the melding of sex and theology, as the first poem in *The Map of Clay*, "A Calvinist in Love," illustrates. Clemo's again uses the clay-pit landscape as symbolic of redemptive grace, a grace that touches every aspect of life, including human sexuality:

> This bare clay-pit is truest setting
> For love like ours:
> No bed of flowers
> But sand-ledge for our petting.
>
> The Spring is not our mating season:
> The lift of sap
> Would but entrap
> Our souls and lead to treason.
> This truculent gale, this pang of winter
> Awake our joy,
> For they employ
> Moods that made Calvary splinter.

Clemo employs the seasonal trope often associated with the Romantics while simultaneously rejecting its traditional use. There are no verdant dales and warm spring afternoons here: his young lovers tryst in a stripped clay-pit with a sharp winter wind blowing. That the image is arresting and uncomfortable is the desired effect. Clemo is trying to compensate for the "ghastly smoothness in the writings of naturalists and pastoral poets. They seemed to be sunk in utter complacency, oblivious of spiritual warfare" (IG 95).[13] If his often violent, ugly images of destruction bring to mind a post-war landscape, it is because Clemo was in the heat of spiritual battle.

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[13] Clemo uses diction from Browning's *Easter Day*, where "his description of nature-lovers as those 'Left in God's contempt apart / With ghastly smooth life, dead

Fellow poet Brian Louis Pearce observes that the "uncompromising" structure of the poem reflects the theological ideal. With a rhyme scheme recalling Tennyson's "In Memoriam," Clemo's use of ABBA is "terse," a description he extends to the overall poem, and at the same time he finds the poem "extremely lyrical" (13). The final stanza of the poem:

> Our love is full-grown Dogma's offspring,
> Election's child,
> Making the wild
> Heats of our blood an offering. (MOC 16)

The theological language is "interwoven with an equally logical setting forth of the imagery . . ." (13). This skilful weaving together of form, image, and theology is typical of Clemo's earlier poems, something this dissertation will closely explore in the following chapter.

With Clemo's fiction and poems finally printed by 1951, his world became less isolated as he began to receive letters and visits from people who had read his work. One such letter resulted his first adult romance, through an eight-month correspondence, with a young poet named Eileen Funston. Eileen did not consider Clemo's "vilification of nature and . . . rejection of churches" to be particularly attractive or Christian (MOR 43).[14] Her critique

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at heart, / Tame in earth's paddock as her prize' [. . .] made me quake [. . .] I realized that this might well be my fate unless I constantly saw the "paddock" as a scene of invasion, a battlefield " (IG 95).

[14] In fact, in these early poems, Clemo's self–identification as a Calvinist does not express the Calvin of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559,1560) where he claims "that God "revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe" (I. v. 1). Of course, Calvin goes on to say this self-revelation does not profit the person sunk in sin (I. v. 14).

of his early poetry in *The Clay Verge* made him rethink his poetic and religious vision. However, Clemo maintained his concern that people would find a spiritual solace and inspiration in Nature that is rightly reserved for God alone. Some forty years after he wrote these poems he replied in a letter to one of his critics:

> Romantics say that birds have lovely wings and sing lovely songs. I say, Yes, but they stick their beaks into worms, fight for possession of the biggest worm, and then drop messes. If the latter facts are ignored, you get a limp, easy-going theology. Christ knew the darker side – the wounded sparrow falling to its death, the withered flowers being burst [. . . .] This doesn't mean that we should follow the ascetics and reject all nature as evil; it simply means that we must be on guard lest we forget that salvation is by grace alone, not by our sense of beauty or duty. (Clemo, Diary, 1982)

They did not marry,[15] but Clemo credits this romantic friendship with a "drastic psychological change" for the better (MOR 50). It also marks the recasting of his clayland symbolism, the effects of which are seen in *The Wintry Priesthood*, which includes the first of Clemo's poems devoted to people.

In the mid 1950's, Clemo became greatly impressed with Billy Graham's Evangelistic Crusade to Britain where Graham made a huge impact, inspiring Clemo's desire to employ his writing for the winning of converts. It was also between 1951-1954 that Clemo's eyesight deteriorated until the onset of permanent "white blindness," which he found preferable to

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[15] Her family considered Clemo as "too old, too handicapped and too poor" (MOR 45).

sheer blackness. Clemo does not often write of the claylands once he could no longer see them. As he descended into sightlessness, Clemo wrote his "Christian manifesto," *The Invading Gospel* (1958), with the assistance of his mother. The book was written to win converts, to call Christians back to "elemental" faith, and to offer a pointed rejection of liberal theology. It also shows the broad range of writers and thinkers that Clemo engaged with and their impact on his religious and intellectual development.

A book buoyant and self-assured in tone, if also occasionally pompous, *The Invading Gospel* was written under distressing circumstances. The encroaching blindness was punctuated by heart trouble and frightening attacks of cerebral paralysis that left him "semi-conscious for hours" (MOR 82). When he was able to write, Clemo had to rely on his mother, who had never used a typewriter, because he could no longer make out the keys. However, Clemo felt the "glow of fellowship [. . .] unconscious that [I was] in any way cut off from the herd—at least, from the herd of singing converts at evangelistic rallies" (MOR 87). After the publication of his theological treatise, Clemo's social life did indeed become more expansive. His work was garnering some attention from both the religious and the artistic worlds: Charles Causley and artist Lionel Miskin became Clemo's friends. Causley, A. L. Rowse and C. Day Lewis championed him for a Civil List pension, which was granted in 1961. The only constant source of income for the Clemos since 1917 had been the mother's war widow's pension. Partial

hearing was restored in one ear after a cold in 1956, though speech remained unintelligible to him. Though he was realizing his vocation as an evangelical poet, his romantic yearning and vocation to marry went unfulfilled.

Clemo then had a four-year romance with Mary Wiseman, an art teacher from Devonshire, who sent Clemo a passionate letter that "plunged [him] into his first full-scale romance" at forty-seven (MOR 115). She was determined to make him into the "untrammeled, erotic mystic" he was meant to be, and he in turn would "help to draw her fully in" to orthodox Christianity (MOR 116-117). Though they became engaged, she eventually broke their relationship off, to Mrs. Clemo's relief.[16] However, Mary left a lasting impression on Clemo both personally and professionally. In practical matters, Mary insisted that Clemo learn Braille and expand his reading repertoire to include more modern writers. She also had a keen critical eye for his poetry, and she helped him choose the poems that appeared in *Penguin Modern Poets* 1964. Mary even persuaded Clemo to visit her in the Lake District. Perhaps most crucially to Clemo, Mary helped him to be emotionally healed. The affair may have ended, but the old cliché that it was "better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all" was an apt one for Clemo. The resulting romantic disappointment fueled many of the poems in *Cactus on Carmel* (1967). This title invites comparison to the dark night of the soul experienced by the Spanish Carmelite John of the Cross. The

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[16] Clemo observes that his mother felt Mary was "subtly threatening me as an orthodox believer" (MOR 118).

collection ends on the poem “Carmel,” about the French Carmelite St. Thérèse of Lisieux, as it explores the constant theme of Christian marriage running through Clemo’s poems. This collection of poems also shows Clemo moving away from his clay-land landscape into a broader range of both subject matter and sympathy.

Then came Ruth. Ruth Peaty, a laundress in Weymouth, sent a letter to Clemo on September 12, 1967—the Brownings’ wedding anniversary, as he carefully noted. Within a few months they were discussing marriage through their letters, but they were not able to meet in person until June. After much anticipation, Ruth visited Goonamarris with her sister. During the few days’ visit, Clemo proposed marriage and Ruth accepted. They were wed in Trethosa Chapel on October 26th, 1968, with Charles Causley as their best man. Though they had early struggles as Ruth settled into the cottage with Clemo and his mother, the pairing proved to be a love match.[17] After more than thirty years of waiting, Jack Clemo had at last fulfilled his vocation to marry. “Wedding Eve” was written in tribute to his wife Ruth:

> Elect for marriage—I sang
> That stubborn theme through three decades
> Of hunger, mirage, avalanche:
> When nature made hopes blanch,
> A text like a clay-bed tang,
> Like the bride’s own breath, stirred in the shades. (ET 6)

[17] Their story caught the attention of Sally Magnusson, a reporter for the BBC, who wrote a book entitled *Clemo: A Love Story* in 1986.

His life and his poetry were permanently changed. He even began attending church again at Trethosa Chapel, where he had been baptized as a child. The first book of poetry written entirely after his marriage was *The Echoing Tip* (1971), published when Clemo was fifty-five. There are several poems inspired by his wife, showing the fulfillment of his vision of marriage. This collection also shows greater control of the dramatic monologue. The prefatory note in *The Echoing Tip* states he was trying for "objective portraiture" rather than the "personal erotic element." The critical reception was mixed, but Clemo felt he had found his true voice. Also in 1971, Clemo became willing—largely to allow Ruth a bit of excitement—to be crowned Poet of Clay at the Gorsedd Festival in Cornwall, an honor he had refused twice earlier.[18]

Broad Autumn (1975) is dedicated to Ruth. The tone of the collection is set in the opening poem of the same name:

> True faith matures without discarding:
> . . . .
> I have not changed country;
> I have grown and explored
> In my faith's undivided world.
> I discard no primal certainty, no rasped
> Sky-sign of the Cross;
> But now in broad autumn, feeling a new peace
> And the old poise of defence,
> I accept the pure trysting lochs,
> The full antlers in the glens.

[18] Clemo acknowledges that his earlier hostility to Cornish nationalism had "softened to indifference" (MOR 139).

There are many poems about marriage, with the final dramatic monologue at the end spoken by Ruth. Two years after the release of *Broad Autumn*, Clemo's mother Eveline died, but not before she wrote her own spiritual autobiography and testimonial entitled *I Proved Thee at the Waters*. Her passing was the motivation for Clemo to write *The Marriage of a Rebel,* his second autobiography.

With the 1980 publication of this book, Clemo had already been married twelve years. The subtitle is *A Mystical-erotic Quest,* a pilgrimage that had begun at Penrose Veor Farm in 1929 and found fulfillment in Clemo's own home in Goonamarris decades later. His early life was the subject of a BBC documentary called "A Different Drummer" televised at Easter in 1980. In 1981, he was awarded an honorary D Litt. degree from the University of Exeter, which now houses his personal and literary papers. Then in 1983 *The Bouncing Hills* was published, a collection of light verse and humorous dialect stories of the kind that he had first published many years ago.

Several years after the passing of his mother, the Clemos moved to Weymouth and settled in Ruth's former home in the fall of 1984, often worshipping at the Baptist church. In his seventieth year, Clemo had his second novel published, *The Shadowed Bed*, although it was written some thirty years earlier. This allegorical novel is set in a remote clay country hamlet in the 1950s during a landslide that cuts the inhabitants off from the

outside world. There the narrative records the mystical conflict between dark and benevolent forces. The novel prompted one reviewer to call him the "Bunyan of the century." During that same year of 1986 *A Different Drummer* came out, a collection in which almost half of the poems are portraits. In 1988 Bloodaxe Publishers soon offered *Selected Poems*, which was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation. *Banner Poems,* containing local descriptive pieces, was published in 1989 by Cornish Nationalist Publications. *Clay Cuts*, an illustrated limited edition of his early poems, was published in 1992.

Among the newfound friends the Clemos made after their move to Dorset were an Anglican priest and his wife, Benedict and Lilah Ramsden, who would be responsible for two fruitful trips to Italy for the Clemos. The first was to Venice in the fall of 1987, and the last was to Venice and Florence in the fall of 1993, a year before Clemo died. These trips inspired many of the poems in *Approach to Murano* (1993) and the posthumously published *The Cured Arno* (1995). The themes of spiritual and emotional pilgrimage remain the same throughout his poetry, though the symbols change and the horizon broadens. As the center of glass production in Venice, Murano island "became a symbol of the clear-cut, luminous image, contrasting with my bleared and heavy clay idiom." He says the "character-sketches" were of figures that came to mind as he "approached the Murano stage" (ATM preface). Though published after his death on July 25, 1994, Clemo had

completed *The Cured Arno*; publishers added one last poem, "Quenched," to the collection. "The cured Arno may represent the cured ego," Clemo states in the preface; the poems include personal reflections and many historical character-sketches. A final novel, *The Clay Kiln*, was issued in 2000. Some of his early, unpublished poems, many originally intended for *The Map of Clay,* were rediscovered in the collection of Clemo's professional papers at the University of Exeter and published as *The Awakening: Poems Newly Found* (2003).

Clemo himself has stated that his poems need to be considered in the light of his life experiences: " I am one of those writers whose creative work cannot be fully understood without reference to certain broken boundaries in their private lives" (COR vii). Clemo's poetry thus witnesses not only to conversion and transformation and the joy of redemptive faith, but also to the dark night of the soul – all the elements found in such spiritual autobiographies as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* or Augustine's *Confessions* (both of which Clemo read).[19] Given the influence of the religious and literary tradition of the Dissenting faith in Clemo's life, it is not surprising that his poetry constitutes a spiritual autobiography. In the Dissenting tradition, it is necessary to recount one's conversion, both the first moment in which one became a Christian as well a the continuing pilgrimage in which one remains a Christian. Together these constitute the public profession of one's faith.

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[19] Browning, one of Clemo's heroes, also focused on conversion and confession. See Constance Hasset's *The Elusive Self in the Poetry of Robert Browning*.

Clemo's work not only reflects the process of his own transformation, but also his desire to inspire others to be converted, putting him firmly in line with the Dissenters.

Critics of Clemo might argue that his poems constitute a spiritual autobiography because his unusual circumstances of poverty, blindness and deafness challenged his faith, and so led him to an obsession with his own spiritual condition. Thus the argument goes that those same disabilities isolated him from other subject matter and left him nowhere to turn to but himself. This "turn to the subject" characterizes modern liberal Protestant theology from Schleiermacher forward— a theology Clemo made repeated and rather pointed protest against (whether he understood it completely is another question). Such critics could be answered by showing that far from being a modern subjectivist, Clemo was concerned with his spiritual condition because he was a Dissenter in the Calvinist tradition, and one who professed anti-Romanticism. Clemo became distinctly aware of his own sinful nature and the necessity of repentance and surrendering the self to God early in life (IG 23). This transformation can be accomplished only with a thoroughgoing examination of the self: "the self is all-important not because it *is* one's self but because it represents the sole battleground of the war between good and evil" (Damrosch GP 4). As Clemo's biography reveals, he keenly felt the tension of conflicting internal forces stemming from his family background.

It needs also to be added that Clemo's disabilities and isolation helped to place him not only among the Calvinists but also even more squarely in the company of Augustine, Bunyan and a host of others who recount their own spiritual journey. Though neither Augustine nor Bunyan grappled with physical disability, they confronted other challenges that were just as keen, as the example of the pear tree in Augustine and the game of tip-cat in Bunyan illustrate. Though *Confessions* and *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* were written to praise God for their conversion with the hope that others might follow after them, they are also decidedly self-oriented. So it is with the best of Clemo's poems. His unflinching intimacy has authority because it is rooted in a personal experience of faith that consistently points beyond himself, as his many poems about major intellectual, artistic and religious figures demonstrate.

CHAPTER THREE

Vocation: “Priest and Lover”

> If you know anything, tell it; if you have had any experience, declare it; if you have had any illumination, reveal it. Do not eat your honey alone, or it will turn sour.
>
> C. H. Spurgeon: “A Prayer for the Church Militant”

Jack Clemo’s poetic vocation began with a radical conversion experience that he did not find either echoed in or welcomed by conventional mainline churches, and so he turned to a more primitive kind of church and to a poetry that drew on both the harsh life of his isolated Cornish childhood and his affinity for the erotic. During his lonely sojourn, Clemo credits Charles Haddon Spurgeon’s preaching and Robert Browning’s poetry for enabling him to “overcome bitterness and escape despair” while he tried to realize his unique vision (COR 229).

> Even though I had been an outsider when the great paradox of redemption dawned on me, the voice that brought me to surrender had come from within the sanctuary. Spurgeon’s voice had thundered from his Tabernacle pulpit [. . . .] Browning’s voice had reached me from the little Calvinistic chapel [. . .] (in the poem *Christmas Eve and Easter Day*).
> (IG 76)

These two different men, Spurgeon the evangelical Protestant and Browning, who embraced a generally Christian vision without much interest in dogmatic certainty, drew Clemo to Christ, shaping his twin poetic vocation to evangelism and marriage.

Clemo's understanding of vocation gave his life purpose and became both the inspiration and perennial subject matter of his poetry. His belief that he was called to serve God within the secular world derives from the Protestant tradition that shaped him. Since the Reformation, Luther's idea of "calling" specified that every Christian should have a vocation, not just members of religious orders. Calvin, too, embraced the idea, and the Protestant tradition has since stressed the "priesthood of all believers" in which every Christian has the vocation to serve God in his or her own unique calling, becoming priests to each other and thus serving one's neighbors and contributing to both church and society. Clemo felt he had received " 'a divine 'grafting', a mystical sense of *vocation* which involved painful training and identified the seeker with the sufferings of Christ" and was "sometimes within the realm of romantic love" (MOR 35). Thus, Clemo sought to be "priest and lover" to borrow a phrase from Browning's *Pauline*: an evangelical poet whose "dominant aim has been to do some pioneering work around the contemporary bridgehead of faith, repairing the breach and restoring the paths of Evangelical doctrine and Christian love" (IG 154).

I. Charles Haddon Spurgeon

The dynamic Victorian preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon had no formal training for ministry. Though he was a great collector of books, he snubbed the intellectualism and the elitism of class-conscious English society in favor of the "common man." His writing is not unlike his oration: "He

developed his own style of vivid declamation, homely and pungent, yet strongly doctrinal and probingly experiential" (Bebbington, *Dominance of Evangelicalism*, 40). Clemo took to him instantly. In his list of "Books that Molded [sic] my Religious Development" he refers, to among other Spurgeon books, *All of Grace*, many sermons, and his *Chequebook of Faith* (Clemo, *Diary,* 1945). A Baptist proponent of the Reformed faith, Spurgeon is quoted as saying "I cannot sever Evangelicalism from Calvinism."[1]

It was Spurgeon who largely fashioned Clemo's quasi-Calvinistic outlook: "on the purely spiritual side I owe more to Spurgeon than to any other man" (COR 144). A book of Spurgeon's sermons impressed upon a young Clemo the idea that vocation was the working out of Providence. Spurgeon gave these sermons at the Metropolitan Tabernacle during 1867, and the book likely came to Clemo via his maternal grandfather, the Methodist lay-preacher John Polmounter. Clemo carefully annotated and underlined several sermonic passages from the 1867 collection, especially those devoted to using one's particular talents for God:

> <u>he who scatters one good thought which would not else have been disseminated, has done something for the kingdom of Christ</u> [. . . .] There are so many niches in the temple, and so many statues of living stone to fill those niches, to make it a complete temple of heavenly architecture. You and I must each find our own niche. [2]

[1] [Freeman (London), April 25, 1884, p.270] quoted in Bebbington, *Dominance of Evangelicalism,* 41.

[2] Sermon no. 738, "Grieve Not the Holy Spirit" delivered on March 3, 1867, printed in *Sermons*, 236. The underlining is Clemo's. From the Jack Clemo collection, MS 68, housed at the Old Library, University of Exeter.

Clemo interpreted such passages as confirmation of the workings of Providence in his life, notwithstanding fifteen years of rejected manuscripts from publishers. One of the most heavily annotated sermons is "The Sweet harp [sic] of Consolation" in which Spurgeon asks, "Have you been called by God's providence to undertake a work far beyond your own visible power, and have you plunged into it by faith?"[3] Clemo believed his writing to be such a calling from God and his faith to be his only real means of support.

Clemo took this improbable call to be a sign of election, confirmation that he belonged to those predestined for salvation. Clemo had carefully marked the following passage: "I do not doubt that the Lord has settled, concerning every one of his elect [. . .] the precise instrumentality by which they shall be converted [. . . .] It is all settled, all arranged and predetermined in the divine purpose."[4] This passage could shed light on Clemo's own unorthodox conversion, as well as his conviction that he was an instrument by which others might be saved. Clemo confesses in his first autobiography that his vocation to be an evangelical writer was made more difficult because of his poverty, disability, and religious beliefs. In the pages of Spurgeon, Clemo believed he had found divine affirmation and support for his sense of calling, however improbable it may have seemed.

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[3] Sermon no. 760, "The Sweet harp of Consolation" delivered on July 14th, 1867, printed in *Sermons*, 387.

[4] Sermon no. 785, "Wanted, A Guestchamber!" delivered on December 15th, 1867, printed in *Sermons,* 687.

Clemo's theology of election was often misunderstood because of its complexity. In his theological manifesto *The Invading Gospel* he provided an explanation: "in every generation a certain number of individuals, called in Scripture the elect, are compelled by God to make this leap [from unbelief to faith] in order to form the nucleus or bridgehead of faith for that generation" (145). Clemo believed that the "higher destiny of eternal life" is offered to the non-elect, who may voluntarily embrace it, in contrast to the elect who find it irresistible.[5] Clemo's concept of election, it follows, is neither Calvinist nor Arminian. Regardless of the idiosyncrasy of his theology, Clemo was keen to have his faith understood. He writes in his Diary of 1954:

> Broadcast discussion of Clay Verge – D.S. Savage exaggerated my Calvinism – wish I hadn't put so much stress on that aspect – it enables critics to ignore my Christianity – theres (sic) <u>never a hint</u> <u>that I believe in Christ's redemptive love for all mankind,</u> with the elect as a nucleus of belief only. Long to write more & put my faith right before the public.[6]

It is essential to realize that Clemo is concerned that his critics recognize his Christian faith even more than his poetic talent. This emphasis on evangelism over "art" becomes the central theme in his poems about artists and writers. For Clemo, his literary talent "will function only on the stimulus of faith. I write only because I believe" (IG 156). And he believes because he is one of the elect.

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[5] Clemo would later soften his concept of God's electing grace as irresistible, allowing for greater freedom of choice among those who are predestined.

[6] The entry is dated February 13th, 1954 (Jack Clemo collection, MS 68). The underlining is Clemo's. According to strict Calvinist doctrine, Christ died only for the elect.

It is clear that Clemo referred to Spurgeon's sermons repeatedly, as certain passages are not only underlined but also dated. In a sermon entitled "Believing to See," Clemo underlined the following passage and wrote the "11 July 1948" in the margins:

> God never did leave a work that he put us upon, and never sets us to do a thing without meaning to help us through with it . . . you who are in any way exercised, remember the life of faith. Remember that you are not called to walk by sight, but by faith.

The date coincides with his receiving the Atlantic Award in Literature from Birmingham University, for which C. D. Lewis, the future poet laureate of England, had championed him.[7] Throughout his career Clemo has been consistent in his belief that "The Christian can never be a pure artist: he obeys One who has commisioned (sic) him not to communicate aesthetic beauty but to convert men by the proclamation of the Gospel" (Clemo Preface). If Clemo wrote because he was a believer, he regarded the Atlantic Award as evidence that his vocation as an evangelical poet was a divine calling.

Poetic evidence for the influence of Spurgeon on Clemo's poetic vocation is manifest in the poems here analyzed. These poems constitute a conversion narrative: they are testimony in response to Spurgeon's admonition: "If you know anything, tell it; if you have had any experience, declare it; if you have had any illumination, reveal it. Do not eat your honey

[7] MOR 32. The award also earned Clemo £100.

alone, or it will turn sour."[8] Also, Clemo's weaving together of earthly experience and heavenly dogma, along with his frequent allusions to Biblical passages and biblical imagery show Spurgeon's literary influence, if only indirectly. Finally, these poems confirm Clemo's claim that Calvinism is "the formula that underlines my fiction and poetry" as well as being examples of his unique poetic talent (IG 146).

The poems collected in *The Map of Clay* present much of Clemo's early theology, as briefly explored in the previous chapter. I will closely consider three poems, "The Excavator," "Prologue: Cornish Anchorite," and "Epilogue: Priest of Out Bondage" as both as maps of his maturing faith and as examples of his poetic technique. Together they artistically embody what critic Donald Davie calls the "Calvinist aesthetic" of "simplicity, sobriety, and measure" (*Gathered* 25). The poems are connected by the theme of spiritual journey amid the clayworks of Cornwall, a quest framed by the speaker's evolving relationship to Christ Jesus. Clemo articulates this relationship as based on divine, irresistible grace, first as the raw conversion experience of what Kierkegaard called the "eternal Moment," then as an encounter with the uncompromising Word, and finally as the joy of fellowship in Christ. The fundamental essence of these religious experiences is, for Clemo, the idea of grace in action – the baptism into salvation and redemption from sin. Not only do each of these three poems express a spiritual journey they also reveal

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[8] Sermon no. 768, "A Prayer for the Church Militant," delivered at Surrey Chapel, Blackfriars Road, n.d., printed in *Sermons,* 490.

a progressive understanding of grace. This theological and emotional pilgrimage undergirds his larger body of work.

These early poems also introduce a key image in Clemo's work: *clay*. The clay of the Cornish mines—"tacky, damp, white, luminous, heavy, dogging, inescapable, hateful, pure"—is symbolic of Christ and of humanity in Clemo's poetry (Thurley 167). The word "clay" yokes these poems together as much as the trinity of terms Moment/Word/Christ. The tension between these two, fallen man and God's grace, infuses theses poems with spiritual depth and resonance. There is less "clay" and more grace as the speaker progressively surrenders himself to Christ. Clemo makes clear in his theological manifesto, *Invading Gospel*, that a soul that does not surrender to Christ cannot be regenerated (23). As the following poems intimate, the journey leading up to Clemo's surrender was fearsome.

II. The Poems

In his first book of poetry, *The Clay Verge* (1951), the speaker in many of the poems is wrestling with God and the world, often squeezing with anguish the ash-gray kaolin of a Cornwall clay-tip in his fist. Clemo's emotionally raw "The Excavator" is representative of this collection.[9] Chronologically first among the three poems under consideration, "The Excavator" is situated in a muddy clay pit in a stormy Sunday evening. The journey, which is deeply interior and self-oriented, is expressed through the

[9] See appendix A for the complete text of the poem.

violent upheaval of the "Moment" and the subsequent rejection of the "staining rhythms of Art and Nature" as temptations that distract from true communion with God. Clemo uses vivid diction and internal rhyme to convey a present sense of action and movement throughout the speaker's baptism by Christ, who is the Excavator.

The second stanza has the action of the speaker being baptized:

> I feel exultantly
> The drip of clayey water from the poised
> Still bar above me; thrilling with the rite
> Of baptism all my own.

This "inner baptism" completes his original boyhood baptism as a Methodist. The third, fourth, and fifth stanzas develop the journey within stillness that this baptism initiates. Finally the sixth stanza brings the reader back around to the exterior clay pit where the speaker prays "Under the dripping clay with which I am baptized" (MOC 33). The speaker has not physically moved, yet he has made a journey nevertheless.[10]

There is also the nesting rhyme scheme where a couplet is not resolved until the next stanza, creating a poetic tension that moves the reader forward. For example, there are the delayed rhymes of "me / exultantly" in stanza one and two, and "soft / oft" and "tool / school" in stanza three and

[10] Clemo sets himself against Romantic nature worship, but it should be acknowledged that much in his work is "Romantic." The circling pattern of "The Excavator" recalls the Romantic lyrics of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley. The focus on internal baptism without ritual generally recalls Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" and "Pains of Sleep." Additionally, the general internalization of religious experience is common in the British Romantics, who were all Protestant despite their unorthodoxies.

four. Notably, the partner for the end rhyme “vow” in stanza four is “now”. The “vow” the speaker makes becomes the apex of the “Moment” of eternal grace:

> Loving to stand as now in outlawed glee
> Amid the squelching mud and make a vow
> With joy no priest or poet takes from me.

The speaker does not need the authority or the mediation of the church or of a particular poetic tradition to receive or retain this grace – an independence that provides the satisfaction of his “outlaw” status. The speaker’s Moment of grace is intensely individual: “Needing no ritual voiced / In speech or earthly idiom to draw / My soul to His new law” (MOC 31).[11]

Not only does the speaker declare independence from corporate faith, but also from romantic poetic conventions about nature, declaring these things actually hinder the experience of God. As the “Moment” turns the speaker’s attention to the Christian church and romantic poetry, he realizes “I cannot speak their language” (MOC 32). Grace reveals these mediums as counterfeits of spiritual worship and true beauty:

> And so I am awake:
> No more a man who sees
> Colour in flowers or hears from birds a song,
> Or dares to worship where the throng
> Seek Beauty and its old idolatries.

[11] Clemo’s iconoclastic visionary impulse has much in common with William Blake, and Coleridge has this theme running through much of his work. Clearly there are differences between Clemo and these other poets, but the resemblances are noteworthy.

No altar soils my vision with a lax
Adult appeal to sense,
Or festering harmonies' magniloquence.[12] (MOC 33)

Instead, the speaker prefers the gross actions of the clay-scooping excavator as rightly expressing his encounter of God's grace. The bars of the excavator make a cross that "that lacks the symmetry /of those in churches but is more / Like His [. . .]" (MOC 31). The more respectable mainline churches have become an inadequate representative of God's grace because of their empty ritual, negligent altar and pompous sermonizing, and so he turns instead to "lonely worship" in his own primitive church of the clay tips of Goonvean mine.[13]

Yet, as one might expect, the poetry of the British Romantics does not become an alternative to orthodox faith; in fact, it offers a temptation dangerous to the speaker's faith;

Their symbols oft
Tempt simple souls like me
Whom Nature meant to seal
With doom of poetry, [14]
And dowered with eye and brain
Sensitive to the stain
Of Beauty and the grace of man's Ideal.

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[12] "Magniloquence" may refer to bombastic preaching.

[13] Clemo later rejoined the church in 1950 "in spirit" and his progression towards that act is noted in the following poems.

[14] The occurrence of "doom of poetry" at the exact center point of the poem (l.42) may or may not be a coincidence in such a self-aware poet as Clemo, who carefully guards his poetic talent from the seduction of natural beauty.

The speaker understands the temptation to seek beauty in Nature and to believe in the innocence of humankind often celebrated by the Romantic poets. However, such Romantic naïveté glosses over the fact of the Fall. It traps true adulthood within a "Progressive sickness of the mind / Which throws up hues and shapes alien to God's / Way with a man in a stripped clay desert" (MOC 32). The antidote to such "progressive sickness" is to become "a child again," a phrase repeated twice more. A child's experience of the world is innocent of the powerful sway of culture: direct, untutored, and uncomplicated. With unintentional irony, Clemo seems to be espousing what is considered a Romantic ideal; however, Clemo is referring to Christ's admonition that one must have the humility of a little child in order to enter into the kingdom of heaven.[15] Clemo's preference for being around children partially stems from his distrust of the adult ego that desires self-expression. Adult human beings are sinful creatures, and anything they create tends to lead them farther from God, not closer, unless Christ redeems it.

Art, nature, and beauty become idols when they are valued for their own sake. Through capitalization Clemo elevates this trio to deific status. Beauty and nature especially seem to be an authority unto themselves: "Nature" has the power to claim the speaker "with doom of poetry" and "Beauty" has worshippers of "its old idolatries," yet they are fallen: the "stain / Of Beauty" and "All staining rhythms of Art and Nature" are akin to the

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[15] Matt.18:3-4.

"pit-head stain" of the first stanza and indicate an impure state. It is significant that "art" appears in the lowercase only once—when modified by the adjective Christian (MOC 32). Christian art, as understood by the speaker, belongs to the Excavator alone.

The Excavator is a "grim," sadistic, and "malicious tool." Clemo is referring to both the machine that digs out the china clay in the pit right outside his front door as well as Christ Jesus, the enactor of the Moment, who hollows out the speaker with his fierce grace.[16] As the excavator's job is to scoop up clay from the earth, so is the experience of the Moment one of being scooped out from the inside:

> Like His Whose stooping tore
> The vitals from our world's foul secrecy.
> This too has power to worm
> The entrails from a flint, bearing the scoop
> With every searching swoop: (MOC 31)

Theologically, the speaker is expressing an involuntary *kenosis* or self-emptying. Christ, the means of grace accomplishing this task, is portrayed as "That broken-mouthed gargoyle" swooping in to rip the belly and disembowel fallen man and ravage Mother Nature, too. Grace is not pretty, as Clemo explains: "It seemed that I could not get a setting simple and bleak enough to match the thoughts of God that possessed me" (qtd. in Savage, 138). With

[16] Word couplings evocative of Browning appear in connection to the excavator. They are "pit-head" "waggon-tracks" "rain-gusts," "storm-lashed," "broken-mouthed" "clay-mounds," "Flower-roots" and "bush-tufts" "caterpillar-tracks" "deep-grinding." Clemo is linking the two types of excavators together.

fervor, Clemo offers up a drastic, deliberately violent image of Excavator Jesus:

> Whose iron jaws bite the soil,
> Snapping with sadist kisses in the soft
> White breasts of rock, and ripping the sleek belly
> Of sprawling clay-mounds, lifting as pounded jelly
> Flower-roots and bush-tufts with the reeking sand.

The hollowing out is described like a sadistic rape, but like rape, the act is primarily about violence and power expressed in sexual terms. The action of grace is a complete act of dominance much like a sexual assault.[17]

It is no coincidence the title of Clemo's spiritual autobiography is *The Invading Gospel.* Clemo believes that God has predestined the elect to be saved, and those elect have no choice but to turn to God (the irresistible grace of Calvinism). However, the speaker does not protest the violence, either to himself or the land; instead he understands and even exalts both excavators. Clay, symbolic of fallen man, must be scooped out by grace in order to be redeemed. Redemption is through Christ, and Christ and the cross are an ugly thing to this world, a scandal, which Clemo's excavator imagery vividly captures. The speaker believes these are "moody excavations Love shall bless" (MOC 33).

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[17] "The Excavator," according to Clemo, "was to some extent prompted by the trial of Neville Heath, the sadist murderer. Throughout that week, I, in common with most other English people, had been engrossed in the neurotic and morbid symptoms of modern life embodied in that young man—only a few months my junior. His tragic destiny showed what an unbalanced sexual temperament could bring a man to if it was divorced from Christian faith [. . . .] This brooding on sadism moved me deeply, and the resulting poetic testimony was thrown up without any conscious effort" (COR 239-40).

The poem ends with a prayer on that Sabbath evening that sums up the speaker's dark understanding of God as well as his acceptance of the destructive action of the Christ:

> "Keep far from me all loveliness, 0 God,
> And let me laud
> Thy meaner moods, so long unprized;
> The motions of that twisted, dark,
> Deliberate crucial Will
> I feel deep-grinding still
> Under the dripping clay with which I am baptized."(MOC 33)

The Moment of grace in "The Excavator," which is a powerful, unrepeatable experience, continues to echo throughout the following two poems.

In that same year *The Clay Verge* was issued (1951), Clemo published a sequence of poems called *The Wintry Priesthood,*[18] in which *"Prologue*: Cornish Anchorite" and the final "*Epilogue*: Priest Out of Bondage" reveal a progression from the turmoil of the first collection. *"Prologue*: Cornish Anchorite," is in many ways a reasoned version of the sprawling emotion of "The Excavator," which may be a reflection of it's focus on the "Word" and the traditional association of *logos* with reason. The violent scooping out of the mortal clay becomes a more precise cutting away of "clay" tainted by the Fall. Because the Word is also the creative principle of God, there is also the hope of spiritual rebirth and regeneration in this poem. Continuing one of the themes of "The Excavator," this means the speaker must be free of the poetic

[18] *The Wintry Priesthood* was published in a collection of poems entitled *Poems of 1951*: *The Prize-Winning Entries for the Festival of Britain Competition.*

preoccupation with natural beauty and man-made culture. The re-imagined Romantic trope of the changing of the seasons, in this case winter turning to spring, is the journey of this poem. The first line begins "Deep in the clay-land winter " and the final verse ends "Spring upon your earth" (MOC 41).[19] Similar to the previous poem, "Cornish Anchorite" focuses primarily inward on the landscape of the solitary self, thus Clemo's use of the term anchorite. Traditionally, an anchorite is someone with a calling to live a life of prayer in solitude, usually with no direct reliance on the larger Christian community. The term conjures up the solitary desert fathers and mothers who went into the wilderness from Egypt in the early fourth century to commune with God. This Cornish anchorite has withdrawn to the claylands to ponder a heavenly spring.

Clemo uses words associated with planting and fecundity that emphasize spring and growth throughout the poem, such as "soil," "sap's" "sown," "roots," "sunshine" "song of your birds," "birth," and "fertility." At the same time he draws on the seasonal trope, he rejects its traditional use, rebuking the underlying natural theology of God as operative in the world apart from revelation: "I am beyond your seasons [. . .]" (MOC 41). So, as certain poets wax eloquent about the glories of Nature, finding God within the beauty of the material world, the anchorite is baffled: "How should I share your pagan glow?" Such adulation by the "poet brood" is nothing but

[19] See appendix B for the complete text of the poem.

Nature worship: a pagan mindset that has nothing to do with the Christian God. The poetic elevation and celebration of the turning of the seasons is no more about God than are pagan festivals marking the winter and spring equinox. The renewal of springtime does not regenerate humanity, for the only valid rebirth has its source in divine grace.

The speaker "lapses from Nature" and turns towards a different springtime, one in which Heaven is the source of images of birth and fertility, as opposed to Nature. The spiritual fertility the speaker embraces "blasphemes" the Romantic poets' spring. Clemo uses the religious term blasphemy to drive home the idolatry of those poets who see Nature as holy and/or worthy of worship. The speaker acknowledges the great distance between himself and those poets of nature: it is "your earth" where pagan spring occurs. The speaker inhabits a different plane where spring is spiritual: the result of grace that comes from beyond the material or mortal worlds.

Continuing to re-imagine the poetic trope of the seasons, it is Clemo's winter, barren of the distractions of poetry, culture, and beauty that allows the regeneration of a heavenly borne spring. The speaker's mind is as barren as a "clay-land winter." Such a state of consciousness does not even allow the weeds to grow— weeds such as poetry and "culture" that can choke growth of the good seed.[20] This barrenness puts the speaker beyond bodily vitality or

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[20] Matthew 13:24

beauty, and therefore, beyond "mortal joy or mortal pain." In this cleansed state of mind the speaker is exempt, having been enclosed "In Dogma's fold," and thus better able to hear God. This state of grace or belonging to the "fold" is not the comforting pastoral image of safety and security brought to mind by certain of the Psalms. Dogma derives its power from the uncompromising Word revealed in the psalms of lament.

The Word, the *logos* and creative principle, bears ironic fruit, as it seems to destroy the mortal rather than save it. The speaker describes the action of the Word in terms of a progressive vivisection of the human body.[21] The "fibre of human knowledge" is drawn back by "truth" to reveal its agnosticism, nerves break down as does the impulse for piety, and muscles grow "slack" where they once were self-sufficient. The truth is "There is no worship here, only the worm I call / Original sin, and fire of the Fall." The natural world is as corrupted and fallen as mortal man. This is the reason Clemo puts forth for his anti-Romantic rejection of natural beauty, as well as his occasional celebration of the destruction of nature. Here the speaker wonders at other poets' romantic celebration of "sunshine" and birdsong while he is acutely aware of the "Worm and fire at my roots." In Calvinist doctrine, humanity's reason and will are depraved and unable to respond sufficiently to God for their salvation. It is grace when the Word reveals

[21] "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart"(Hebrews 4:12).

humanity's pretensions "And lets the once proud clay / In dumb humility decay." The destruction of mortal knowledge and false reliance on human effort by the Word is appropriate and necessary because only grace can reconcile fallen humanity to God.

The experience of the sharp edge of the Word, the truth that saves and destroys, is a necessary step before the birth of "Heaven's fertility" (MOC 41). The raw baptism of grace in "The Excavator" has led to the experience of the Word occurring its hopeful, uncomfortable period of youth in "Cornish Anchorite." The period of solitary testing now over, Clemo begins his buoyant journey out of bondage in "*Epilogue*: Priest Out of Bondage." There the speaker identifies his spiritual journey as occurring in tandem with a physical one and he lays out its beginning, middle, and present progress for the reader (there is certainly no end here, for the speaker or for the poet). This spiritual journey revolves around the "Moment," which becomes synonymous with the "Word" and eventually with "Christ."[22] The sense in which Clemo uses these terms is similar, but not interchangeable, to a theological understanding of the Trinity; each term, "Moment," "Word," and "Christ," implies a separate, distinct experience of grace, yet they are all interchangeable for his encounter with the one Christ Jesus. The two earlier

[22] In *The Concept of Dread,* Kierkegaard describes "the instant" as "that ambiguous moment in which time and eternity touch one another [. . .] where time is constantly intersecting eternity and eternity constantly permeating time" (80). Clemo had read Kierkegaard and knew that conversion should be spoken of in a way that guards it from being just another human experience.

poems focus more on the "the "Moment" ("The Excavator") and the Word" ("*Prologue*: Cornish Anchorite"), while "*Epilogue*: Priest Out of Bondage" explores the "Christ" experience. The fundamental essence of these terms for Clemo is grace in action. Clemo consistently chronicles the spiritual waypoints through the integration both poetic content and form.

"*Epilogue*: Priest Out of Bondage" translates the internal movement of the first two poems and expresses it in a concrete, physical journey moving out of the land, symbolizing a more expansive spiritual outlook.[23] The "Moment" of grace in "The Excavator" becomes ever more active and powerful, as its "hot fierce joys convulse / My heart" ("Priest Out of Bondage" MOC 53). The Word as truth is still operating as it does in "Cornish Anchorite," severing the speaker's flesh and bone from anything that would compromise his obedience to God. Now the speaker inherits the promise of the "Moment" and the "Word" in moving towards Christ, as he must. No longer mired in clay, the solitary anchorite has become a priest embracing the possibility of communal faith.

The title, "*Epilogue*: Priest Out of Bondage," suggests that changes have occurred—a priest differs from an anchorite in spiritual orientation: the first looks outward and the other inward; the first belongs to a community and is responsive to that community; the latter by definition lives a solitary life while praying for the sake of others. The phrase "out of bondage" brings

[23] See appendix C for the complete text of the poem.

to mind the exodus journey of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. Similar to the Israelites, the priest's journey of exodus is a physical journey intertwined with a spiritual one and infused with a tangible sense of leaving a place in the hope of coming to a better one.

The form of the poem consists of three stanzas with the stanza breaks determined by the phases of the speaker's journey. In the first stanza, the speaker realizes that he must separate himself from the "Cornish bond" because it carries the burden of ethnic memory, the "the annals / Of the Celt." He seeks to speak with a voice that is not merely the product of his Cornish past, as if he were still trapped in his rebellion against it. His journey inward must now turn outward as the poet moves from slavery to freedom. Yet he cannot be free without acknowledging the bonds of the past. He boldly declares, therefore, "I rise" from superstition and "savagery" that the speaker associates with the Cornish world, yet the land, a "mother-breast," has also nursed and nurtured him and possesses its own allure (MOC 53). However, the "Moment" is irresistible, the decision has been made, and the "Word" dissolves the earthly ties as the speaker begins his journey in the third and final stanza. Though the exodus journey of the Israelites was one of leaving civilization to go into the wilderness, here the priest is coming out of a wilderness into a less savage place. Christ is calling, "from the tarred road" no less, and the priest is going out to meet him. Though the speaker exquisitely details where he has been, there is no such tangible description of

where he is going, except he is "Moving to fulfillment, moving home." Sure of his destination, the speaker seems to look back and survey his physical/spiritual progress. The land "smoulders (sic) and glowers" at him as he leaves, for he, the "plucked brand," will never return (MOC 54). [24]

The "plucked brand" was John Wesley's favorite description of himself, and Clemo is consciously identifying himself in Wesleyan terms.[25] This reference to a plucked brand (or stick) has many levels of meaning that resonate with Clemo: certainly that of conversion, also of irresistible grace, and personal experience of the providential hand of God. Also, C. H. Spurgeon had a published sermon called "God's Firebrands" on the Zechariah 3:2 passage, and Clemo would have probably come across it.[26] Poetically, the image of being plucked from the fire supports the urgency and intensity of the speaker's journey. Though Clemo identifies his vocation first and foremost as a Christian concerned with evangelizing, his means of

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[24] "And the Lord said unto Satan, The Lord rebuke thee, O Satan; even the Lord that hath chosen Jerusalem rebuke thee: is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?" (Zechariah 3:2).

[25]At the age of five the Wesley's home caught on fire in the night. The children got out of the house, except for John; however, a farmer from nearby spotted him looking out of an upstairs window amid the flames. Several neighbors climbed on each other's shoulders until the top man could pull little John out of the burning house to safety. Only moments after he was rescued, the entire house exploded in flames. For the rest of his life, John Wesley referred to himself as a brand plucked from the burning.

[26] Sermon no. 3233, "God's Firebrands" delivered at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, *Sermons*, Vol. 57 London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1911, pp.25-36.

communication is poetry, and he makes sophisticated use of rhythm and rhyme to accomplish his task.

As the stanza breaks shape a journey going forward, the rhythm of the lines reveal the pace of that journey. Out of a forty-one line poem, there are only twelve end-stops; the vast majority of the poem consists of enjambed lines. These enjambments affect a constant forward motion as the reader anticipates the next line at the end of the present one; such progressive movement supports the overall sense of journey described by the poem. Interestingly, however, as the open line propels the reader to the next line, frequently there is a caesura in the form of a comma, semi-colon, or colon signaling a pause. This punctuation emphasizes words and phrases in two ways: either by having the reader linger over a particular idea or by the rhythmic surprise of the caesura pattern being broken and the resulting effect of a line rushing forward with energy and urgency. This short step/long stride pattern can be seen in the following section of stanza two:

> To air that is rid of superstition, to a pulse
> That draws no heavy blood from the obscure
> Cycles of savagery, the historic shape
> Of atavism. I shed the lure
> Of a dim mother-breast I have outgrown,
> And while the Moment's hot fierce joys convulse
> My heart I take the irrevocable step beyond
> Loyalty to this dead land: (MOC 54)

The last two and a half lines convey the energy of "hot fierce joys" and the release of crossing that threshold, the "irrevocable step," in the journey forward out of the land and out of physical and spiritual bondage. Clemo is

now nourished by something other than the Cornish "mother-breast," yet it is no less sensual for him, as the language conveys. The second stanza, in which the speaker is about to set out on his journey, has the greatest number of enjambments or pauses; the final stanza, when the speaker is already on his way, has the fewest. This pattern of delay and release is familiar enough to anyone leaving a place with which he or she has an emotional connection.

The intertwining of "space and grace," or the coincidence of the physical and spiritual journey, occurs in Clemo's rhyme pattern. After beginning each stanza with AA, the general pattern dictates that for every C rhyme, for example, somewhere in that stanza its mate will be found. From a regular pattern of AABCBCDEED in the first stanza, the second and third stanzas stuff in new rhyme endings before resolving the earlier ones, creating a nesting effect. For example, in the previous section of the poem, "pulse" must wait for either the resolution or introduction of three different rhymes before its own closure in "convulse." The effect is a weaving together of ideas whose tensions and resolutions are intertwined, mirroring the physical/spiritual journey of the speaker. What is most interesting is that there are two end rhymes from the second stanza that are unresolved until the third stanza:

> Loyalty to this dead land: no longer bone
> Of my bone is its granite, nor flesh
> Of my flesh its clay:
> The bright blade of the Word severs the barbarous bond.

> Out of the ancestral mesh,
> Out of the bitter moorlands where my tears
> . . . .
> Heir of the Moment and the electing Way. (MOC 54)

There can be no resolution for the "flesh" and "clay" of the speaker until the final stanza when the journey is in motion. Only then is the tension resolved: poetically in the end rhyme of "mesh" (for "flesh") and "Way (for clay)"; physically as the old bonds are broken; and spiritually as the earthy clay undergoes transformation through the spiritual "Way." Such delayed resolution of rhyme underscores these words as the key image, which is the earthly being left in favor of the spiritual. The image ("flesh / of my flesh") is drawn from Genesis 2:23, when Adam recognizes Eve, here signifying the speaker's spiritual being will no longer derive from the Cornish granite and clay. The speaker has been in a restricting and "barbarous" erotic union with the land, and the Word that cuts like a two-edged sword (a reference back to "Cornish Anchorite") severs him from the barbarous limits of a false betrothal.

Clemo also uses repetition to support the theme of exodus. In stanza one he repeats "in"; he begins each line of stanza two with "of " and repeats "out" in the third stanza. This repetition emphasizes the transition from being *in* the land, to the decision to no longer be *of* the land, to coming *out* of the land. The spiritual progression is illustrated as the "Moment" uprooting the speaker from his native soil, the "Word" cutting the bond completely, and finally "Christ" calling to him. The use of these words, which could all

reasonably be said to refer to the Christ Jesus, implies different experiences of the same idea of grace. It is the "Moment," though, that is repeated in each section – the word with the most informal and experiential connotation.

The only other words that are repeated in the poem (twice) other than "Moment" describe the place from which the speaker is departing: "dead land" (MOC 54, 55). However, this land seems quite alive in the priest's imagination, for it is "mutinous," "dark," "bitter," "sullen," "sour," "hard," and it can "hate," "smoulder," "glower," and finally, "never . . . understand." Though the poem indicates this land is tangible, these anthropomorphic terms also support the interpretation of land as a state of consciousness or way of being. Either way, the speaker is indeed journeying towards something more peaceful as Christ is associated with words such as "fulfillment," "home," "treasures," and "truth." Christ also represents openness to community and fellowship that seems more hopeful than the isolated fate that the land had in store for the speaker: "Sour as its soil and hard with its hate" (MOC 55). This sense of concrete hopefulness derives from the speaker's being "Heir of the Moment and the electing Way" a reference to Clemo's deep Kierkegaardian and Calvinist sense of election: he is elected to the Way of Life by him who is also the Truth (MOC 54).[27]

[27] John 14:6

III. Marriage

As he took inspiration from Spurgeon for his poetic evangelism, so Clemo also found affirmation of his marriage ambitions in the pages of Spurgeon: "where there is true and genuine love, it is the sweetest and happiest mode of living. It is one of the blessings of paradise which has been preserved to us after the fall."[28] Clemo felt his vocation to marry was as divinely inspired as his vocation to write: "my belief that I was destined to marry was based on a Christian sense of vocation which had nothing to do with poetic fancies" (MOR 77). His vision of fulfillment lay not in marriage as such, but in a particularly Christian marriage, a "creed-embedded marriage."

In order to unravel his conception of Christian marriage, one must begin with Clemo's declaration that for him "conversion came through sex" (Clemo *unpublished preface*). His Calvinism does not follow the caricature of Calvinism that rejects everything bodily. However, Clemo had a complex notion of human sexuality. He was not referring, therefore, to his own experience (or lack thereof) of carnal knowledge; he was speaking of *eros*, the love between a man and a woman, which, as Pope Benedict XVI says in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, is "a certain foretaste of the pinnacle of our existence, of that beatitude for which our whole being yearns" (7). His experience of *eros* not only brought him closer to God, but also drew him to

[28] "The Relationship of Marriage" as found in *Sermons,* pp. 412-420.

the feminine as the inspiration for much of his writing. However, Clemo quickly rejected *eros* as complete or sufficient unless it was connected to *agape*, the love that moves "towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God" (Benedict XVI 10).

Clemo's understands holy *eros* as a purified desire that brings energy and power to his poetry. [29] He clearly rejects an *eros* that is not disciplined by and grounded in Christian orthodoxy, as illustrated by two of Clemo's poems devoted to the poet D. H. Lawrence, "Two-Beds" and "Tregerthen," as we shall later discover. Like D. H. Lawrence, the teenaged Clemo was looking for a religion in the "dark shrine of erotic mysticism" before his conversion. And, though he identifies with Lawrence's working class background and is sympathetic to his sex mysticism (he lists *The Man who Died* as an influential book), Clemo will often refer to Lawrence an example of a doomed and tragic *eros* (IG 11).

As Clemo's faith matured, he understood that Christian *eros* would necessarily be intertwined with *agape*: that is its power and its promise. Clemo declared,

[29] Virginia Burrus notes that "Eroticism is not, however, confined to the human or even to the human-divine sphere of relationality. Eroticism is not perhaps confinable at all, as Nygren intuited; it appears also to lie close to the heart of creativity and thus of cosmology, an insight that Nygren, however, resists in his attempt to distance creativity from *eros* by aligning it strictly with the agapic" (xx). Nygren is Anders Nygren, whose *Agape and Eros* was the watershed moment in the modern treatment of theologies of love.

> A close study of the Epistles had shown me that something quite extraordinary, something we can never fully understand in this world, happens to the sex-drive when the whole personality is yielded to the Holy Spirit [. . . .] The holiness of sex exists only where the natural "unclean" striving towards self-fulfillment has been cancelled by faith. (IG 97)

Clemo was early influenced by the story of Dante and Beatrice, courtesy of Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopedia.* Clemo felt he had already experienced a similar phenomenon through his relationships with Evelyn and Barbara, as we noticed in the previous chapter. *Eros* became sanctified by *agape* for Clemo in the way it was for Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, as his experience of romantic, sexual desire for Beatrice, when rightly ordered by Christian faith, became an experience of the Holy. Having traveled through Purgatory under the tutelage of Mary and Virgil, Dante is at last "crowned and mitered" by Virgil who pronounces him free since he has overcome his tendency towards misdirected love (*Purgatorio* 27:142).

Clemo's understanding of the mediating role played by the women in his life was largely inspired by Dante's regard for Beatrice. The intimate space between Dante and Beatrice had been the place of spiritual transformation. Dante emphasizes the very earthy and concrete reality of Beatrice, but for Dante she is also an image of the kingdom of God. Charles Williams claims that the common experience of falling in love can be an experience of the kingdom of God and an experience of the love and grace of the incarnate God—an experience of salvation. If romantic love is not seen as

an end in itself but rather a beginning, it can be a means of following of the Christian way, especially in marriage (*Outlines* 9).

Clemo also shares Dante's sharp judgment against romantic love that climaxes chiefly in sexual embrace. In the second circle of Hell where the sin of Lust is punished, Dante finds Paolo and Francesca forever locked in each other's embrace, swirling about in the tumult of romance. Not only did they give in to lust, they are also guilty of being in love with love, indicated by the book they were reading, which was the story of Lancelot and Guinevere. Dante's inclusion of this tale of courtly love as the incipient cause of hellish condemnation is a judgment on what Williams would call pseudo-romanticism—making the beloved an extension of one's idealism, rather than affirming the flesh-and-blood person as an "other" (*Figure of Beatrice* 101). Dante's sympathy with Francesca indicates the lure of romance is a temptation he himself understands, as would Clemo, who experienced his own version of romantic idealism (and hell) through his relationship with young Evelyn.

Clemo struggled as a young man to reconcile two internal impulses he felt to be powerfully at odds with each other. One impulse was the sensual, pagan nature he felt he "inherited" from his father's side of the family. Dangerous, raw and erotic though it may have been, it was also fuel to his artistic fire. The other impulse was godward, the result of his mother's influence and his immersion in Scripture, his singing of Ira Sankey hymns,

and his early experience of Methodism at the Bible Christian Church near Goonamarris. Though the godward impulse did not summon him to emotional asceticism, neither did it seem to leave room for the erotic, romantic impulse that inspired his poetry.

IV. Robert & Elizabeth Barrett Browning

The solution to this painful struggle came through Clemo's encounter with the life and poetry of Robert Browning, and by extension, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The *Love Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett* was a Christmas present to Clemo from his mother in 1937, when he was twenty-one. Clemo found in Browning's life and work a synthesis of passionate Christianity and spiritual eroticism. He began to interpret his own life through the example of the Barrett-Brownings as if he had found a template from which to map and measure his life. Whether rightly or wrongly, Clemo interpreted the Browning "life-pattern" as poets, Christians, and marriage partners to be his own divine direction, and so he aspired to it throughout his entire life.

Clemo was more influenced theologically by Charles Spurgeon, Karl Barth, and even Kierkegaard than Browning (the nature of Browning's Christianity is still debatable), yet Browning is clearly a source of spiritual awareness for him. Clemo is not the only one who looked to Browning in this way: "from the appearance of *The Ring and The Book*, Browning enjoyed an adoring audience of disciples who read him more eagerly for his spiritual

insights than for his poetry" (Lawson 7). The *Athenaeum* greeted the publication of *The Ring and the Book* in 1868-69 as "the most precious and profound spiritual treasure that England has produced since the days of Shakespeare" (*Athenaeum*, No. 2160, March 20, 1869). Several Browning societies were formed and members wrote elaborate commentaries on his poems and their spiritual meanings. These "disciples" of Browning characterized him as a prophet and a philosopher, rarely as a poet.[30] The Great War and the Depression, however, had changed public perception of the veracity of "God's in his heaven, / All's right with the world" (*Pippa Passes*, I, 227-228) (Lawson 10-11). Even so, Jack Clemo still held to his romantic interpretation of the Brownings as exemplars of Christian marriage and evangelical poets.

Clemo was "profoundly moved" by the serialized version of Rudolf Besier's play *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* and read several biographies of Browning. He concluded that "[Browning] alone among writers, as far as I could judge, had emerged from adolescent morbidities to enjoy a love-life in which Christian mysticism and normal human feeling were ideally balanced" (COR 129). Though Browning's influence as a poet can be seen in Clemo's work, (especially word couplings and his use of dramatic portraiture), it is Clemo's perception of Browning's *life* as a poet—the romance, the Christian

[30] Even the criticisms of Henry Jones and George Santayana (*Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher*, 1891, and "The Poetry of Barbarism" in *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, 1900) did not diminish Browning's reputation as a religious thinker.

witness, the passion, the artistry—that had the greatest impact on his sense of vocation. The Brownings offered Clemo an example of a life he admired and sought to imitate. He studied them as people more than as poets. For example, his personal papers at University of Exeter include notations cross-referencing *Love Letters* and *Sonnets for the Portuguese* so he could compare the poems to the events of their courtship. Hence Clemo's linking of Sonnet XXVIII from *Sonnets from the Portuguese* to specific letters:

> My letters! all dead paper, mute and white!
> And yet they seem alive and quivering
> Against my tremulous hands which loose the string
> And let them drop down on my knee to-night.
> This said,—he wished to have me in his sight
> Once, as a friend: this fixed a day in spring (*1)*
> To come and touch my hand . . . a simple thing,
> Yet I wept for it!—this, . . . the paper's light . . .
> Said, Dear I love thee (*2)*; and I sank and quailed
> As if God's future thundered on my past.
> This said, I am thine (*3)*—and so its ink has paled
> With lying at my heart that beat too fast.
> And this . . . O Love, thy words have ill availed
> If, what this said, I dared repeat at last! (*4*)
>
> *1 May 20th 1845 – See Love-Letters 1.71*
> *2 Love-Letters 1. 182.*
> *3 Love-Letters 1. 229.*
> *4 Love-Letters 1. 22-3.*[31]

He declares that Elizabeth Barrett's *Love Letters* are "great spiritual documents" that "transformed my whole attitude to the place of suffering in the Christian scheme" (IG 125). Suffering is not the final word for a Christian, as we heard Clemo declare in the previous chapter.

[31] The annotations refer to volume and page number of *Love Letters*.

Immersing himself in the Browning's lives lessened Clemo's sense of isolation and helped him to persevere during his own lonely yearning for a wife. Browning scholar William Whitla wrote that one of the themes in Robert Browning's poetry is that "Love, like art and religion, can be redemptive it if is made incarnate in life's critical moment" (92). Clemo's many notations of his copy of *Sonnets for the Portuguese* often refer to his own struggles as he waited for the promised incarnation, as the underlined phrases make clear. There are implied references to his sadness:

> Were changed to long despairs, till God's own grace Dated: *1938-45*
> Could scarcely lift above the world forlorn
> My heavy heart [. . .] Sonnet XXV vv. 6-9

But also notes of triumph:

> My own, my own, Dated: June - Sept. 11, 1951.[32]
> Who camest to me when the world was gone
> And I who looked for only God, found thee! Sonnet XXVII vv. 6-8

Clemo would write his own poetry in the years ahead by chronicling his search for a wife and eventual courtship and marriage to Ruth Peaty.

When he at last found his own bride, he had the occasion to write "Wedding Eve":

> To plant the Cross in the nerves
> Intensifies the wedlock sun;
> Faith's ravaged fibre now revives
> Where the blood thrives,
> And I feel in your flushed curves,
> In your kiss, the world-renouncing nun. (ET 6)

[32] The dates coincide with Clemo's attraction to a young lady known only as "T". See MOR 68 ff.

At long last, the Browning pattern is fulfilled, with its blend of eroticism and spirituality. As Donald Davie says, "Those 'flushed curves' should be sexy enough to satisfy anyone . . ." (Davie, *Sacred Poetry*, 7). But it is the Cross that heightens the bliss of the marriage partnership just as the kiss revives faith. The relationship with Ruth began with a letter received, as Clemo carefully noted, on the wedding anniversary of the Brownings, September 12th. It was with obvious delight that the Clemos took a belated honeymoon to Italy, where Elizabeth and Robert Browning lived after their elopement.

In "Festal Magnet" Clemo tells the reader his reason for coming to Italy, which is physically to connect with "The soil and climate in which my faith / First reached into poetry, rich with Italian colour / Through Browning's pen" (ATM 56). He then lists the works of Browning set in Italy that influenced his vision, in what seems to be in an ascending order of importance:

> In Venice I feel again the dawn
> Spread from Pippa's Asolo, Guercino's Fano,
> Andrea's wistful twilit Fiesole,
> Rogue Lippi's Florence, aglow with God,
> And the Arezzo crest, Pompilia's vision
> That showed my goal beyond the clay sickness. [33]

The list culminates in with a reference to the central character in Browning's *The Ring and the Book*. As she lay dying, Pompilia has a vision of the

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[33] Browning's works that Clemo mentions are *Pippa Passes*; "The Guardian Angel: A Picture at Fano," (After Browning saw Guercino's original painting in Fano he was inspired to write the poem); and "Andrea Del Sarto" and "Fra Lippo Lippi" from *Men and Women*.

spiritual meaning of her life as untouched by the suffering of the past, and her love and faith in the priest Caponsacchi as a basis for renewed faith. She thus represents the fulfillment of Clemo's call to marriage. Paul Zietlow observes that Pompilia "strikingly exemplifies the love that sacrifices nature and becomes one with faith," a phrase that Clemo himself might have written (211).

In *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning* that Clemo possessed in his library, there is pasted a typed, underlined excerpt about Pompilia from one of the papers he read at Trethosa chapel:

> Think for instance of that little Italian girl Pompilia Camparini, that Browning wrote about in his masterpiece [. . . .] her mother, an evil woman, sold her to a wicked old couple [. . . .] The fraud was discovered and when she was twelve years old they got rid of her in the most dreadful fashion, forcing her to marry a man over 50 [. . .] who tortured her in the most dreadful fashion [. . . .] Yet in spiteof [sic] all these evils that caused her to halt from earliest infancy she stands out as one of the lovliest [sic] Christians God ever made.

As Caponsacchi imagines sharing a life with Pompilia, these words could be Clemo's:

> To learn not only by a comet's rush
> But a rose's birth, —not by the grandeur, God—
> But the comfort, Christ (VI, 2094-2096).

Such a dream of marriage as an experience of the incarnate Christ is close to Clemo's vision. As Caponsacchi explains to the judges "'You know this is not love, Sirs,' 'it is faith, / The feeling that there's God'" (*Ring and Book* VI.1193-1194). Caponsacchi, like Pompilia, loved with spiritual purity "and of those

who participate in the poem as observers, only the Pope can believe that Caponsacchi's love lacked earthly dimension [. . . .] This love that sacrifices nature and becomes one with faith strains credulity with such force that it approaches the miraculous" (Zietlow 211). As with the Pope as well as Browning, Clemo believed in this kind of love, and much of his poetic output was "preoccupied with the universal tensions of nature and divine grace, especially in their bearing on the Christian regeneration of sex" (CC 7).

In the rooms of the Palazzo Rezzonico, where Robert Browning died in 1889, Clemo pays homage as he reminisces: "I clung, by stubborn grace, to the alien / Glitter of the Browning pattern" ("Palazzo Rezzonico" ATM 57). Browning had dreamed of his voluptuous *Pauline*, only to find she was "a pious invalid shut up in a darkened room at Wimpole Street" (IG 30). Clemo had been both the yearning poet and the pious invalid, and now he was graced-filled groom. The Clemos were able to visit Italy courtesy of their Weymouth friend Benedict Ramsden to whom the poem "Casa Guidi (for Benedict Ramsden)" is dedicated.[34] Clemo acknowledges his debt to Robert Browning:

> His pen was turbulent, bringing soul-quakes,
> Not always aesthetic pleasure.
> His tangle of key meanings, clues to God,
> Led straight to the heart of my marriage.

[34] Casa Guidi was the Florentine home of the Brownings during most of their married life.

Browning's *Pauline* illuminated one of the keys to Clemo's marriage by showing what "Evangelical conversion must mean even to a poet for whom life naturally flowers in religious symbols" (IG 28). From the sensuous and temporal quest that soon suffers the conviction of sin, the penitent turns to Christ. Willing to give all for the vision of God on the temporal level, the soul surrenders. "And then," Clemo writes, "the paradox appears [. . .] the human symbol, dissolved by grace for the contact of surrender, is restored [. . .] still poetic, still adapted to the temperament of the convert, but purged of self-indulgence and idolatry" (IG 29). As Browning's *Pauline* illustrates:

> I shall see all clearer and love better:
> . . . .
> And beauteous shapes will come to be again,
> And unknown secrets will be trusted to me,
> Which were not mine when wavering—but now
> I shall be priest and lover. (1012, 1016-1019)[35]

In his interpretation of *Pauline*, Clemo found a way to solve the tension between his spiritual and sexual needs: "Having been found by the redeeming God, the poet was free to seek the fulfillment of His plan for the dedicated life." This plan was not "suffering and poverty and shame" that the exiled soul had anticipated, but one of fulfillment and joy (IG 29)."Casa Guidi" continues:

[35] Browning is known for tinkering with the text of his poems, and *Pauline* is no exception. It is noteworthy that the final edition reads: "I shall be priest and prophet as of old." Clemo's book of Browning's poems given to him by his mother had the older version of the poem.

> Soon I shall stand on the balcony,
> My wife's hand and mine on a roughly-carved cherub.
> The same sun burnished Via Maggio
> When that pair slowly paced the terrace,
> Discussing Euripides or Cavour,[36]
> Or merely recalling Wimpole Street
> And their life of wonders unfolding. (CA 46)

There is understated warmth and quiet awe suffusing the poem, as Clemo sees his life following the pattern of his mentor's, a vision at last realized after decades of frustration.

Though none would be so important as the Brownings, Clemo read landscapes, texts, and people for clues and keys to his own divine calling. "Places and people," Donald Davie points out, "however remote from Jack Clemo, are in his poems sooner or later connected directly and quite explicitly with himself in his own landscape of Cornwall. This is inevitable, given the allegorical cast of his imagination" (Davie, *Dissentient*, 54). Clemo's Calvinistic-Methodist sensibilities and his practice of "reading" his world allegorically would come naturally to a man who believed in Providence and the sovereignty of God. As we have seen in "The Excavator, ""Prologue: Cornish Anchorite," and "Epilogue: Priest Out of Bondage," Clemo saw the hand of God in the clay tips and clay pits that surrounded his home, providentially claiming him for his own. When "clay" was no longer a comprehensive enough symbol for Clemo's maturing theology, and when he

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[36] This is likely a reference to Robert Browning's *Aristophanes' Apology including A Transcript from Euripides being the Last Adventure of Balaustion.* [Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1886 (original London, 1875 by Smith, Elder, and Co.)]. Count Cavour led a movement for the unification of the Italian States in 1861, a cause fervently supported by Elizabeth Browning.

could no longer see the clay pits, his poetry began to increasingly turn to other people—just as his fiercely individualistic faith began to acknowledge that Christianity is a communal faith.

Davie asks, and answers, a key question relevant to the thesis at hand in his consideration of "On the Death of Karl Barth," a poem this dissertation will address in the sixth chapter. For now it will suffice to say Davie questions Clemo's use of the first person plural. Who are the "we" and "us" that Clemo is speaking for in the poem? Davie thinks Clemo writes "as if for a community [. . .] acting as if it already exists [. . .] thereby willing that community into being" (8). This community is broader than Calvinists, or Nonconformists, for as we shall see, Clemo's affinities are not sectarian. According to Davie, Clemo is speaking "for 'illiberal' Christians such as Clemo himself" (*Lecture* 8). Indeed, Clemo's poems about individual figures are in part an effort to create a community for himself, a sense of belonging and a sense of affirmation of his own vision by placing it alongside others whom he admires (and sometimes those he does not). However, Davie as a former Baptist is too eager to reclaim Clemo for the Church universal, claiming him as one who seeks to preserve the saving remnant, a sort of church-within-the-church. He argues therefore that Clemo "is not concerned to argue, to make converts." His business is to help his Nonconformist companions, according to Davie, "to restore [. . .] a poetic voice such as they once had [. . .]" (*Lecture* 9). In fact, Clemo is not primarily concerned to aid

his fellow evangelicals, but to establish himself as poetic apologist for evangelical Christianity; therefore, he does in fact argue, and testify, and celebrate, and denounce evil in all of his poetry, the better to disseminate what he understands to be the truth of the gospel.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Choice About Art: Writers & Artists

> Art, to me, was not a cause to be served, but only a way in which people with a certain kind of brain could serve causes, and the decision as to which causes art served must be made outside the aesthetic sphere: it was determined by spiritual and moral awareness of man's predicament.
>
> JACK CLEMO: *Marriage of a Rebel*

Almost all of Clemo's published (and unpublished) writings explore his vocation as a poet within a Christian context. Being a poet was inseparable from being a Christian witness, for Clemo's prime desire as an artist was to serve God. He is clear, however, that art can never have the same status as belief, even though it may serve as a witness to it. Faith brings "a grace . . . / Deeper than art probes" ("John Wesley" BA 28). In this way, Clemo at once rejects any modern notion of art as an end in itself, while embracing an older notion of art as having extrinsic religious and moral purpose.

> This does not mean that the Christian is absolved from doing his utmost to fashion an enduring witness; it does not preclude him from feeling keen aesthetic pleasure at a well turned phrase [. . . .] But it does mean that for him these things can never be an end in themselves, and that the urge to regard art as a religion must be resisted as idolatry (Preface).

He declares the poet is often in "conflict with everything that would make the world safe and tidy" (IG 18). Such a statement, perhaps, would also describe Clemo's understanding of what an orthodox Christian is *vis-à-vis* the world. The artist as well as the religious often steps beyond the bounds of ordinary

experience, and in the poet's case, he or she often pushes the boundaries of language. The result of this tension can be an "especially privileged insight," but it may also lead to an "especially perverted insight" unless guided by Christian discipline (IG 18). As a young man, Clemo had become "sadly disillusioned about the literary life, and no longer wondered that Puritanism tended to suppress all writings except tracts and hymns" (COR 127). This was due to his own exploration of the biography of authors such as Shelley (who was an adulterer) and Wordsworth (who fathered an illegitimate child), as well as his mother's simple stricture against his praise of a pagan author: "'What do that matter if 'e lost 'is soul?'" (COR 127).

Clemo's continuing interest in the success or failure (in his terms) of other writers derives from his own keen struggle to find his place as both artist and believer. Clemo confesses that poetry "had meant for me the worship of strange gods," and that these deities called for the worship of ideals that were contrary to "the curt brutality of the Gospel" (COR 222). As we have seen, it was chiefly the Brownings who showed Clemo that one could be both a Christian and a poet: "I had observed [. . .] when a creative genius surrendered his gifts to the service of alien Christian truth he escaped the divine judgment on unregenerate nature [. . .]" (IG134). Surrender of one's artistic gifts meant putting them wholly under the direction of divine will: only then is one free from egoism.

This chapter unfolds in two sections. The first is an examination of those poems devoted to non-Christian artists about whom Clemo offers his judgment. In the second section I will turn to poetry about Christian artists. There is in this first section a steady progression of poems of critique that show Clemo both unfairly and fairly assessing artists who do not share his faith. In the least successful of these he is guilty of sermonizing, while in the more effective poems he draws the reader in to consider his perspective.

I. Poems Devoted to Non-Christian Artists and Writers

"I Go Gentle, To Dylan Thomas" is Clemo's answer to one of many poets of doubt, namely Thomas's famous poem to his dying father: "Do not go gentle into that good night, / Old age should burn and rave at the close of day; / Rage, rage against the dying of the light." Clemo responds:

> That terminal rage gets us nowhere
> Except into the wrong grave, the dead end.
> My day's light slackens gently
> Among these quiet, mystical white horns,
> Clay horns that sounded my entry [. . .]. (ET 2)

The horns are the huge clay tips visible from most of the china clay country in mid-Cornwall. Clemo's "entry" refers to his conversion:

> My entry was justified
> When cloven tongues knit Bedford to Wimpole Street,
> Answering my horn;
> When taper-blooms bound Mary to the Lourdes foothills,
> Answering my horn;
> When a Valkyrie's shadow tautened Derwentwater,
> Answering my horn;
> When a parched face kindled under Weymouth palms,
> Answering my horn.

Though the entire poem is not given here, it is enough to deliberate on Donald Davie's comment that the poem is a failure. He notes, rightly so, that the poem is obscure. The reader must be familiar with the Thomas poem and have intimate knowledge of the persons alluded to by the place-names, "not all of which can I, who have studied Clemo for many years, confidently identify" (Davie, *Lecture*, 10).[1]

Davie also takes issue with the fact that "the poet has called into play energies of the English language—in this case, centered on the word, 'horn'—such as, once they are in play, he cannot control" (Davie, *Lecture*, 10). He lists the many possible connotations of the word "horn," from trumpet to cuckold. I think Davie is asking for greater precision in Clemo's diction, and he is right that the poem is a failure. Compared to the first and final third stanza, the second one offered here seems from a different poem. It has a different rhythm, tone, meter, and imagery from the more subdued reflection of the rest of the poem. The effect is jarring and works against Clemo's message that a Christian faith in heaven engenders a "gentle" surrender to the dying light of death.

Clemo treats another skeptical writer in a heavy-handed way in his eponymously titled poem about Jack London. He depicts London's difficult

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[1] Bedford is where John Bunyan was imprisoned for twelve years, during which time he wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress;* Wimpole Street refers to Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning's courtship, of course; Derwentwater refers to Mary Wiseman, Clemo's romantic interest of three years, who took him to visit the Lake District; and Weymouth is where his wife Ruth was raised.

early life as a slum child on the San Francisco waterfront with his usual realism, remarking that London's talent as a writer delivered him from its shadows:

> Life, barred from love and faith,
> Forced an early outlet, the one shoot
> Of sane, uncrippled movement in the darkness –
> A cool clear art. His pen retaliated. (CA 54)

The second stanza chronicles London's adventurous early career as hobo, sailor and, most vividly, his time in Alaska during the Klondike gold rush:

> Hordes of dead souls,
> Ice-bitten bodies, lost in yellow mirage;
> Prowl and howl of wolves and madmen
> Weird in Polar twilight;
> Revolver shots in doomed camps
> Where fires had died through blizzard avalanches.

Clemo seems to admire London's work, evoking some of his short stories such as "White Silence" and "To Build A Fire." Yet in the third and last stanza Clemo pronounces an acerbic final judgment of the author based on the aspects of London's biography that Clemo found unacceptable.

> The rich artist preened in his mansion
> Before the flames clawed it down, while the torn
> Bride-bond had brought him his only offspring.
> His Californian luxury ill fitted
> The remnants of raw class-hatred:
> There was blind defiance, smell of liquor and ashes,
> Then the white silence at forty.

Clemo reveals familiarity with the details of London's life. For example, the mansion that London was building, Wolf House, burned down just as London and his second wife Charmain Kittredge were due to move in.

Clemo does not even acknowledge Kittredge, who had an affair with London before they were married, focusing only on London's divorce from his first wife Bess Maddern, who bore him two daughters. London and Charmain's only surviving child died when it was less than two days old, and Clemo intimates this childlessness was a divine judgment. Though he acknowledges London's advocacy of socialism, which stemmed from his childhood labor in a cannery and his stint in prison for vagrancy, Clemo dismisses it as only "class-hatred." The "smell of liquor" refers to London's alcoholism, and the "white silence," the title of one of London's short stories, to his supposed suicide.

Clemo is responding to the source (or sources) of information about London available at the time, some of which would have painted an unattractive picture of the adventurous author:

> The prevailing myths are that London [. . .] committed suicide, that he wrote obsessively about his own illegitimacy, that he was a writer of dog stories and adventure tales for adolescent boys, that he was a racist, a womanizer, an alcoholic, and a hack writer [. . .].
>
> (Nuernberg xxiii)

Clemo's criticisms of London, particularly the ones involving his personal life, are not simply "myth." He was likely an alcoholic, he did indeed have an adulterous affair, and the exact nature of his death is still debated (Labor xxv). But London was an early celebrity, a role that invites exaggeration for good or ill by those writers who exploit the celebrity image (including London

himself).[2] Likely the truth about Jack London can be found somewhere between the competing portraits of him as morally rotten and morally upright. A nuanced portrait does not interest Clemo, however, who likely finds London's adultery and abandonment of his children unforgivable. By the end of this poem Clemo renders his judgment, declaring that London was "uncured by a faith," which "set the trail to a sorry end" (CA 54).

Clemo is more forgiving in the dramatic monologue of Victorian painter Holman Hunt, who was one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood. These young artists formed a group in response to the "artificial" painting of their time, preferring the simplicities of Italian painting to that of the influential High Renaissance painter Raphael. Their paintings are known for intense color and realistic detail developed through the study of nature. Their goal was to express "a new moral seriousness and sincerity in their works" ("Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood"). However, the co-founders of the Brotherhood such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Everett Millais did not realize their lofty goals in their troubled lives. Clemo has Hunt explain their failure:

> Our aim was noble, our art-sense trained,
> But a warp was in the hot blood:
> The bright banner of the brotherhood
> Was soon bedraggled, stained
> With signs of madness and drunken splutter.

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[2] Art and life may have become conflated in the popular mind as the protagonist of London's novel *Martin Eden*—which plot summary closely resembles London's early life—commits suicide.

There were mistresses, “procured abortions,” blackmail and “divorce-court squalor” in the lives of these high-minded artists: “Jesus Christ’s name headed the list / Of our exemplars. What an irony!” (DD 24)

Clemo’s Hunt confesses to his part in this display of the “hypocrisy of art.” His intent was to paint Christ, “But I could not get morally focused.” Instead, he fell in love with a barmaid named Annie whom Clemo characterizes as “wanton and easily bought”; at one time Hunt planned to marry her. Though Hunt eventually married “respectably” (twice), the image of Annie remains in many of his religious paintings: “Annie twists the aim. / ‘The Light of the World’ hangs crookedly, / Shaped in her impure flame” (DD 25).[3] Clemo utterly rejects the notion that artists can indulge in immorality in deference to their “creative impulse.” According to Clemo, the life of the artist will inevitably shape the art, for better or worse, a conclusion that challenges received ideas about poetry’s immunity from a moral and dogmatic judgment.

“Mary Shelley in Geneva” is another of Clemo’s dramatic monologues depicting disillusionment. Reflecting on her life and that of her intimate circle, including her husband, Mary recalls that Geneva was tolerant of their moral revolt: “But all has ripened, burst, and I come back / To a sour epilogue

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[3] A well-known painting, the life size version of “The Light of the World” hangs in St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, depicting Jesus Christ holding a lantern about to knock on a door overgrown with vines. The painting is an imaginative illustration of Revelation 3:20: “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.”

of bold ideals" (ET 16).[4] Those ideals have left her wanting, and she wonders if she made the right choice: "I would loathe religion as my parents did, / As Shelley did, but I am tired, unsure. / I feel we missed some clue, got blinded, trapped" (ET 17). The fact that Shelley's father, William Godwin, had been a Calvinist minister (and the founder of philosophical anarchism) would naturally interest Clemo. He thus has Mary suggest that Godwin's ultimate rejection of the faith is the root of Shelley's unhappiness. She wonders:

> Suppose my father, once in Calvin's fold,
> Had broadened the firm core with tenderness
> And won my mother to it, brought me up
> Believing heaven had chosen me for joy. (ET 17)

Clemo allows Mary to ponder the path not taken; however, she cannot change the past. With wifely loyalty she declares:

> But no: such fancies only cast a smirch
> On my imperious memories of love.
> Calvin was monstrous. It's my husband's frail
> Light I must lean to: I can search no more. (ET 17)

It was in Geneva that Mary Shelley conceived of her famous novel, *Frankenstein*, and it is perhaps with intentional irony that Clemo has her characterize Calvin as "monstrous," when Frankenstein has come to symbolize the nightmare of the ego unfettered by morality and man's creative impulse becoming his god.

In a similar vein, the dramatic monologue entitled "Virginia Woolf Remembers St. Ives" also condemns a father who failed to give his child an

[4] Mary Shelley had a child out of wedlock with the then married Percy Bysshe Shelley.

example of faith: “Though my father had worn a dog-collar,” she declares, “And blown his horn feebly . . . He reared me in silent guilt.” The consequence of his failing was “I choked early / And shall die choking” on what Clemo calls her agnosticism (DD 19). However, sounding like a proud Cornishman, a rare thing for Clemo, he makes the picturesque seaside town of St. Ives where Woolf went on holiday with her family, soften the existential blow:

> But Cornwall soothes my fate:
> Her images of cloud, wave, huer’s hut [5]
> And lonely lighthouse (could the fish see that)
> Pierced between dream and trauma, shaped something
> (Though not hope), and my solid pages
> Float out from a borderline. (DD 19)

Clemo’s interest lies with Woolf’s spiritual life. The only direct reference he makes to her literary work acknowledges her “solid pages,” which are only on the “borderline” of her search for “solid truth.”[6] The great power of this poem lies precisely in Clemo’s ability to capture the spirit of Woolf’s own wonderfully gossamer prose, which operates just on this “borderline” between the real and the imagined, the visible and the invisible:

> Above the huer’s hut the clouds have no edges:
> It’s too near sundown, there’s nothing left to grip.
> All’s floated loose, smudged in the sun’s dyes,
> In a soft padded riot: the clouds huddle together,

[5] The little outpost of one who directs seine-fishing from high ground by the sea. Chiefly used in the Cornish pilchard fishery that was all but gone until pilchards became rebranded as sardines (which technically they are) in the early 2000s. They are currently on sale at Marks & Spencer.

[6] “Lonely lighthouse” may be Clemo’s allusion to Woolf’s novel *To The Lighthouse*.

Wandering and woven and woebegone
. . . .

The mythical haul of pilchards!
A vast, gliding, phosphorescent shimmer
From millions of flicking fins,
Cold eager little bodies. Dense movement of life,
Gills breathing gently under the foam,
Goblin eyes rubbed by rocking currents,
Tiny mouths opening for marine food. (DD 18-19)

Though Clemo skillfully communicates a sense of Woolf's inner consciousness of her faith (or lack of it), the sheer beauty of this poem lies in the lyrical recollection of the St. Ives of her girlhood. It is a testament to both Clemo's keen powers of observation and his keen memory that this poem was written decades after he lost his sight.[7]

"Charlotte Mew" is a remarkable poem about another woman writer, the complex, tragic poet and short story writer whom Thomas Hardy considered to be the best female poet of her day (her dates are 1869-1928).[8] As with Shelley and Woolf, the poem achieves a tension between "sympathy and moral judgment [. . .] an effect peculiarly the genius of the dramatic monologue" (Langbaum 85). She had no formal religious affiliation, but she wrote obsessively about God; she supposedly did not marry for fear of familial mental instability but was possibly a lesbian; sadly, she ended her life by drinking a bottle of Lysol (Warner xiii.). Clemo, however, does not follow his

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[7] See Lane, pp. 205-215, for a brief foray into how Clemo produced poems after he went blind.

[8] Hardy said she is "the least pretentious but undoubtedly the best woman poet of our day." Quoted in Untermeyer, 656.

usual pattern in using her as testament to the tragic fate of sub-Christian artists. One reason is his considerable regard for her poetry, some of which Clemo refers to or weaves into the dramatic monologue devoted to her. Mew's poems are subjective and sensual, as she employs Browningesque dramatic monologues and narrative forms that Clemo also used. He references her poem "The Trees Are Down" in the third stanza:

> Too sensitive – that's what got me split.
> When the plane-trees were felled near my home
> My heart bled – agony: I was robbed of communion
> With a whole heaven of birds and leaves and soft shadows.
> (DD 11)

Clemo not only lifts the phrase "plane-trees" directly from the poem, he also captures her abrupt syntax as the stanza jumps to the death of her parrot Willie,

> Suffering for hours in his cage, squawking feebly.
> Just like me – too much like me
> Since Anne went, since they buried her alive . . .
>
> They did! They can't fool me: I told them all.
> That's why I'm here in this rest-house for the mental.

Clemo renders her life with an unflinching eye, catching the rhythm of obsession and torment of her reoccurring nightmare that her sister Anne had been buried alive.[9]

Not surprisingly, Clemo has Mew consider her poem "Madeleine in Church," whose memorable lines sum up her searching: "Then safe, safe are

[9] This may have been the leading cause of the mental breakdown that precipitated Mew's suicide.

we? In the shelter of His everlasting wings? / I do not envy Him his victories. His arms are full of broken things" ("Madeleine in Church" Warner 26). Mew recalls that clergy considered the poem, with its conception of Mary Magdalene as the embodiment of devotion, as "blasphemous" (DD 12). As in the poems about Mary Shelley and Virginia Woolf, Clemo again regrets that Mew did not embrace the Christian faith. The poem recounts her interest in the holy images of the Roman Catholic churches and their ultimate failure to convert her:

> I felt a presence
> Spread around crucifix and saint,
> A lift towards faith within my elfin body,
> As if I might be convinced, grow normal and human
> With a little more stretching. But the marvel snapped:
> I was too small to hold it. I escaped. (DD 12)

Clemo may or may not have known that Mew did not become Roman Catholic because she could not accept the rite of confession, possibly due to her sexuality (Warner xvi). The escape Mew had planned was suicide:

> I wonder if my friend guessed yesterday
> Why I gave her that Hardy copy –
> My poem he liked so much?[10] She read the phrase:
> 'It's good-night at the door.'
> Yes, I've locked the door.
> Good-night, Anne. Good-night, Willie. (DD 12)

Mew took her life, she says, because: "I'm outside the world. I found no grace: / The middle Cross falls like the plane-trees, / Sawn through by – what? Me?

[10] The poem which Hardy liked and which Clemo quotes from is "*Fin de Fête,*" a brief poem about parting with a sweetheart for the evening.

Sorry, God!" (DD 13). The "plane-trees" return to the poem's beginning, when their loss took away her "heaven." Bereft, she declares that

> I've locked the door.
> Good-night, Mr. Hardy. You were very kind,
> But you've been dead two months, so you won't mind.
> They buried Anne alive, but I'll make sure
> (Dear smirking Muse) there'll be no place
> For doubt when they burst in, find the empty bottle,
> And see the cold grimace under my white hair.

After swallowing Lysol while in the sanatorium, Mew died a few hours later at the age of sixty. She was buried in the same grave as her sister Anne, as she requested.

Clemo is sometimes compared to Thomas Hardy for his "bias towards rural tragedy," and reviewers of his novel *Wilding Graft* commented that Clemo was deliberately him. Clemo notes, however, that he was almost thirty years of age before he read Hardy's "mature works." Rather, it was the combination of Clemo's particular circumstances—being steeped in Biblical language, living in a remote rural area, knowing the "tragedy" of the Clemo bloodline—that made such comparisons inevitable (COR 102). When Clemo finally did read Hardy, he immediately felt an affinity similar to his attraction to author T. F. Powys. Yet as with Powys, Hardy's lack of faith became an insurmountable barrier, as Clemo wistfully notes in "Max Gate (To Thomas Hardy)":

> You missed redemption's paradox amid
> Those pines; so I had to bid
> Farewell to Max Gate, though its strong

And somber shade lay long
Upon me, half congenial still. (MOC 70-71)

What does it mean to "bid farewell" to an author? Clemo is rejecting Hardy's philosophy: "the ravings of Jude" and Hardy's "bitter protest on behalf of working-class intellectuals" stemmed from his unbelief, having no reference to the "possibilities of such a predicament when controlled by strong and unfaltering religious conviction" (COR 244). In short, Hardy's outlook no longer matched Clemo's self-understanding (or experience after his novel *Wilding Graft* was published). However, Clemo does take his leave of Hardy lightly, as this poignant acknowledgment reveals:

And in the twilight, looking back
In lapses on my frontier track,
I almost could conceive
That to blaspheme with tears is to believe. (MOC 70-71)

Whatever the inconsistencies in Clemo's poetic spiritual confession, he remains consistent about the primacy of his faith and his desire for others to share the joy he has found.

Clemo did revisit Max Gate, literally, in 1978, and he wrote a later poem about his impressions in "At Hardy's Birthplace." The tone is much mellower compared to the first poem now that some decades have passed and Clemo is an established writer as well as a married man:

All is Quaker-simple here, firm and remote,
With the heavy strength of old iron and timber,
Except for the lean wooden rail
Flanking the frail
Stunted stairs. The upper room where he wrote
Breathes a hard sincerity, like his birth-chamber. (DD 46)

As in the first poem on Hardy, Clemo uses a regular rhyme scheme, though here it is ABCCAB. He employs a consistent telescoping rhythm that shortens and lengthens as if he were walking around the house, often stopping to look at something.

> These beams press low, yet the rooms seem airy enough,
> Glowing and warm near his June birthday.
> If a pitying sadness springs
> For the stumbles and stings
> He was doomed to, there is holier stuff
> In the pervading aura – no dank decay. (DD 47)

Clemo offers a footnote to this poem, mentioning among other things Hardy's experience of "domestic discord" with Emma Gifford, his first wife, and Florence Dugdale, his second—hence the line "Max Gate hides some dingy scars" (DD 47). Clemo noted that it was "the humility of Hardy's search for faith [. . .] that kept me sympathetic to most of his work" (MOR 161). He ends the poem by affirming what he can of Hardy's vision:

> But a plain perception strove
> Through his clotted grove.
> He wrenched a cosmic woe to his shoulders:
> Now his threshold creaks cheerfully; a plump thrush hovers.
> (DD 47)

Clemo's more detached perspective on Hardy's past and present reveals contentment with his own.

In another poem to a writer whom Clemo admired, "Tregerthen Shadow (To D. H. Lawrence)," Clemo acknowledges the very real impact Lawrence had on his psyche. In a phrase layered with meaning, Clemo notes that Lawrence had been in physical proximity when Clemo was an infant:

"And the shade / Of your passing was marked by fate, and the mark stayed" (MOC 65). It is historical fact that Lawrence and his wife lived in Cornwall from March 1916 until October 1917,[11] but it also acknowledges Clemo's nascent grappling with his own spiritual identity, as Lawrence's mystical sexuality inflamed Clemo's imagination. The temptation to worship the gods of erotic mysticism was powerful:

> And I felt the chill fear
> Lest your end should be mine and a strange god find in me
> His way to Isis in her Cornish form, Isis
> Of the grit-hard mystery,
> Isis of the crag-clotted womb,
> And my night-black pit become
> A shrine where the unknown god might heal his wounds
> In the intimate lapse. (MOC 65)

The references to the goddess Isis allude to Lawrence's *The Man Who Died*.[12] Clemo comments further on the influence of Lawrence's novel in *The Invading Gospel:* "[Lawrence] pictured Jesus as realizing at last that his asceticism had been a mistake, and that the overtones of fleshly rapture brought a revelation 'beyond prayer. '" Clemo claims to have come to a similar conclusion while in his teens (20). However, the cottage near Zennor where Lawrence lived while in West Cornwall could not fascinate Clemo for long because of Lawrence's rejection of Christianity. In his theological manifesto

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[11] See C. J. Stevens's *Lawrence at Tregerthen.*

[12] Lawrence's novel *The Man Who Died* concerns the life of Jesus after he returns from the dead, including his sexual relationship with a priestess in the temple of Isis. The original title was "The Escaped Cock," a reference to a rooster that breaks free of its tether and flies over the wall, as well as to the male erection, which Christ experiences as his real resurrection in Lawrence's novel.

Clemo urges the reader to "compare Lawrence's pitifully thwarted life, his changing career, his tormented wanderings around the world in a vain attempt to gain converts for his "Rananim"[13] cult [. . .] with the triumphal march of Billy Graham, and the difference between the pagan and Christian patterns is clearly manifested" (132). If comparing D. H. Lawrence to Billy Graham seems comically inappropriate, recall that Clemo was caught up in Graham's crusade of England at the time. Regardless, the link is an oversimplification, more an exuberant expression of the time it was written than a considered commentary on Lawrence (or Graham for that matter).

"Tregerthen Shadow" is Clemo's acknowledgement of his affinity for D. H. Lawrence, while "The Two Beds (to D.H. Lawrence)" focuses on the difference between them. Clemo thus uses the analogy of the coalmines of Lawrence's youth, comparing them to the claybeds of his own youth. "You were a child of the black pit," Clemo declares, but the "blindness of those deeps . . . Too near the earth's bowels" permanently distorted Lawrence's vision (MOC 47). Going down a coal shaft into the dark, silent, deep of the earth becomes a spatial metaphor of the fallenness of nature. The clayland symbols, on the other hand—the open pit, with high cones and elevated moonscape—indicate a redeemed, fecund reality:

> On the bare hills, the little breasts
> So white in the sun, all the veins running white
> Down to the broad womb with its scars.

[13] Meaning "Green or flourishing," Rananim was the name Lawrence gave to his idea of a utopian community. It was never realized.

> And the scars meant, beyond fertility,
> Purgation [. . .].

If Lawrence had been exposed to a higher, spiritual perspective he might have been saved:

> Could light of my clay have fallen
> On your black pit (yet not my light,
> But the light that is not as you supposed:
> I tell you, the Man who died
> Is not as you supposed), flesh would have been known
> As clay-bed and not coal-bed, its yield
> The patterned cup for the great Marriage-feast. (MOC 48)

This "great Marriage-feast" is a reference to both the wedding celebration at Cana in the book of John and the final marriage feast of the Lamb in Revelation.

Critic Geoffrey Thurley claims that Clemo is resurrecting the old Christian dualism between the spirit and the flesh, arguing that the spiritual is "misrepresented and distorted by traffic with the sensuous" (171). Clemo is not, in fact, denying the physical here (or in "Calvinist in Love," against which Thurley makes the same accusation), but privileging a redeemed sensuality, specifically Christian marriage as the "Marriage-feast" is set over and against Lawrence's way, "With its primordial stain as it goes unpurged / From the subterranean womb to fires of perdition" (MOC 48). Though Lawrence searched, he did not find "the true flesh," but rather was doomed to spiritual death. In Clemo's Christian theology there is a physical death that lasts until the resurrection, but a spiritual death that becomes permanent in Hell:

slipping, gliding,
Fading down the shaft of drugged sense to the dead
Coal-forests where the dark gods reign, silently breeding
The sensual theosophy, the second death. (MOC 48)

If Lawrence was a prisoner of sensualism, the Victorian essayist and historian Thomas Carlyle was a prisoner of intellectualism. The poem "Comely Bank" opens with a description of an uprooted garden, a reference to the story that Carlyle destroyed the flower garden at his residence in Edinburgh the morning after his wedding in a fit of fury, scandalized by his impotence. Such assertions cannot be proved; scholars have noted that in fact was no flower garden at the time (Tarr 200). Regardless of rumor, Carlyle's marriage to Jane Baillie Welsh was famously unhappy. Clemo implies Carlyle's soul was in the same disarray as the flower garden (and his marriage):

wrenched by ego claws,
In this savage doubting Thomas, whose bitten
Soul raged for mastery through the mind's grind,
The hectoring intellect, the unit self-refined,
Blocking communion, forcing a breach. (BA 38)

Clemo's careful choice of words captures the temperament of the writer, who, according to Clemo, "raged" and "bitten" by the pride of intellect, suffered the "hectoring," "blocking," and "forcing" of desire for "mastery." Such ego-driven tumult would inevitably cause Clemo to lament Carlyle's unwillingness to make the necessary surrender for both faith and a successful marriage.

Clemo declares, perhaps a bit smugly, that he never forgot the lesson he learned from Comely Bank: "I would not wed / The thundering brain-cloud

or art's dream-guise" (BA 39). Instead, he sought human companionship based on "prayer and heart-ties / Shaping my needs as a believer." The happy result bears no resemblance to the Carlyle marriage:

> Although I wed in autumn I wrung no root
> From a frosty earth, but embraced the absolute
> Crag-tongue of Christ and a joy bedded. (BA 39)

For Clemo, communion with God and communion with his bride are inseparable. Carlyle and his wife were testimony that lack of spiritual harmony prevents marital harmony—a lesson Clemo learned by the unhappy example of his mother and father.

The occasion of "Friar's Crag (To John Ruskin)" was Clemo's visit in April of 1965 to Derwentwater in the Lake District with Mary, with whom he was romantically involved at the time. Ruskin owned a house there, Brantwood, which was subsequently preserved as a museum; his grave is in Conistan churchyard. The stroll to Friar's Crag, a popular viewing spot, also has a memorial to Ruskin along the path. Ruskin and Mary were both on Clemo's mind in his inner monologue about the decline of his relationship with Mary: "our souls have slipped / Somehow apart [. . .]." Clemo wonders if Ruskin would understand that though there is "threat of a dead end" in Clemo's first full-fledged adult romance, " I still / Have no crushed dream to bury?"(COC 48). Clemo is referring to Ruskin's ill-fated love of Rose La Touche, whom Ruskin met when she was nine. At seventeen he asked her to marry him, and although she refused, Ruskin was unable to let her go and

continued to ask for her hand unsuccessfully until she died at twenty-seven (Landow "Ruskin's life"). Clemo knows that Ruskin's tragedy is not his own, sure in his faith of God's purpose:

> There is a riddle here
> Beyond your shade: even now I am exempt
> From the tragic quest, since prayer forestalls
> The straining, stinging shocks from the blurred hill.
> Faith guards the last rock-bed;
> Love finds it tenanted.

Clemo believes he will not be denied his soul mate, even if he loses Mary now. However, Clemo's vulnerability is palpable:

> Blind above Derwentwater, I feel your stone
> Warmed by invisible rays, and am not alone—
> Not yet alone. (COC 48)

"Blind" describes Clemo's existential state of sightlessness as a metaphor of his inability to see what may happen beyond his troubled romance. Though his faith assures him of eventual fulfillment, it cannot completely insulate him from the pain of a disintegrating relationship.

II. Poems Devoted to Christian Artists and Writers

A case of the surrendered Christian artist came for Clemo in the figure of Eric Gill, the English sculptor, typeface designer, printmaker, and stonecutter. His poem, "Eric Gill," is a kind of elegy to an artist whom he admires for his approach to his craft.[14]

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[14] Clemo wrote this poem in March of 1977 (*Different Drummer* MS) well before the revelation of Gill's disturbing sexual activity in Fiona MacCarthy's 1989 biography. He would have rejected Gill and his work if he had known of Gill's lack of moral discipline, including instances of incest. Clemo proclaims in *Marriage of a*

His hand carved stone and cuffed Art,
So he worked with a clear conscience,
Serving the absolute Beauty, Augustine's vision,
Which breeds the polemic and the convert.
He was not split, but deeply unified
As craftsman and believer [. . .]. (DD 26)

Gill rejects Art for pretentiously offering itself as worthy of veneration – art for art's sake instead of art for God's sake. For Gill, beauty will look after herself if the artist concentrates on truth and goodness.

Such an artist, however, was not the ideal of the cultured art world. Clemo thus labels Gill "a misfit" (and by association applies the term to himself) because Gill's religious sensibilities were not in keeping with "high Art." Clemo had typed up an excerpt from Eric Gill's *Autobiography* and pasted it in on the inside cover of his Diary of 1976: "Doubtless I never was a serious artist as serious Art was understood in that world. I was the son of a Nonconformist parson, the grandson of a missionary. Life was more than Art."[15] The poem continues:

Some said he fled from Art's inner circle,
Very well: let them say it. Gill's way is mine,
. . . .
(Because the man must spread truth, fight for it,
Not just salute a Muse and rhyme a fancy).

Clemo wishes to be clear that his vocation as poet is to be carried out in evangelical terms, and neither the poet nor the priest needs to be, or should

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Rebel that "If an artist cannot produce a masterpiece without seducing a child or corrupting another man's wife, then the world is better off without the masterpiece" (30).

[15] The quote is only a partial excerpt of what Clemo typed. It comes from Eric Gill's *Autobiography*, New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1968, pg. 180.

be, sacrificed for the other. There are echoes here of Clemo's poem devoted to C. S. Lewis, "Link at Oxford," with the idea that culture is "sick" and the poet or artist is to represent the healthy, i.e. Christian, norm over and against it.

> Gill knew the lonely seizure
> When trained technique guides the tool
> To satisfy the pure sense of design;
> But it was in faith's context, made meaningful
> By priest's and preacher's motive – blasting idols,
> Hurling the healthy norm at a sick culture. (DD 27)

Clemo praises Gill's approach to his craft, noting that because of man's sinful nature the only safe manner of artistic expression is one guided and guarded within a religious framework. Clemo says: "The creative impulse is so easily fooled; it will function on illusion as powerfully as on truth, and therefore cannot be trusted until it has been placed under Christian discipline" (IG 18). Clemo bases this pronouncement on his personal experience of writing his early poems fueled by adolescent yearning thinly disguised as vaguely Christian romantic mysticism. As a bulwark against such deception, the practical safeguard for the artist is a Christian home:

> Gill's discipline showed the only way
> Of feeding and seeding the artist's throb
> On the safe home's hearth. Outside this rule all's torment
> Because all's ego: dark paths winding furtively
> Back to the airs of the aesthetic snob.

Though this poem focuses on art, Gill's biography (the version available at the time) also affirms Clemo's ideals on marriage and sex. The seeming happily married Gill espoused fidelity within marriage; however, he was always quite open towards the erotic. It was Gill's marriage, "the safe home's

hearth," which protected him from the artist's undisciplined ego and its tragic consequences.

Fellow Cornishman Alfred Wallace was another artist, a painter, whose approach to art and life was temperamentally and theologically sympathetic to Clemo. Wallis created primitive paintings of boats, harbors, and the sea itself from his cottage in St. Ives—beginning at the age of seventy. Previously a fisherman operating a marine supply store on the harbor before he retired, Wallis often used boat paints and usually did his work on pieces of cardboard. Wallis espouses what for Clemo was the Christian theory of art: "It's from the Word I must paint . . ." ("Alfred Wallis" ET 36). Wallis purportedly read the Bible every day. The curator of an exhibition of Wallis' work comments: "I like to think of him like some old monk, working in his cell, reading his bible when he was not painting" (Bowness). Clemo characterizes him this way as well.

Wallis likely suffered dementia in his later years—"I've done mad things," notes Clemo—"but the colour's sane enough." For Clemo, as for many other admirers of Wallis' work, it was his use of color that drew them to his paintings, whose subjects he recalled from memory.

> And yet there's miracle: it's in the colour,
> Riot of boat-paint on those packing-sheets.
> The house walls sag, the sails reel at sunset;
> Shrill trumpetings char the smoky port.
> And then I'm through, at grips:
> Heaven's caught in trance by my watery eyes
> And my old body trembles in possession. (ET 36)

Clemo believed Wallis was an artist who created through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, fostered by his devoted daily Bible study. This rather romantic notion of the primitive solitary creating divinely sanctioned art in defiance of the established "art world" (yet recognized by that world as valuable) is as much a wish-fulfillment fantasy for Clemo as it is a description of Wallis. "Fantasy" does not imply this assessment has no basis in reality, only that it is a projection of Clemo's image of himself as rebel Christian artist, such as Holland's theory of self-replication supports. Clemo sees himself as continuing in this tradition of faith-inspired art, as he impersonates Wallis speaking in his own voice:

> I wonder if there is a man, a brother to me,
> Somewhere in Cornwall, with this outlawed twist,
> Half artist, half revivalist,
> . . . .
> Fearing the same knife, hearing the same drum? (ET 36)

One of Clemo's more imaginative poems is devoted to another "rebel" artist, William Blake. "William Blake Notes a Demonstration" describes the painter, poet and printmaker as having a terrifying vision of 20th century London:

> Where's my Jerusalem?[16] That future London
> I see in visions now I am near death,
> Is not the Holy city: harlots abound

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[16] *Jerusalem: the Emanation of the Great Albion* is Blake's epic poem that concentrates on London as the city that might become Jerusalem. The poem abounds with assaults on the "harlot" of false religion and capitalist-industrial society. "Jerusalem" is also the title of one of Blake's poems in which he promises to strive "Til we have built Jerusalem / In England's green & pleasant land."

> In street, school and pulpit,
> And the winding-sheet seems made of protest banners. (ET 44)[17]

While walking over Hampstead Heath, Blake comes upon demonstrators protesting nuclear weapons. Given the spiritual decay he saw "in street, school and pulpit," Blake declares

> That heaven's red scroll mocks such peace-planners.
> If men can't die praising God
> They're not ripe for life, not fit
> To protest against the means of exit. (ET 45)

The "poisoned, splintered world" is unaware that it is God who governs the end of the world, not humanity. The "apolyptic fact" the protesters do not know is that angels will guard the nuclear missile sites "And the red scroll's horrors won't cremate the West [. . .] while prodigals plod home, / Stirred by the shining tiger [. . .]" (ET 45).[18] Whereas the marchers believe that the threat of nuclear war can be countered by secular protest, Blake knows that only spiritual renewal can solve the problem:

> But every earth-bound act,
> Denying my visions—denying, Catherine,[19]
> Robert's ascension and his clapping hands—
> Will weaken the spirit-guard,
> And the planet slips nearer doom
> When rescue bids are made (I see the scene sway,
> Fading now) from the shell of the soul's decay. (ET 45)

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[17] "The harlot's cry from street to street / Shall weave old England's winding-sheet" is from "Auguries of Innocence."

[18] This is a reference to "The Tyger," one of Blake's more famous poems from *Songs of Experience.*

[19] Catherine was Blake's wife.

Clemo depicts the spirit of Blake's brother Robert ascending at his death, clapping his hands for joy, attesting to the presence of God amidst death. Modern Britain, by contrast, has turned its back on the existence of God. The real threat to the world is not nuclear holocaust so much as the encroaching secularism that leaves little room for the saving action of Christ.

"Wart and Pearl (to Gerard Manley Hopkins)" finds Clemo declaring he was "oddly / Like you in my youth: the art streak / Feared fatal . . . / we had to choose" (BA 10). Whether as dancer or painter or writer, the artist's unchecked ego consigns him or her to the fate of a fallen humanity:

> Pagan preen
> Kindling limb or canvas or page
> Accepts the fated dust, trusts no unseen
> Lip at a recalling trumpet – (BA 10)

The phrase "recalling trumpet" is an allusion to judgment day in 1Corinthians 15:52[20] and also to the line "In a flash, at a trumpet crash, / I am all at once what Christ is," from Hopkins' poem "That Nature Is A Heraclitean Fire." Hopkins, too, might have missed the last trump had he put poetry above Christ:

> Your Muse was Jesuit-maimed, but worse maimed
> You would have foundered, adrift Wilde's way,[21]
> Swinburne's, Arnold's—shades that fell
> Akin to your nature's, on the Cherwell.[22]

[20] "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed."

[21] "Foundered" is likely an allusion to *The Wreck of the Deutschland*.

With immense respect, Clemo acknowledges how “Holy and terrible” was the path that Hopkins trod, especially in the “Terrible Sonnets” that elegantly render Hopkins’ spiritual agony. Clemo understands Hopkins’ struggles because “your Master . . . wrung / Such tears from me too.” But, Clemo declares, there was light for him that was denied Hopkins in his celibacy:

> Flashing where breast and blown hair mounted
> Incredibly on the crest of my vow:
> Touched, harboured, balancing now –
> Christ-sanctioned Aphrodite.

The phrase “Christ-sanctioned Aphrodite” offers an image of *agape* and *eros* united, the ultimate goal of a Christian marriage that Clemo knew as the fulfillment of his vocation.

The only night Clemo ever spent in London, in Soho, brought to mind another erotic Christian poet, John Donne. Clemo had come to the city with his mother courtesy of his friend Helena Charles, who had paid their way and arranged Clemo to meet a blind priest reputed for his healing ministry. Clemo’s disabilities were a block to his relationship with Eileen, his first adult romantic love, and he was willing to explore every avenue within the church to effect a cure. During the day Clemo had a cathartic emotional experience (if not a physical healing) at church (MOR 73). Then that evening

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[22] The River Cherwell runs through Oxford, where Wilde attended Magdalen college and Swinburne, Arnold and Hopkins attended Balliol College (*Chambers* 677).

> I lay in bed, still a young man
> Groping for love, and your shade towered
> Among my thoughts of Cornwall, Ann,
> And the cavern of truth where the new seeds flashed and flowered.
> ("A Night in Soho" BA, 34)

Ann, of course, refers to Donne's faithful wife, Anne More, whom Donne married at the cost of a promising career. "The cavern of truth" is a poetic description for Anne's vagina or perhaps womb, given that she bore Donne ten children. It is also the unique spiritual plane sought through an erotic Christian marriage. Clemo declares, "I knew I was following you" for he also sought "Christ's Passion-mark" that "Ann's full ardours showed you constantly" (BA 34).

> Fierce battling sensualist,
> For whom the bell tolled in the maidenhead,[23]
> And the Lamb's blood, at work in the carnal twist,
> Raised the true ecstasy of the soul's alchemist! (BA 34-35)

Clemo had read much of Donne's work and was deeply moved by it. In poems such as Donne's "The Litany" Clemo felt Donne "was voicing the timeless experience of all Christians – the mystery of a conversion process" (MOR 36). Donne's conversion through the broken "maidenhead" and the shed blood of Christ was also Clemo's own experience.

Another poem addressed to a fellow Christian writer, "St. Gudule and St. Agnes (to Charlotte Brontë)," compares two churches, the first Catholic

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[23] The famous phrase "for whom the bell tolls" comes from John Donne's "Devotions upon Emergent Occasions."

and the second Anglican, at which the Protestants Charlotte Brontë and Jack Clemo respectively came to call:

> There they loom—city cathedral,
> Church on a Cornish headland,
> Gently folding our secret,
> How iron wills broke at a crossways. (ET 26)

While in Brussels working as a teacher, Charlotte grew melancholy in her isolation, and during a school break she happened to find herself in front of St. Gudule as the Benediction was being sung. She stayed behind with a few other pilgrims and felt impelled to make confession.[24] Clemo was in a similar lonely and worn state of mind when he agreed to a "regular course of priestly intercession" at St. Agnes to effect healing. He describes their shared emotional weariness:

> Hearts scooped to life's last marrow,
> Plucked to a thread of penance,
> Fluttered from a shaping Eros,
> Toil's hammer, a worm of blindness.

For a final ministration, Clemo consented to the rite of confession and absolution (MOR 80-81). For Charlotte, the momentary "lapse" was later dismissed as she retained her distaste for Catholicism: "You rose in more icy estrangement, / I dazed with absolution" (ET 27). Clemo does not distance himself from the anguish that brought him to St. Agnes or the fact of his own "compromise" with Catholicism:

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[24] She acknowledged she was Protestant, but the priest relented in the hopes of converting her (Dimnet 100-101).

> The candle-flames died; they had shown us
> Frail, fugitive, inconsistent:
> Those priests saw the blackened selfhood
> Sweat truth unglossed by courage. (ET 26-27)

The poem is particularly moving because of the unadorned directness of Clemo's retelling of a moment of naked need. The reader becomes a spiritual confidante and intimate of both Jack Clemo and Charlotte Brontë.

Clemo devoted another poem to Charlotte Brontë concerning her last years. Through her marriage to Rev. Arthur Nicholls, Clemo has Charlotte finding the happiness in "parish visitation" and "'the content / Of common housewives in the village" that eluded her when she was the maiden author Charlotte Brontë. Thus in "Charlotte Nicholls,"

> Warm truth taps the decay
> Of the artist-urge: a curate's wife, living her vow,
> Shames the impassioned fantasy. (COC 40)

Clemo dramatizes Charlotte's "conversion," as she renounces the self-absorption of her artistic temperament, recognizing "That the bright surface beyond purgation / Holds abiding poetry." This dramatic monologue takes place as Charlotte drifts off to sleep next to her husband, feeling her unborn child stir. According to Clemo scholar Andrew Symons, "the resolution of the conflict between agape and Eros in Christian marriage is extended to the union of creation and redemption in the sexual act" (91). Charlotte is now truly creative in a way barred to the solitary artist she once was:

> I have been released indeed
> From that aesthetic bondage,
> From the fume of fashioning, the loneliness

. . . .
And I am thankful, for the fight was hard,
And Emily's end was terrible. [. . .]

Clemo contrasts Charlotte's salvific marriage with her sister Emily's "scarred isolation," noting that Emily's work, "aloof and cryptic," together with her ego-fueled drive to be "self-fulfilled alone," caused her to miss the ultimate truth. Charlotte chooses "the shared fulfillment" of marriage and service to the church, where she learns what deprivation and "the black tempest could not teach. / Here or in Brussels." The poem ends:

I lie relaxed,
Warmed by my husband, and an owl hoots
Somewhere near the churchyard.
The wind may rise, straining the thorn-roots,
But a calm of ordinary bliss
Bears me to sleep unmarred. (COC 41)

Clearly familiar with her life story, Clemo knew some months later Charlotte and her unborn child died. His choice to focus on her spiritual insight and peace as a result of her marriage and impending motherhood is perhaps meant to offset that tragic death.

Clemo ends the collection *A Different Drummer* with a poem to another Christian writer and clergyman's wife, Florence Barclay, a popular novelist of the early 20th century. He provides a footnote explaining that she was "influenced by the Brownings, but shunned literary society. She avoided all tragic and sordid themes, drawing her inspiration from her serene happiness as a vicar's wife" (DD 71). Though Barclay wrote eleven novels in her lifetime, her most popular work was "The Rosary," a love story lauding the

joys of married life. Clemo declares that her example "Fed and soothed a host of thin, scarred souls / Who misread life as drift and bafflement, / Cloyed dreams and grim endurance" (DD 71). He counts himself as one who found "Relief and rebuke" in "this gracious pattern" of her life (and novels) when he was in the "purgatory" of his youth. At last a happily married man,

> I reaffirm now what Florence felt
> Among her Browning Relics and at Wimpole Street,
> Where I touched the carved stone and iron she fingered,
> And my wife's warm hand unbolted the full depth. (DD 71)

This section on artists and writers would be incomplete without reference to Clemo' explicitly autobiographical "Poem at Sixty." Opening with a rare rhymed couplet, he notes the difference between his life and the tragic fates of not a few other poets:

> So many poets, before they reached three-score,
> Let their despair employ a coroner.
> As the March rain now hammers
> The slate above my birth-room, 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,
> A massed chorus with no broken bars. (DD 8-9)

Many of Clemo's poems on artists and writers testify to the relationship between the "pagan," ego-serving artistic personality and ultimate self-destruction. The ellipsis invites the reader to continue the list of suicide artists Clemo offers as evidence of his claim. Though the constant repetition of his theme of the self-destructive artist acknowledges a certain fascination with his own survival, if not a repressed anxiety about his role a Christian

poet, Clemo is not adopting a superior tone. The underlying theme of the poem is gratitude for the crucial difference he sees between himself and the tragic poets: his faith and its influence on his creativity.

He is aware there are other differences as well. Some of the more usual characteristics shaping a poet —"Romantic sentiment . . . Prudent ideals, academic precision"—are irrelevant to someone with his temperament and upbringing as a working class autodidact. He was a poet

> Who needed the unschooled artist's crucible,
> The revivalist's platform, the hermit's cell,
> The theologian's tome open on granite, open to upland winds,
> And the sex-mystic's pulse of moon-tokens on the loyal
> Pressed lips and breasts [. . .].

There is a note of pride in his "rebel" status; however, he acknowledges that the tension of "so many selves in one skin" took their toll:

> My character, like the scarred plateau
> That bore me, had its geometry askew –
> Lopped, slanted, swollen: the crystal peaks
> Craned in a barren patchwork till, beyond art,
> Outside of the blood's moods and the mind's,
> I found scope and motive in the far call
> Rising through mother's and wife's prayer, breaking despair.
> (DD 9)

His found his unifying salvation not through his art, sensuality or intellect, but instead it was "the old Damascus call," a summons made audible through the mediation of the women in his life. This is precisely the pattern that will predominate in Clemo's treatment of saints and missionaries in the following chapter.

It is surprising that the poems about artists and writers should be the most uneven in quality; one would expect Clemo would have the greatest insight and empathy for all of these men and women. Instead, Clemo occasionally falls prey to one of the most common pitfalls of Evangelicalism. He is guilty of moralism that reduces faith to dos and don'ts, especially in those non-Christian artists for whom he has no real sympathy. If Clemo had read the most recent biography of Eric Gill, he would have no doubt wrote a scorching denouncement of the artist. At the same time he is sympathetic in varying degrees with two of the greatest writers, Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence, even though their personal lives did not measure up to Clemo's ideal. Such inconsistencies show that though Clemo has committed himself to a particular standard, he has not sufficiently sorted out his response to great art that does not line up with his religious or moral stance.

CHAPTER FIVE

Beatific Vision: Saints & Missionaries

The wholesome idea of the Christian saint and visionary is expressed by the hot-gospeller rather than the wistful pietist.

JACK CLEMO: *The Invading Gospel*

In addition to poems devoted to artists and writers, Clemo had a lifelong devotion to saints and missionaries. In this chapter therefore I will examine portrait poems and dramatic monologues about Christian saints and missionaries from several different denominations and time periods, some well known and others obscure. As we saw earlier with theologians and preachers, Clemo again links his fascination with saints and missionaries to his perennial concern with erotic Christian marriage. Indeed, Clemo's "creedal sexuality," the power of the beloved to mediate between the individual and God, is the subtext of almost all of these poems.

It was missionaries who Clemo felt most closely modeled his own mystical sense of vocation, "which involved painful training and identified the seeker with the sufferings of Christ," and his belief that such a calling was "sometimes within the realm of romantic love" (MOR 35). The example of these particular missionaries vindicated Clemo's faith during his lonely years of waiting for a mate, and it also offered testimony of justified faith in the face of great difficulties. Finally, the missionary poems served as Clemo's

own form of evangelism about the fruitful union of sensuality and spirituality within Christian marriage.

His poems of saints almost always include commentary on the incompleteness of celibacy.

> An unwavering opposition to asceticism and the celibate ideal characterized all my work. I know that the Christian approach to the Absolute is not the obvious one expounded by Kierkegaard to whom the monastery was the "beacon light" of mankind. The true beacon light, the radiant rebuke to worldliness and sensuality, was the Christian home, the sanctuary of redeemed sex, enshrining the wayward secret grace through which we can deny ourselves while enjoying ourselves. (IG 95-96) [1]

This does not mean that his poems about saints disparage their calling—far from it. For a Nonconformist such as Clemo the saints' lives become the focus of his character sketches, since their individual witness matters more to him than their Catholic faith. In fact, Clemo declared that "Catholicism [. . .] allows the shadow of the Cross to obscure the Pentecostal exhilaration, thereby distorting the Christian ideal of saintliness" (IG 132).[2]

Clemo's use of dramatic monologue gives an intimate, powerful, and often poignant voice to the missionary's erotic love and vocational fidelity as well as to the saints' self-sacrifice in their calling, making such larger-than-

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[1] Clemo found in the preaching of Spurgeon a strong affirmation of the holiness of married love: "Christ did not come to make monks of us: he came to make *men* of us. He meant that we should learn how to live *in the flesh*. We are neither to give up business nor society, nor in any right sense to give up life" ("Christus et ego." (no. 781). 647).

[2] Clemo had to work out the meaning of suffering in his own life, and so he came also to reject the Catholic notion that suffering is to be accepted as the final word of God.

life figures more human and accessible. In reminding us that these people are both earthy and earthly, Clemo makes their accomplishments more remarkable while also underscoring the vindication of their faith, as it was often sorely tried. Thus do these poems enable Clemo to glorify God, fulfill his vocation to evangelize for the sake of Christian sex, and find confirmation for his own faith under extremely difficult circumstances.

Clemo has a special affinity for John of the Cross, who is symbolic for Clemo of his own time of spiritual aridity, left without comfort (particularly the sensual kind for Clemo), when there was nothing but faith to carry him through to the spiritual dawn. "Beatific Vision" begins with a reference to John's nighttime escape from his fellow monks in Toledo:[3] "The monk John thanked heaven for absolute / Unbroken darkness. A cutting tick of light / Would have betrayed him, and he fancied / An inner parallel" (CA 20). Deftly Clemo brings the reader to encounter Saint John's *via negativa*:

> The soul's disgust, with temporal comfort, its taste freed
> From festive candles, romantic moon.
> John scorned them as carnal flickers
> Foiling the escape from self
> To the sublime, unrivalled union,
> God's clasp of the stripped ascetic. (CA 20)

However, as with de Caussade, Clemo's belief in the soul's purgation does not lead him to embrace prolonged asceticism of any sort. In the final

[3] He was caught up in a dispute between the Carmelites of the Mitigated Observance and the Carmelites of the Reform that cost him ten months in a tiny cell in Toledo, until he escaped. (Introduction to *Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*).

stanza Clemo offers an alternative beatific vision to that of St. John. Here Clemo ponders rhetorically whether the Spanish saint might have satisfied his deepest spiritual desires by way of marriage. For in its ecstasies of the flesh, John's heart might also have reached the purified flame of love.

> Did not some wedded Spanish artist
> Find a healthier way after baptism
> Through the bride's smile, ripe olive-groves in a painting?
> He would have known blessed kindlings,[4] the heart's
> And high art's vowed frontiers
> Heaven-flushed outside the world's prison,
> And spirit purged for its last prayer
> When farthest from the cloisters. (CA 20)

As in earlier poems, Clemo elevates marriage; here it is to sacramental kinship with "baptism," the rite of rebirth.

Clemo also devoted poems to two figures linked with John of the Cross. The first is Teresa of Avila, co-founder with John of the Discalced Carmelites. John was also confessor to the nuns at Avila, where St. Teresa was superior. Donald Davie considers "Mould of Castile (to St. Teresa)" Clemo's finest poem (*Dissentient Voice* 52). Though not a dramatic monologue, it nonetheless gives a real sense of Teresa's world. Clemo splendidly evokes a sensual landscape, in this case the hot, rocky, aromatic world of sunlit Spain:

> No mist or dream had softened
> The bold Castilian flint: there was sun-glare
> On bull-fights and flashing lizards
> And the hot black stems of olives, pungent cistus,*   * rock rose
> Awaiting the shift and shock, an El Greco storm.

[4] The poem shows a familiarity with "The Ascent of Mount Carmel," St. John's depiction of the soul's ascent to God. It begins with a poem: "On a dark night, / Kindled in love with yearnings [. . .]" (John of the Cross Ascent *of Mount Carmel*).

He alludes to Teresa's travels, as she often arrived in the middle of the night to set up a new convent while the town's citizens were sleeping. She found it ironically easier to create convents clandestinely than to obtain permission officially.

> You were ageing, an enigma still,
> When your mules arrived at San Jose,
> And a thunder that thrills my flint
> In Cornwall now, spread from the wooden wagons,
> Filled with your nuns, lurching over calcined[5] plains,
> Up primitive mountain-tracks, drifting aground
> On river ferries [. . .].

Those primitive tracks still exist in the hills of rural Spain. A contemporary traveler can still feel the rhythm of that rocky and perilous journey as Clemo captures it:

> You and they were bound
> For new cells in Elisha's shadow:
> Traditional rock like that which my poet-soul,
> As wasted and adamant,
> Split and gay as yours, descried
> Beyond sly bramble misted kiln
> And the dried voluptuary veins. (ET 14-15)

Like Teresa, Clemo had caught sight of the "rock," or Christ, which lay beyond the clay pits and kilns, beyond the sensualism of the natural man. His description of her, which he fancies as also pertaining to himself, captures what we know of her. Teresa was indeed "wasted and adamant" as she traveled around Spain, suffering from debilitating illness while organizing Carmelite convents with tenuous authority to do so. She was also

[5] Made powdery by heat.

"split and gay": a woman who devoutly submitted herself to the Church but who maneuvered past the rules; she also could have mystical, other-worldly, erotic raptures and function as a practical manager and savvy politician all in the course of a week.[6]

"Ah!, how many lights have I not drawn from the works of our holy Father, St. John of the Cross!" wrote French Carmelite St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897) in her memoir, *The Story of a Soul*. A popular saint in the 20th century, she is the subject of Clemo's "Carmel" (COC 51-52). She became a nun at fifteen, dying at twenty-four of tuberculosis. Thérèse became the third woman to be named a doctor of the church (Teresa of Avila was the first, Catherine of Siena the second); she is also the patron saint of missionaries.[7] Clemo compares Thérèse, with her yearning for Christ, to the other spiritless nuns in the cloister at Normandy:

> You were the true child-bride,
> Burning among the passionless, cold-eyed,
> Uncomprehending species, bats or fish,
> Who glided in corridors,
> Clicked rosaries or tapped a refectory dish.

Inhuman for their lack of warmth, the other nuns silently blend into their routine, a metaphor of Clemo's distaste for the cloistered life. However, he

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[6] See Cathleen Medwick's wonderful biography, *Teresa of Avila: The Progress of a Soul*.

[7] "Saint Therese of Lisieux." Saints.SQPN.com. 11 August 2010. Web. 17 August 2010. < http://saints.sqpn.com/saint-therese-of-lisieux/>.

exalts Thérèse's celibacy over those who are sexually active outside Christian marriage:

> Who are the cheated, who forfeit most?
> Not you, Thérèse, but earth-drugged lovers,
> Tricked by the unscarred chalice,
> Breeding in ignorance of the white host.

Marriage is sacramentally sustained by the Eucharist, indicating its potential to lead the participants into union with Christ. Clemo bases the truly Christian marriage in "two facts: (1) the individual hunger to learn more of Christ, and (2) the limitations of the individual experience of Christ" (IG 99). Thus Clemo reserves the fuller experience of Christ for those who participate in the wedding feast at Cana through their own marriages:

> Who, tasting the Word, yearns deepest
> For the ultimate Carmel of the soul?
> Not the frosted nun, but the doubly wedded,
> Flesh-fertile pilgrims, canonized at Cana,
> Struggling with hints of riper paradox;
> Spirits still chaste for Christ, heaven's eagle,
> Amid the bedded senses' shocks. (COC 51-52)

Clemo's poem celebrates the union of sensuality and spirituality, thus the "doubly wedded" state of the married Christian.

"Juan Diego (1474-1548)" is one of several poems Clemo devoted to the Virgin Mary. Diego was a sixteenth century saint who had a vision of the Virgin Mary dressed as an Aztec princess on Tepeyac Hill in Mexico. The poem begins with the conversion of Diego, an indigenous Mexican Indian. He recalls his conversion in such a vivid manner that readers are able to feel the power of that indigenous faith through the accurate and concrete details that

Clemo provides. He uses local words such as *tilma*, (a thin cloth made of cactus fibers) and refers to the "feathered serpent" Quetzalcoatl, the deity of the Mayans, Toltecs and Aztecs—a figure symbolized by a snake combined with the quetzal bird with its brilliant colors and long tail feathers.

> A dark red hand above me had dissolved:
> Aztec mother-goddess, cruel weaver,
> Leaving the course *tilma* blank of meaning,
> And the bare body more blank, meaning only lust.
> I felt her melt in the candle-flame
> My white brothers lit: our Mexican dust,
> Our feathered serpent, no longer shuffled
> Glinting in my blood's bowed dream. (DD 44)

Diego retells his encounter with the Virgin Mary and with the bishop who requested that the Lady perform a miracle before he could acknowledge her instruction that a church was to be built on the hill. Diego returned to the site of his vision, where the Lady folded roses in his *tilma*, " lovely hands, / Such tender skill, as shown once among oxen" (DD 44). When the Diego unfolded the *tilma* to show the bishop fragrant roses in December, it was imprinted with the image of the Virgin Mary. The poem closes with a sense of simple wonder, as Diego ponders, "How often / Will men look with awe, kneel before it, the coarse plaiting / Aglow with colour, her pure face and all it meant? " Our Lady of Guadalupe Basilica was indeed built on Tepeyac Hill and drew many Indians to the Catholic faith. It is also reputed to be the site of many healings. Clemo has written in his autobiographies that he does not

question such testimonies; they are means of spiritual wonderment rather than scientific investigation.[8]

The earliest published poem concerning a saint and one who inspired three poems (more than Clemo's theological hero Karl Barth) is "Beyond Lourdes (To St. Bernadette)." Though the poem refers to St. Bernadette who had multiple visions of the Virgin Mary at Lourdes in 1858, it mostly consists of Clemo's own self-centered musings, a characteristic of his earliest poems.

> A fang struck the rock, you saw the sign
> At your wintry Lourdes, and healing flows
> Still from your wounds: and yet
> In my own pilgrimage I found
> That a vision born of pain
> Dissolves in morbid rain. (MOC 76-77)

Helena Charles, a Catholic friend, compared Clemo to Bernadette, suggesting that he was the "embodiment of the ascetic ideal of the suffering saint" (IG 127). Clemo, however, rejects suffering as a means of lasting insight. Perhaps the rather strident tone here may be due to Clemo's need to justify the faith that alone sustained him during his suffering. He is moving beyond his own painful youth and rejecting an earlier, immature Christianity; however in doing so, he is implying his spiritual superiority: "Faith has schooled me further, brought me round / To the secret you may have lost / Through your suffering . . ."(MOC 76). The poem finally implodes in sheer adolescent self-righteousness in the final stanza:

[8] Recent investigation about this matter casts doubt on both the authenticity of the image of the Virgin Mary on the *tilma* and the story of Juan Diego. See Brading's chapter entitled "Myth and History" in *Mexican Phoenix*.

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: (MOC 77)

Though this poem fails to survive Clemo's Pentecostal delight in pulsing rhythms and flashing lights, he nonetheless took up Bernadette as a subject in later poems, much more successfully.

After reading Franz Werfel's *The Song of Bernadette* in the early 1960's, Clemo wrote two more poems about the saint's vision at Lourdes (MOR 122). In "The Riven Niche" (COC 30) the poet is less arrogant; in fact, the poem begins with his own anointing with water from the grotto at Lourdes—"The soft Cross of blessing." [9] Still self-referential, Clemo compares his youth to Bernadette's: "Holding my pitcher to the wheezing pump / Or the valley spring-pipe, forty years back." Childhood is gone, however, and

Since then I've heard of creed-crashes,
Of broken moulds and the freedom
Of the unpierced ego to advance alone.
Does your Lady smile,
Or do the swords turn in her heart?

Clemo is referring to his old enemy, liberal Protestantism, by which humanity searches for God by relying more on human wisdom rather than on divine revelation. In a tender phrase, he wonders if such hubris is painful to

[9] Clemo explains that "in 1961 a Roman Catholic visitor had given me a phial of water from the Massabeille spring, and as I sprinkled the drops on my forehead at intervals since then I had been drawn into a great mystery and benediction" (MOR 122).

Mary. Clemo explains his mystical experience engendered by the anointing, turning his attention to the Virgin:

> And as your baptism spreads I sense the gold
> Of blooms on the feet that span the ages,[10]
> Fragrance of the wild rose guarding
> Multifoliate grace, safe from the slandering tide. (COC 31)[11]

The Virgin, like the riven niche in the rock where she appeared, remains unaffected by the inundations of unbelief.

The poem "Massabeille" is named for the grotto at Lourdes. Clemo again affirms a kinship between himself and Bernadette, though yet again, he ascribes his own condition to the maid:

> We may exhaust the bitter treasures
> Of rebel poet and mystic, proud, self-exiled
> With shadowy daemons on a borderline.

But now there is a welcome recognition that the Virgin Mary transcends his own merely personal concerns. Finally it is to her, and ultimately to God as the source of the vision mediated through Bernadette, that he turns:

> But we cannot exhaust the blessed sign
> Secured at sunset on the Savy bank:
> . . . .
> As Virgin to virgin bared the source of love. (COC 27)

Clemo's attraction to Mary, the ultimate Catholic saint, is clear in the previous poems. It is not surprising, for she is the sum of all that Clemo

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[10] Bernadette described the Lady in her vision as having gold roses on her feet (Werfel 64).

[11] By this time Clemo had read T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, in which the image of "multi-foliate rose" appears. The phrase also conjures up Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

desires: the feminine and the divine, the virgin and the mother, the merely earthly and the supernaturally miraculous all in one. Clemo notes the paradox that this presents for a Dissenter in the poem "Virgin Harbor." He exclaims: "How deeply, under Calvin's shadow, / Dare I name you—I with no waxen flares, / I the heretic?" (ET 42). The question is quickly dismissed, as Clemo confesses: "I go all the way / With Gabriel, up the rocking stairs, / And breathe my 'Hail Mary' over the miraculous harbour." "Virgin Harbour" seems to be the most explicit acceptance of the Catholic cult of Mary, though such sectarian differences seem irrelevant to much of Clemo's work. In Mary's encounter with God, the sexual arousals of youth are perfectly intertwined with the divine inception of the Christ: "As soon as the racial charge claimed your body / God's terse rejoinder nested at its core:[12] / I was spun into grace where those two worlds meet" (ET 42).

Clemo "was spun into grace" by a comparable experience; the emotional and physical release expressed here coincides with his marriage to Ruth Peaty (the poem appears in the first collection after their marriage). Clemo's reverence takes Mary out of her Catholic context, claiming her for all Christians as the mother of Jesus:

> A free believer's vow must honour you:
> Not from incense and litany,
> But from my raw baptismal pain
> On a cratered hillside, I come to your feet.

[12] "And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

In the third stanza Clemo situates grace and sex as having the same source. Sexual love, when redeemed by Christianity, is an experience of the kingdom of heaven on earth. The "yielding harbour" is Clemo's poetic expression for the vagina: "There, at your yielding harbour, for me too / Eternity unloaded its veiled / Explosive love [. . .]." Here Clemo goes against the grain of church teaching that this inception was strictly spiritual, occurring through Mary's assent to the angelic annunciation, by describing it with sexual metaphors. Whereas Mary's *Fiat* enabled the incarnation of divine love to enter the world, Clemo laments that for many liberal Protestants the "Son is admired merely / And your towering nuptials are never hailed." Clemo, however is steeped "deeper in elemental life," and thus "aware / Of the exemption and rebuke / From the heart of heaven, in your immaculate glance." Clemo's embrace of the Immaculate Conception, as a Dissenter, coincides with his declaration that he is "Claimed by no church" (ET 42).

Not only was Clemo drawn to heroic self-sacrificing saints from the Catholic realm, but also to missionaries, those adventurers for God who traveled and explored the world in ways that were barred to Clemo due to poverty and disability (and temperament). "The evangelist," Clemo declares, "is the only rebel whose life-changing urge is valid beyond time and space . . ." (IG 47). It is within their combination of faith, marriage and vocation that Clemo finds complete confirmation of his own vocational path. With few

exceptions, it is the marriage that is the focus of these poems, though the missionary work done by his subjects is nothing short of extraordinary.

Clemo's poem about Jim Elliot, an American missionary to Ecuador, celebrates the happy marriage and muscular Christianity that were the ideal for Clemo. Clemo describes Elliot as a "rebel" and a "rugged wrestler" who rejected pseudo-mysticism and declared 'The secular is sacred enough'"(DD 50). Elliot died in the mission field: he was speared to death along with four other men in 1956 by the Auca Indians (now Wuaorani) whom they had come to evangelize. Clemo drew on *The Shadow of the Almighty*, the journals and letters compiled by Elliot's widow, Elizabeth. He also sought her approval to publish the poem. "Jim Elliot" is a tightly controlled poem with a regular rhyme scheme. The poem has a fierce kind of emotion to it, barely contained by the formal structure.

> He tore himself loose from culture: a sinewy flame
> Lit his raw track to the Absolute.
> Truth peeled was truth beyond dispute:
> He hacked through convention to the bare cloven Name.
>
> Religionless faith, more radical than Bonheoffer's,
> Blazed its challenge through his hard grip:
> Unmoved amid civilized worship,
> He strained for a fall where the wild tangle suffers. (DD 50)

The rhythm and diction of these first stanzas ("tore," "sinewy," "raw," "peeled," hacked," "blazed," "hard grip," "strained," "fall," and "wild tangle") convey the sense of hacking through the jungle undergrowth with a machete. The next few stanzas have the same energy, but focus on Elliot's first

experiences in South America and his self-sacrificing choice to work as a missionary in Ecuador apart from his beloved Elizabeth: "Decisions that gave sheer agony / To his male roots [. . .]" (DD 50).

Though "he was no monk," Elliot and Elizabeth were separated as they each did their own mission work. When they decided to marry five years later, she came to him in Ecuador. Clemo's description of her arrival has an almost mystical quality: "Orchid and coffee-palm / Brushed the beloved: she was at his hut" (DD 51). The otherworldly quality soon gives way to the earthy and primitive, though the poem ends with a solemn affirmation of his widow's abiding trust in God and her conviction that her husband's short life was well spent.

> No room for a churchy marriage service:
> God and a drab old Quito office
> Rebuked the hollow shows. And when Elliot bowed
>
> On the Curaray airstrip, pierced by the lance of an Auca,
> Martyred for making Christ his chief,
> A twin faith rebuked the clouding grief
> In the woman clasping his child at Shandia.

In testament to their shared vision, Elizabeth returned to live among the tribe, continuing her husband's work, less than three years after his murder (Saint 20).

Another of Clemo's laudatory poems, the eponymously titled "Toyohiko Kagawa (1888-1960)," concerns an exemplary Christian evangelist and social activist from Japan. Nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and author of one hundred-fifty books, Kagawa was a man of action and deep love (Tuttle 358).

"As mystic, reformer, husband," Kagawa was everything Clemo aspired to be (BA 17). Roughly the first half of this portrait poem is based on Kagawa's early life as an orphaned bastard raised in a loveless home. Of his conversion experience, Clemo writes that Kagawa

> Glimpsed Peaks beyond Fujiyama,
> A foreign track for his spirit.
>
> Arrows of Christ on the mountains
> Dislodged the racial dragon,
> Pierced the glossed shield and the idol,
> Halted his climb to Nirvana.[13]

After his conversion, Kagawa lived for thirteen years in the Shinkawa slum of Kobe; from his experience there came a collection of poems entitled *Songs from the Slums*. One of these, "Beside My Brazier," may be the source of these lines in Clemo's poem: "In a slum hut he soon knelt writing, / Shaken by cough while a brazier / Burned feebly beside his passion" (BA 16-17). The cough refers to Kagawa's tuberculosis, from which he recovered after being diagnosed as a terminal case. In the midst of his healing, Kagawa had a mystical experience of the presence of God.

Clemo also refers to him as "A Bunyan, a Saint Francis," who "Plucked poems from prison bruises" (BA 17). Kagawa was arrested more than once for his activism on behalf of the laborers and peasants—and beaten even more often than he was arrested. Kagawa combined the devoted, self-sacrificing life of a saint with Christian marriage:

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[13] Kagawa was raised under the influence of Shinto.

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

One of the poems in *Songs from the Slums* is "New-Wedded," which contains the image of Kagawa and his new bride Haru on the seashore. Clemo triumphantly declares in the final lines: "He attained, along alley and sea-shore, / Christ's yoke: poor, blind,[14] but married, / Shared heavens unguessed by Buddha" (BA 17).

The poem to Hudson Taylor, the first Protestant missionary to inland China, focuses on his marriage to his first wife, Maria,[15] hence the title "Hudson Taylor to Maria." After almost two years in China, Taylor learned from his mission board that they had run out of money to support him. He went on anyway, choosing to rely on prayer to God to provide his material no less than spiritual sustenance. Along the way he met a young missionary, Mary Dyer, in Ningpo. Her guardian instructed Mary to refuse Taylor's request for her hand. She did so; however, almost a year later they became engaged despite the objections. Two years later they married, as Clemo has Taylor recall:

I was left with no salary, no church:
We married in blind faith, pioneers,
Defying a furious bishop. But the Chinese watched,

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[14] Kagawa suffered from trachoma, which is an inflammatory eye disease frequently resulting in blindness. He contracted it while living in the slums (Tuttle 356).

[15] After Maria died he married Jennie Faulding, also a missionary. They had two children (Pollack 207).

> Curious about our God. Our trials unlatched
> Doors barred to snug preachers: the search
> Of a few drugged souls was halted despite the jeers.
> (ATM 46-47)

They were married for almost thirteen years and had four surviving children (Mary gave birth to nine).[16] The arduous and often dangerous work, the reliance on prayer for workers and funds, the passion of their relationship—all of this intense emotional, physical, and spiritual biographical material fades in Clemo's trite, triumphalist images of pagan idols being overcome:

> Yes, we have blazed a trail, knocked deep inland:
> Our love beat stronger than temple gongs;
> Our children's eyes danced, fearless of the carved dragons' teeth.
> Some flower of wisdom has burst from its sheath:
> Barnsley, Penang . . . twin points expand,[17]
> Meet in our marriage, challenge China's wrongs. (ATM 46-47*)*

This misfire is the exception for Clemo, as previously illustrated, since he usually excels in concrete, vivid detail as a means of communicating a deeply felt response. It could be posited that Clemo's failure in this derives from his caricatures of the Chinese—"coolies," "pigtails," "yellow magnet." It might also be that Clemo was being faithful to the language used by the English of the period (Hudson's dates are 1832-1905), given that the poem is a dramatic monologue. Yet to capture the voice of Hudson Taylor (and that of his marriage) one must also capture his great love of China and the Chinese people (Spurgeon *"Interviews with Three of the King's Captains"*).

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[16] Pollack, pp. 79-91.

[17] Taylor was born in Barnsley, England. Maria was born in Penang, Malaysia (her father was a missionary there).

"Henry Martyn (1781-1812)" focuses on a love that remained unconsummated. Clemo's footnote for the poem conveys the depth of his interest in an otherwise obscure figure:

> Henry Martyn, born at Truro, gave up a brilliant university career as a classical scholar and became a pioneer missionart [sic – typo in volume] in India [. . .] His short life was complicated by his unfulfilled love for a Cornish girl, and he died while on his way back to England, where he hoped to resume their romance. (DD 41)

This dramatic monologue takes place on Martyn's deathbed in Tokat (Turkey) in 1812. He was on his way back to England at the time, to recover his health and recruit more missionaries for India.

> Deaden the fire. Why did the Moslems lay me
> In this furnace of an inn, on the mud floor?
> No air: each breath is agony,
> The sweat pours, heat makes the winds shrill
> Through my feverish brain, like the howling,
> Weird and heathen, in the mountain passes. (DD 40)

The phrase "Deaden the fire," which Clemo repeats three more times, is possibly a reference to something Martyn wrote in his journal of May 17th, 1806, as he arrived in India as chaplain for the East India Company: "now let me burn out for God" (Martyn 330).

As he lay dying Martyn's thoughts turn to Cornwall and his Lydia, wondering "How long did she stay on Marazion sands, / Or watch through a casement, that August day" (DD 41). He characterizes their love as one that fought "In defence of faith's higher claims," for Lydia was "A staunch Dissenter." However, Martyn wonders whether they were "Misled, morbidly

ascetic?" for delaying marriage. Thinking of his missionary work, Martyn asks a question:

> Had Lydia shared my work, a reverent bride,
> Would they [prostitutes] have caught the spark, a ray of desire
> Which my pale celibacy denied? (DD 41).

Acknowledging the reality of his approaching death, Martyn admits it is "Useless to ask" (DD 41). For Clemo this is a rhetorical question, for he is clear that a Christian marriage is a powerful witness to God, as he illustrates in the preceding poem about Hudson and Maria Taylor.

Yet not every evangelist who interested Clemo was married. One of first rays illuminating Clemo's path "back to fellowship with a revived Church" came through American child evangelist Renée Martz, "who claimed to have been converted through a vision and the voice of Jesus in a Los Angeles street" (IG 121). "Lunar Pentecost" specifically witnesses to Clemo's partial recovery of his hearing while playing a recording of Martz.[18] He depicts his familiar clayscape, with its barren, powdery, weirdly gray mimicry of the moon's surface, experiencing the volcanic eruption of God's presence through jazz:

> Scarred stillness of the brooding bone
> In the slow wash of lunar light:
> Such was my ghostly kingdom, a dreamer's land

[18] Clemo had so wanted to hear Martz that he actually bought a second hand record player and played her recording for two months, even though he could hear nothing. Then after a cold, he blew his nose and heard himself cough. "I hurried to fetch Renée Martz's record, and a few minutes later stood spell-bound, listening to her clear strong voice soaring amid a thunder of jazz. I could not catch any words, but the sounds were loud and incredibly moving after years of silence" (MOR 101).

Which the real heaven had to smite.
It smote with song – just a fire-flake
That clove a crater in my clay:
God's jazz-drums seemed to thunder
Where His lava broke away. (MOC 74-75)

The image of molten lava captures Clemo's intense emotions of release and burning joy:

A fire-flake has pierced my silence,
And a tongue responds—too deep
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. (MOC 75)

The touching exuberance of this poem also conveys Clemo's emotional response to the other American evangelists who came to Britain in the early 1950's, chief of whom was Billy Graham. Mysteriously, I have yet to find a poem written specifically about him or for him in a published collection.[19] Clemo's diaries of the time are a historian's goldmine as Clemo (Mrs. Clemo, actually) seems to have clipped every bit of print coverage about him, and his diary entries focus on Graham with great regularity. However, part of Clemo's appeal lies in the unpredictable and eclectic group of people he has poetically engaged with.

[19] According to John Hurst, who did some of the earliest manuscript work on Clemo, a small number of Clemo's poems that were published in a magazine format never made it into a collected format (136). At the time I visited his collection in Exeter, Clemo's personal papers that had been given to the University had yet to be catalogued.

The eponymously titled poem "Josephine Butler" is a dramatic monologue about the Victorian British social reformer who fought against the sexual abuse of women and children as well as for increasing educational opportunities for women. As seen in "Mary Shelley in Geneva" and "Virginia Woolf Remembers St. Ives," Clemo exhibits a talent for creating a convincing feminine voice. In this poem he captures the mental and emotional inner life of a woman with both the compassion of a mother and the necessary toughness of a reformer. As she declares at the end of the first stanza: "God, why do I dare – / I, married and fifty – defy the established crime?" (BA 36-37). The established crime is prostitution, which in effect was legalized in England through the Contagious Disease Acts that had been introduced during the 1860s.[20] Butler was urged to lead the difficult but ultimately successful campaign to get the Acts repealed, as she was already known for her compassionate work on behalf of prostitutes. A deeply Christian woman,

[20] This legislation permitted the detention of any woman merely suspected of being a prostitute, whom the police could then force to submit to an examination for venereal disease. She could be arrested and imprisoned if she refused. If she was found so diseased, she was locked up in a hospital until cured (or mad, or dead). The final legislation applied to a ten-mile radius of many garrison towns and naval ports, as an attempt to combat venereal disease in the armed forces. The vagaries of the law meant that any woman could be accused, and if she objected to the painful and humiliating exam, she could be imprisoned. Even if not a prostitute, any woman so charged usually lost her employment and connection to polite society; often she then ended up a prostitute as the only way to earn money. It was an easy way for sexual predators from pimps to the Lords to gain and exert sexual control over a woman. See Jane Jordan and Ingrid Sharp, Eds. *Josephine Butler and the Prostitution Campaigns: Diseases of the Body Politic*. See also Jordan, *Josephine Butler*.

she was motivated by Christ's treatment of fallen women in the Bible.[21] She went to the brothels and docks,

> Where the urge of rescue receives the bruise
> From the stony chattel, the cynical male stride,
> The trafficker's manipulation
> Of a State licence to buy and sell. (BA 36-37)

Butler's Christian faith was inseparable from her sense of justice: "To me they are one" (Butler, *Personal Reminiscences of A Great Crusade,* 130). She led the "Christ-war on vice" wherever necessary, as Clemo assumes her own voice (BA 36):

> I've fought the C. D. Acts and Bruce's Bill, [22]
> Morals police, the regulated sewer,
> And apathy in decorous pews. (BA 37)

While Clemo is often critical of the Social Gospel because of its association with Modernist trends in the church, this poem, like the following poem devoted to George Müller, shows Clemo's admiration for those who care for one's neighbor in the spirit of Christ. Clemo captures the strength of Butler, "who is ready to go down to Hades again, if it were necessary for the deliverance of her fellow-creatures" (Butler, *Letter*). In a condensed version of her life, Clemo has Butler end her confession:

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[21] *The Hour Before the Dawn: an Appeal to Men.* London: Trubner, 1876, found in *Josephine Butler and the Prostitution Campaigns: Diseases of the Body Politic*, p. 280.

[22] Henry Austin Bruce, Home Secretary in 1872, introduced Bruce's Bill. Though it was a step forward in proposing the age of consent be raised from 12 to 14, it also sought to extend police powers to arrest women on suspicion over the whole country, not just within garrison towns.

I thrust at public conscience, gave lepers
The tender truth, slipping through the official
Cordon of steel-toned disgust
To bid Christ's martyred love conquer. (BA 37)

"George Müller" (CA 34) is a character sketch of a major Christian philanthropist of the Victorian era. Clemo makes note of the aspect of Müller's life that interests him most: the dramatic conversion from "lecherous German student" to a man who "built and maintained five orphanages at Ashley Down, near Bristol, relying entirely on faith and prayer . . ." (CA 35). The sordid side of human behavior holds a fascination for Clemo—perhaps a reflection of his own decadent tendencies. Clemo declares that Müller

[. . .] had once been jailed for petty crime
And dead drunk as often as Keats,
Arrogant at Halle and, flushed at cards,
Drawn into brute-heat by a haggling kiss.[23] (CA 34)

Even more compelling, however, is the dramatic conversion. From a juvenile roué to being the express image of Christly love for neighbor, "Young Müller soon dreamed of orphans, / Spurred by his Exeter wife, pregnant in Bristol" (CA 34). Clemo salutes Müller's wife, Mary Groves, as a fellow evangelist, noting that she was a local girl (the Clemos lived in Devon when he wrote this poem).[24] Clemo recounts Müller's life by contrasting him with

[23] "The night [my mother] was dying, I, not knowing of her illness, was playing at cards till two in the morning, and on the next day, being the Lord's day, I went with some of my companions in sin to a tavern, and then we went about the streets, half intoxicated" (Müller 5).

[24] Clemo does not mention his second wife, Susannah Grace Müller whom Müller married after his first wife of forty-years died. Susannah also was a partner in Müller's work, and she went with him on his evangelical tours to forty-two countries, which he undertook at the age of seventy.

the poet John Keats declaring that “there was a kinship / Between wafted poet and plodding, prose-burdened student” (CA 34). They both had come to the seaside town of Teignmouth, in Devon, Keats to nurse his younger brother Tom, Müller to serve as the pastor of Ebenezer Chapel.

Using the biblical image of the guiding shepherd, Clemo characterizes Müller as

> Herding his multitudes of children
> Outside the well-planned tracks of survival,
> In a Bible-fenced corral of stubborn prayer.
> The saint’s way of emptiness, blind trust in God.

By way of contrast, Clemo describes Keats quite unsympathetically: “The London poet seemed a sick moth, fluttering / To his grave in Rome . . . “(CA 34). Müller’s radical reliance on prayer as a means for supporting his philanthropic ventures (and their proven success) attracted Clemo, as it did many others. Clemo would also be sympathetic to Müller’s devotion to the Bible as the sole source for his understanding of God.[25] Clemo ends his poem with a typically strong, triumphant affirmation:

> Its vindication is historic:
> It bred no melancholy art.

Thus does Clemo brings the poem back to what he sees as Keats’ failure—to be a poet without being a Christian.

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[25] See *A Narrative of Some of the Lord’s Dealings with George Müller*; Arthur T. Pierson’s, *George Müller of Bristol*, Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1899. The George Müller Charitable Trust continues his work today.

“A Choice about Art: To Oswald Chambers” was written for Oswald Chambers, author of the classic devotional book *My Utmost for His Highest*. In this poem Clemo compares the happily married Chambers, who abandoned his career as a painter to serve as a chaplain in Egypt, with Van Gogh, who abandoned the work of evangelism for a life in art—although in the latter case “with tragic consequences” (DD 21). This concluding judgment on non-Christian artists is echoed in some form or another in several different poems written by Clemo. There is little room for nuance in Clemo’s harsh dismissal of Van Gogh: “The pulpit had lost a voice, the galleries gained / Some savage pictures” (DD 20). Chambers, on the other hand, is compared to Gerard Manley Hopkins, who put aside poetry out of obedience to the priesthood:

> You followed Hopkins and bent,
> Like him, your being to self-abandonment,
> To years of beauty-mangling, dry grey soul-storms (DD 20-21)

Clemo acknowledges the struggle, the dark night of the soul that Chambers must have experienced (as did Hopkins). Clemo feels that a central part of Chambers triumph is his marriage to Gertrude Hobbs – known affectionately as Biddy. When Chambers felt called to be a military chaplain to British troops in Cairo during World War I, Biddy and their young daughter Kathleen followed him there. The Chambers’ happy marriage was inspiring to the soldiers:

> At the Zeitoun base, near Cairo, the troops
> You served were awed by the balm
> Of your fertile marriage, gay amid camel and palm.

Chamber's artistic sensibility is transformed and even triumphant in his service to God. This paradox, to receive in return what one surrenders, rather like losing one's life to gain it again, is the fertile joy of the Gospel.

> Your artist-nerves exulted, somehow redeemed:
> A paradox barred to your old art groups,
> Barred to Van Gogh, now bared its body and teemed.

Clemo's language is sensual and immediate; the joy of the Christian life is not mere promise to be fulfilled in the afterlife, but bears fruit in this life. The knowledge of this joy is lost to Van Gogh and to all who choose the path of the artist undisciplined by Christ and, by implication, perhaps all those who do not have a Christian marriage as defined by Clemo. Rowan Williams comments on the conclusion of "A Choice About Art":

> The triumphant, almost savage, undercutting of the artist's achievement as such, in the name simultaneously of erotic fidelity and the gospel, says clearly that art, including the poem itself as it speaks, is at best a path into the deaths of commitment and risk for God's sake. And perhaps a good poem is one that pushes us nearer such death. (203)

As we shall see in his poems devoted to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Simone Weil, there is a need for a corrective to Clemo's judgment of Van Gogh.[26] His simplistic assessment and dismissal of Van Gogh, perhaps to make Chambers the more admirable by comparison or else for aesthetic purposes, does a disservice to Chambers, Van Gogh, and, I believe, to Clemo

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[26] Perhaps for Hopkins as well, who returned to poetry as means of giving voice to his deepest priestly insight at the instruction of his spiritual director. However, he is only peripheral to the poem, and Clemo cannot be expected to paint the fuller picture of him here.

himself. His easy dismissal of Van Gogh matters because these poems seek to provide not just Clemo's version of the lives of these historical figures, but also his means of testimony to the truth about art and Christianity. And if he was at all aware of Van Gogh's own religious pilgrimage, which came near enough to his own, his outright dismissal of the painter is hugely telling.

Van Gogh came from an Arminian background, and, like Clemo, he struggled to reconcile his devotion to the Bible with his own aesthetic sensibilities. "As a result of van Gogh's inability to find compatibility, accommodation, or resolution," David Hempton argues, "his passions for religion, art, and nature sometimes seemed more competitive than integrated" (*Evangelical Disenchantment* 121). Though he felt called to be a minister, Van Gogh found it difficult to concentrate on his course of theological study at the University of Amsterdam. He found the emphasis on academic theology to be soul-deadening: He repeatedly told his tutor Mendes da Costa that "John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is of much more use to me, and Thomas à Kempis [*Imitation of Christ*] and a translation of the Bible; and I don't want anything more."[27] It is likely that Clemo would have affirmed this objection. Knowing that he would not gain entrance to the University, van Gogh instead went to Brussels where he failed to be

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[27] M.B. Mendes da Costa, "Personal Memories of Vincent Van Gogh During His Stay at Amsterdam," originally published in *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, December 2, 1910, and reproduced in *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1959), 1: 170. Van Gogh was also influenced by C. H. Spurgeon's sermons. See *Letters* 1:113 and 3:596.

nominated for full admission to the evangelistic training school he hoped to enter. Though van Gogh went forward with his plan to serve as a missionary to Belgian miners, his endorsement was withdrawn by the Union of Protestant Churches in Belgium. Their annual report states, "Mr. Van Gogh has certainly shown admirable qualities in his care for the sick and wounded; many times he has shown devotion and a sense of sacrifice [. . .] [he] even gave the best part of his clothes and linen away. If he had also had the gift of the word [. . .]" (qtd. in Hempton, 128). A second assignment ended with the same criticism, and a third stint as an independent evangelist proved to be his last. Rejected, Van Gogh became cynical about what he saw as the hypocrisy of religious professionals who were more interested in the letter than the spirit. Would not Clemo have had considerable sympathy for him?

Clemo might also have sympathized with Van Gogh's falling away from orthodox Christianity into both his art and the arms of women who nonetheless failed to bring him the love he so ardently desired. In a letter to his younger sister Wilhelmien (Wil) he wrote, "people who do nothing but fall in love are more serious and holier than those who sacrifice their love and hearts to an idea" (*Letters*, 3:425-28).[28] This sentiment is not far from Clemo's statement that by choosing to surrender to the love of Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was more in accord with God's will

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[28] Also quoted in Hempton, 130.

than the philosopher bachelor Søren Kierkegaard who rejected marriage to Regine Olsen.

Though van Gogh was not a Christian minister or evangelist as he intended in his younger years, his abandonment of institutional Christianity and dogma did not result in atheism. On the contrary, his personal faith was grounded in creativity, nature, and love—all of which were sacred to him. In sum, he embodied his experience of the sacred on canvas. He had become an artist who believed that "[Christ] lived serenely *as a greater artist than other artists*, despising marble and clay as well as color, working in living flesh" (*Letters,* 3:496). Hempton points out that such "quasi-theological musings of van Gogh were given artistic expression not in conventional biblical art, but in paintings like *The Sower* (1888)," which depicts a peasant spreading seed under a brilliant sun (131). Debra Silverman comments on this painting and others like it: "In this combination of grounded peasant work and immaterial irradiation, van Gogh identified a new theory of art and attitude toward reality that he connected for the first time to 'symbolism' and to the aspiration for a modern sacred art" (82).

Though Clemo can acknowledge the "soul-mangling" storms of Hopkins and Chambers with compassion, he did so because he believed they kept the orthodox faith. Van Gogh by contrast took "flight from Richmond," where he preached his only surviving sermon in the local Methodist church. It is also likely that Clemo did not have access to the specific details of van Gogh's life

because the artist's letters translated into English (1954 edition) were not yet available in Braille. This brief excursus into van Gogh's life is but to acknowledge the limitations imposed by Clemo's constrictive theology and also perhaps by his disabilities. It also serves as a counterpoint to his much greater sympathy with theologians and preachers in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX

A Kindred Battlefield: Theologians & Preachers

> 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.
>
> Jack Clemo: "Poem at Sixty"

To follow Clemo's distinctive journey of faith through his poetry is to discover a theology that emphasizes the mystical but that defies neat labels. As we saw in the biography chapter, Clemo was baptized in a Bible Christian church,[1] and then later he became enamored of a romantic, Celtic-tinged mysticism during his adolescence so that he stopped attending church in 1929 at age thirteen. Eventually rejecting such romantic mysticism, he embraced a "primitive" Christianity and came to call himself an evangelical Calvinist and later a neo-Calvinist of the Barthian school (IG x). Though Clemo had returned to Christianity by 1938, his poems of conversion and confession show a continual working out of his religious beliefs, a process that does not cease until his death in 1994.

Clemo embraced certain theologians and preachers as aids to his religious pilgrimage and vocational pursuit. In Clemo's second collection of poems, *The Wintry Priesthood,* he writes about theologians such as Karl

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[1] The Bible Christian sect was prevalent mostly in Cornwall and Devon. Its theology was largely Wesleyan, emphasizing decisive religious experience and close adherence to scripture rather than liturgy and sacrament.

Barth, C. H. Spurgeon, Søren Kierkegaard, and though not a theologian, he includes the writer T. F. Powys as a spiritual influence. These early poetic "character sketches" are dialogical, as Clemo treats his theological heroes also as interlocutors. Having seen that Spurgeon influenced Clemo decisively through his printed sermons, we should not be surprised that Spurgeon is the first subject in this poetic sequence. "The Broad Winter (to C. H. Spurgeon)"opens with a declaration of affinity for Spurgeon, who opposed Protestant Liberal theology[2] much as did Clemo:

> What isolates me here in frozen clay
> But that same tidal shock which fell
> First upon England in your day? (MOC 42-43)

The "tidal shock" is a metaphor for Clemo's list of what he regarded as heretical movements: "Darwinism, Higher Criticism, Christian Socialism and the New Psychology" (IG 159). As Clemo saw the modern church embrace these "isms" he found himself both isolated by his religious vision and repulsed by organized churches.

Clemo specifically addresses the Downgrade Controversy, which began when Spurgeon published a series of articles in his weekly magazine *The*

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[2] Protestant Liberal theology of Clemo's time "was marked by the discovery of the significance of historical time and an emphasis upon the notion of progress." One event that sparked such interest was the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859). Modernists sought to bring religious thought in line with recent scientific knowledge and to use this knowledge to solve societies ills. "The study of Christian doctrine was transformed into the psychological study of religious experience and into the sociological study of religious institutions and customs and the philosophical inquiry into religious knowledge and values" ("Theological liberalism").

Sword and The Trowel criticizing the modern evangelical church for getting on the "down-grade" or descending slope by rejecting the final authority of scripture in the face of historical criticism. In typical Spurgeon fashion, he is blunt: "Avowed atheists are not a tenth as dangerous as those preachers who scatter doubt and stab at faith" (August 1887). Clemo dramatizes Spurgeon's assault:

> 'Woe to the idol shepherds who feed not
> The sheep, but speak in swelling words
> Of human wisdom! Vengence [sic] is the Lord's.'

The response to Spurgeon's reprimand was outrage from the English evangelical community, and Spurgeon ultimately decided to withdraw from the Baptist Union in October 1887. Clemo, however, was energized by Spurgeon's defense of a high doctrine of Scripture: "the idea of the Bible as a gift of God, as elemental and independent of scholastic criticism as love or death, was very close to my own conception of it" (COR 139).

Alluding to Spurgeon's mid-winter death at Menton in the south of France, Clemo re-creates the severe scene with images such as "snowy blasts" and wind "biting to the bone" and with words such as "bleak" and "shudders." He then ties the winter chill to the frozen condition of the Shepherds of the church,

> As bitterly the grey truth breaks
> On disillusioned Church and frantic world.
> You see what form the judgment takes,
> What harvest faithless generations reap:
> The folds half empty, no clean pasture for the sheep;
> Soil sterile where the liberal waters swirled.

Clemo's pastoral images ironically echo Luke 10:2, where instead of "The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few," there is only a fallow field. Noting the spiritual desolation in the aftermath of Liberal theology, Clemo employs a metaphor that Spurgeon himself often used, the citadel, as a place of last refuge. Clemo announces he will remain loyal to the difficult gospel of the cross rather than casting his lot with the crossless Liberalism:

> When I saw this I chose to dwell
> With torturing symbols of the Citadel.[3]

Clemo's other poem devoted to Spurgeon—not published during his lifetime, but belonging to the poems garnered from his papers at the University of Exeter—was included in *Awakening: Poems Newly Found*. In the original manuscript for "The Clay Verge" this poem is placed under a heading "POEMS IN TRIBUTE."[4] Entitled simply "Charles Haddon Spurgeon," the poem is an intimate version of "The Broad Winter," focusing only on the torment caused by Spurgeon's evangelical critics, who were numerous and vocal:

> The glare
> Of hostile faces in Far England comes
> In sick drifts to the breaking strand
> As from a nightmare past,
> Fleering to depths no other mortal plumbs
> And few would understand. (AWK 72)

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[3] Clemo's "torturing symbols," such as the excavator, we have already briefly considered.

[4] "The Clay Verge" MS 68.

It is possible Clemo is alluding to Spurgeon's battle with depression for most of his adult life (following a tragic incident at Surrey Music Hall when he was preaching) that may have intensified Spurgeon's anguish.[5]

Not only is Clemo in personal dialogue with these formative figures, he also puts them in conversation with each other. The final poem of *The Wintry Priesthood* series (except for the Epilogue) is "The Broadening Spring (To Karl Barth)," clearly a link to the first poem "The Broad Winter." Clemo employs liquid images as in the first Spurgeon poem, though more of them: "fount of faith," "fervid waters," "knotted currents at the fountain-head," "thrust of waters," as well as implicitly water metaphors such as "sunrise floods the sky," "swell of sunrise," "Faith plunges," and "engulfed in strife." Water often is a metaphor or image of purification, cleansing, baptism, and rebirth, which is how Clemo employs the trope in this poem. He connects water with Barth's theology, as he envisions it flowing down from the Alps, through Barth's early pastorates and teaching posts, from Safenwil, to Munster, Bonn, and then out to all of Europe. As one who had read only Barth's commentary on *The Epistle to the Romans* —never having read any later Barth—Clemo interprets Barth in essentially Kierkegaardian terms,

[5] On October 19, 1856, Spurgeon was giving a service in the Surrey Music Hall in the Royal Surrey Gardens. The cry of "Fire!" caused a panic and several people were trampled to death (the hall held about twelve thousand people). Spurgeon became deeply depressed and lost in grief for some weeks after the incident. See C.H. Spurgeon, *The Saint and His Saviour*, pp. 371 ff. See also *The Autobiography of Charles H. Spurgeon*. Vol. II. 1854-1860.

emphasizing the singular event (Moment) of revelation rather than its historic trajectory:

> The fused and free
> Life of the Moment quickens where it will
> And meets the secret searching of the soul
> . . . .
>
> The tide has reached me; all my clay is changed;
> The bed and battleground of solitude
> Lie thawed in fellowship; my symbols fade
> In recognition of the Citadel.

This revelation prompts Clemo's move from an individual to a corporate understanding of Christianity, as once again the citadel metaphor occurs. No longer frozen by solitude, Clemo recalls the "frozen clay" of "The Broad Winter. " Now, however, he is no longer bound in isolation to the clayworld but dwelling in this new Citadel, which has become a city on a hill.

As with Spurgeon, Clemo wrote a second poem for Barth, this on the occasion of his death in 1968, simply titled "On the Death of Karl Barth." Similar to the first poem written years prior, it begins with a reference to the Alps:

> He ascended from a lonely crag in winter,
> His thunder fading in the Alpine dusk;
> And a blizzard was back on the Church,
> . . . .
> Back again, after all his labour
> To clear the passes, give us access. (ET 54-55)

As Donald Davie rightly discerns, "Clemo's imagery of crags and passes, blizzard and thunder, is more than a graceful acknowledgement that Karl Barth was Swiss: this precipitous landscape, and this extreme weather, are

the right scenario for God's visiting us" (Davie, *Lecture*, 6). The descent of grace is turbulent, as Clemo's early poems have illustrated.

This poem again reflects Clemo's affinity for the *Epistle to the Romans*, which he read in 1949, calling it an "earthquake of a book" (IG 136).[6] He hails Barth for maintaining that the cross overshadows any attempt to find salvation by means of human achievement or culture:

> And in that eclipse it condemns man,
> Whose self-love with its useful schools of thought,
> Its pious camouflage of a God within,
> Is always the cause of the shadow, the fall, the burial,
> The smug rub of hands
> Amid a reek of research. (ET 50)

Clemo was always "cautious about all attempts to assess Christianity 'in light of modern knowledge'; for such light is never valid in the sphere of Christian revelation" (IG 109). He preferred signs and wonders, the in-breaking of the supernatural that he regarded as the validation of his mystical experience of grace and he saw Barth as confirming it. The last lines ask for "grace to mortify [. . .] all projections of the divine," another pointed thrust at Liberal theology. The "God within" is the remaking of God in man's image, a God

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[6] Stephen John Lane insightfully explains that *Romans* had such an impact "because it so fully articulated what Clemo already knew at the intuitive and existential level. Because Barth provided confirmation rather than insight Clemo had no need to read further than *Romans*" ("Jack Clemo: Cartographer of Grace" 70). Here is a good example of Holland's theory of self-replication—Clemo was deeply moved by Barth because he found himself in the pages of the commentary. However, Holland's theory cannot account for Clemo's insistence that Barth (and Spurgeon) was responsible for bringing him into the body of Christ from an isolating individualistic stance.

who is no more than a projection of us that leaves no room for the invasion of grace from without, from the Wholly Other.

Between these two poems on Spurgeon and Barth illustrating Clemo's early pilgrimage, he grappled with Søren Kierkegaard. Clemo believed that "Kierkegaard's life might have been a Danish fairy-tale, but he preferred the more austere and philosophic role of martyrdom" (IG 142). Such martyrdom is the topic of "Thorn in the Flesh (to Søren Kierkegaard)." For Clemo, Kierkegaard had the choice either to embrace his fiancée Regine Olsen and thereby reject sorrow, or to cling to his hyper self-conscious suffering.

> Kierkegaard, you missed
> The highest pinnacle of privilege where
> The faithful flesh casts out the soul's despair,
> And rapturously the living lips are kissed
> To mark the rout of Nature. Had you but believed,
> You would have seen your sum of life retrieved,
> Fate driven from its last stronghold in the flesh. (MOC 48-50)

Clemo understood the destiny of the "natural" man as altered by the gift of marriage that in Kierkegaard's case would "break the thorny mesh" of solitary fate. Thus God brought Regine Olsen into his life, whom Kierkegaard in turn rejected in a decision that Clemo, a man yearning for a wife, could not fathom:

> Why did you turn
> From the gift of passionate norm,
> Afraid to let its ardours burn
> Down to the dark thorn roots
> And quicken there the choicer nuptial fruits?

As with many of Clemo's character sketches, this one offers a subjective view that reveals as much about himself as the person he is ostensibly writing about. Clemo tells us in his first autobiography that his mother's concern was not that he should either marry or burn, as St. Paul would have it, but rather he should "marry or freeze" (COR 37). Ironically, the following observation William MacDonald makes about Kierkegaard may be similarly applicable to Clemo:

> Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus says of Socrates that 'his whole life was personal preoccupation with himself, and then Governance comes and adds world-historical significance to it.' Similarly, Kierkegaard saw himself as a 'singular universal' whose personal preoccupation with himself was transfigured by divine Governance into universal significance. ("Søren Kierkegaard")

Clemo's self centered poetry usually testifies to something larger than himself. I am not, however, claiming for Clemo the same level of subjective exploration as is found in Kierkegaard. In fact, Clemo believed that such self-focus left Kierkegaard "a frustrated bachelor because he could not surrender his egoistic view of himself as one ordained to interpret the somber mystery of the Absolute" (IG 142).

One cannot completely dismiss his critique of Kierkegaard, even if one cannot completely embrace it either. As an illustration of his critique, Clemo contrasts the inward turning of Kierkegaard with the outward unfolding of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Despite her long struggle "with the proud demon of 'renunciation', [she] humbly accepted her liberty, thinking [. . .]

only of the mercy of God" (IG 142). By saying "yes" to Robert Browning, she did what Kierkegaard could not—namely to embrace the outward life of marriage as the rout of tragedy— i.e., "the Resurrection pattern" which Clemo regarded as "the most complete witness to the Gospel" (IG 142-143). Martin Buber offers an almost identical critique of Kierkegaard: "God wants us to come to him by means of the Reginas he has created and not by renunciation of them [. . .] ("The Question of the Single One" 52).

The last poem on a seminal theological figure in the *Wintry Priesthood* sequence concerns not a theologian but a writer: T. F. Powys. "A Kindred Battlefield" (To T. F. Powys)," written in early 1950, is the first poem Clemo devoted to Powys. Theodore Francis Powys lived in a very religious world without appearing to embrace conventional Christian theology. Clemo remarked, "Powys was sufficiently Christian—in the deeper, mystical sense—to inspire a feeling of permanent kinship" (COR 138). What constitutes a deep, "mystical" Christianity Clemo does not make completely clear. He admits being drawn to Powys by reading an interview that addressed his "mystic isolation" on the Dorset moors after he abandoned his career as a writer: "No other incident in modern literary history had so gripped my imagination or come so close to my sympathies" (COR 137). Clemo saw Powys' struggle between his pagan nature and his evangelical roots as parallel to his own. Powys' seclusion also mirrored Clemo's own sense of being a hermit. As a writer, Powys' use of allegory, his vision of rural life,

and his attention to the surrounding Dorset landscape also resonated with Clemo:

> Chalk heart[7] and clay heart share
> A wilful strategy:
> The strife you learned to bear
> Breaks westward over me. (MOC 46)

This poem caught the attention of Monica Hutchings, an acquaintance of the reclusive author, and she arranged for Clemo to visit Powys at Mappowder in Dorset. Clemo wrote about the experience in "Daybreak in Dorset":

> 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. (MOC 71)

Clemo was deeply moved by Powys' Mr. *Westin's Good Wine,* an allegorical novel about the mystical forces of good and evil. Clemo saw a unity between Powys and Browning, for their work revealed a "Calvinism warped in opposite directions" (COR 138). Powys fused sensual and religious realism "against a background of 'everlasting night'" while Browning did something similar "against a background of eternal sunshine." Whereas Browning often tended toward a "too facile optimism," Powys suffered from "an apocalyptic pessimism." Clemo found he needed both points of view in his life, balanced by the "undistorted norm of Calvinism represented by Spurgeon" (COR 140).

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[7] Chalk is to Dorset as clay is to Clemo's area of Cornwall.

After Powys died, Clemo visited his grave in 1978, a moment that inspired "Mappowder Revisited" (DD 62). In this poem he movingly acknowledges Powys as one of his important early "companions" who shaped his faith and vocation: "I had long cherished, from a different angle, / His picture of a God, who was not Pan, / Moving among the virgins" (DD 62).[8] As an illustration of Clemo's dedication to his own spiritual growth, he laid Powys aside when he found that Powys' pessimism and lack of any guiding Christian principle was not in keeping with his own understanding of the truth of the gospel. He writes: "What I found in his work was Christian tradition trying to express itself through a pagan temperament, becoming warped and distorted in the process" (IG 80). Clemo had already fought that battle.

These five early poems were part homage, part sounding board for Clemo's maturing theology and thus his vocation to evangelical poetry and Christian marriage. He would only increase the number and frequency of poems on historical figures in his later collections. Part of this turn to other people is due to his disabilities, which isolated him from the usual avenues of material for his poems. He says, "I was not the sort of mystic who could create poems which came exclusively from within his own soul [. . . .] I was a spirit-and-sense mystic, and the artist in me demanded realism—landscapes,

[8] T.F. Powys helped Clemo understand his own attraction to young girls, "especially the novel *Unclay* (1931)." Clemo praises him for writing "of a friendship between a middle-aged man and a girl of nine as a 'very beautiful and spiritually significant thing'" (AWK 18).

people, events" (MOR 107). He stopped writing novels when he could no longer hear dialogue, and his contact with the outside world was limited due to his blindness. However, when he finally consented to learn Braille at the urging of Mary, the books he read gave him the imaginative stimulus he needed to keep writing. Also, as previously noted in this chapter, Clemo then came into contact with a broader community of people and events that could "testify" to his vocational ideals, though sometimes he affirmed his vision through disagreement.

As we have seen in previous chapters, Clemo sometimes surprises, sometimes blunders in his critique of major theological and literary figures. His hostility towards Liberal theology presents a skewed version of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the poem dedicated to him. Bonhoeffer's theology, as outlined in the letters he wrote to his friend Eberhard Bethge, emphasizes "the world coming of age".[9] This was the idea that Western Europe is no longer Christendom; it has become "religionless." Religion for Bonhoeffer is a human invention for controlling God. A "religionless" Christianity is not one therefore that spurns worship, prayer, the evangel or the martyr, yet neither is it centered on the bland acculturation of the faith that the Enlightenment created. As the world comes of age, Christian maturity is found in turning from a childlike dependence on merely functional religion; however, this is not to say that the world has achieved spiritual maturity. Bonhoeffer is

[9] See *Letters and Papers from Prison*, pp. 324-329. The specific letter is dated 8 June 1944.

offering a critique of the church—rejecting an infantile religion while not yet prophesying its replacement. He does however, envision small groups of believers living in community, but without any guarantee everything will work out well. For the uncomprehending Clemo, the Nazis no longer held a childlike faith: instead they exhibited "the shame / of man's coming of age." Unable to detect this subtle critique of childish religion, Clemo sees Bonhoeffer as momentarily losing sight of orthodoxy: "The true Cross turned crooked under pressure:" He

> Saw a Cross that meant mere crumpled deity,
> A heaven that knew only secular service
> From the adult nature's autonomy. (DD 49)

As Rowan Williams says about this poem, "Ultimately, Clemo's reading is of a very classically Calvinist character; this is a narrative of exemplary testing for faith" (202). Though Clemo has Bonhoeffer lose his theological way in prison, at the end of the poem, with "the last plank straight again," an "infinite mercy . . . annulled for him the blind probe." The implication is that Bonhoeffer found his way back to orthodoxy through the acceptance of his death.

If Clemo seems clumsily naïve in his handling of Bonhoeffer, he is overtly hostile towards Simone Weil. In his poem, entitled "Simone Weil" (ET 24), he describes her as an "intruder" at the farm where she came to work, "sibylline and sinister."[10] He is offended by what he sees as her pagan

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[10] Out of her desire to more closely identify with the life of the French peasant, Weil went to work on the farm of Gustave Thibon (Thibon 4).

affinities. “A Greek prayer is forced out, groping and sour”: an alien kind of prayer for Clemo. It is an affront to Clemo that Weil was willing, while profoundly drawn to Christianity, to seek God outside its confines:

> Too proud to take Abraham’s root
> As a pledge of a redemptive whole,
> Her spurious breadth sucks at a pagan thorn,
> Slighting the Hebrew Virgin, the elect fruit.

Perhaps most repugnant of all to Clemo is her radical denial of the body’s need for nourishment:

> She wrenches at a vine-bough, her mind gabbles on:
> ‘Starvation is the true bread:
> Give us this day our
> Daily starvation till the soul itself is dead.’

Weil was trying so fully to identify with the peasants of France that she denied herself any more food than they were furnished. Rather than seeing her bodily self-denial as an imitation of Christ, Clemo sees it as the rejection of Christ: “Slave-cast in her mystic dramas / Aloof from the convert’s exaltation.” Clemo sees Weil as caught up in a woolly mysticism that revolves around her own ego—proof of which is her insistence on suffering. As Clemo has consistently held, the authentic convert embraces joy: “there is a truer revelation of God in the least happiness than in years of misery.” An ascetic stance is not genuine surrender to the “God who ‘giveth us richly all things to enjoy’”(MOR 82).

Against Clemo’s charge of heresy, Weil could reply by offering her definition of heresy, which is a speculation that “diminishes the reality of

divine things by covering them over with an apparent reconciliation of the contradictions constituting their mystery" (*La connaissance surnaturelle* 81, qtd. in Nevin 437). Ironically, Clemo may commit this very heresy in his reading of her. Weil did refuse to be baptized despite her love of Catholicism, and she was interested in and honored other religions, believing they could also be a path to God. In this regard, Clemo is accurate; however, she did not actually fight during the Spanish Civil War as he intimates. Regardless, when Clemo describes Weil as "Tragic as a strutting Nazi" he gets things radically wrong. Weil may be heretical in Clemo's eyes, and tragic to many others, but to equate her with the Nazis' is excessive.[11] Clemo ignores the subtlety of her self-denial, unwilling to grapple with the complexity of Simone Weil's life and witness. It may be that Clemo sees Weil through the lens of his own fears and temptations, or as Holland would frame it, her life directly challenges his defense strategy. In his eyes, she gave herself over to ego-driven mysticism, dangerously flirted with paganism, embraced asceticism and a life of suffering, and she was celibate—Weil seems, in short, the shadow self that Clemo rejected.

In contrast to his virtual contempt for Simone Weil, Clemo discerns the theologian, writer, and academic C. S. Lewis as sharing his vocation. In "Link at Oxford," Clemo salutes Lewis as an apologist who names

[11] It is interesting to note that while Clemo could not tolerate religious indiscretion he never treated sexual unorthodoxy in the same harsh way. See poems on Cardoc Evans (DD 14) and Holman Hunt (DD 24).

"wholeness in a sick climate" (ATM 30). It is noteworthy that Clemo here identifies himself with Lewis in a poetic act of self-validation:

> My harvest, too, is in libraries,
> But rough-edged, elemental, prompted
> By the long caress, the brief withdrawal,
> Divine or feminine, never academic.
> 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. (ATM 30)

Clemo points out the stark contrast with Lewis in circumstance, temperament and literary style, but notes also that such differences actually intensify their shared vocation. "Naming wholeness," witnessing to the gospel of Jesus in a sinful world, is not an individual's choice but a sign of election, a calling from God. Lewis was a "true poet," but he was a romantic rather than a primitive, so though Clemo felt validated by their shared vision, "a sense of loneliness remained" (IG 77).

"In The Kilns (to C. S. Lewis)" concerns the home Lewis occupied near Oxford from 1929 to 1963. Clemo notes with compassion that it was here that Lewis's wife, Joy Davidman, finally succumbed to cancer: "Joy limped up these stairs / And a final anguish shook the walls" (ATM 48). While visiting the house Clemo acknowledges the "scorching irony" of the name of the house, for a kiln was also ubiquitous in his china clay country, with its "steam, bubbling clay, / Thick suffocating dust that muffled rails / Where a tank-waggon vomited." Unlike Lewis's late struggle with belief following Davidman's death, Clemo's own battle is a distant memory, for there is "Not

a trace / Of its truth in my wedded life. I salute / Your faith's hard test, but I am past my furnace." Clemo admires the gardens at the Kiln's, as well as Lewis's writings, his marriage, and his faith. Without sentimentality or nostalgia he acknowledges the debt he owes Lewis, one of the most prominent authors in Clemo's list of influential writers: "Here were the springs that fed me / Parched for hope amid sullen kilns." The fact that Clemo is visiting with his wife Ruth "Assures me that your blithe wisdom / Rides now unwounded: Joy still hunts / For surprises, teasing after the grave sting" (ATM 48).[12] Clemo's marriage was the final fulfillment of his vocation, and Ruth often shows up in his later poems as the testament of faith justified.

While Clemo gracefully pays homage to Lewis, he offers a slightly petulant testament of his own survival and conversion to his cousin the Cornish novelist and Methodist minister Joseph Hocking. "In Testament (To Joseph Hocking)" there is a trace of defiance deriving from the Hockings' failure to help the Clemos during Jack's early period as an unpublished writer. Clemo recounts his difficult childhood with an almost melodramatic flair, reminding Hocking that

> Brute tools broke me in the riding stillness
> Of infancy, then the loping wagons,
> Glum and fast on the drummed tracks,
> Woke me each morning, along with the brayed
> Or shrieked summons of engine-house sirens. (BA 26)

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[12] Clemo is likely playing on the double meaning of Joy both as Lewis's wife and the subject of Lewis's spiritual autobiography about his conversion, *Surprised by Joy*.

Under such harsh circumstances, he asks, "How could I take the sleek service / And the tidy text?" The line could be taken as Clemo deriding Hocking's ministry and his popular novels or as a declaration that Clemo's environment molded his "Knox-souled and Burns-hearted" temperament with vastly different results.

> My boyhood's dream crossed a mineral stage
> Without lark's song or bowing myrtle,
> But always with an unbegreyed
> Gesture apprehended, God's and woman's
> Blood-leap—not in your mild pattern
> Of the clean sheet and Victorian climate,
> But storming to my unwritten page,
> Anguished for all the lost Edens.

A more nuanced answer incorporates both interpretations as accurate.

Clemo's article for the *Cornish Review* on the Hockings (Silas was the other brother) also reflects his ambiguity towards his cousins. For while they were "able and earnest" they lacked the "genuine Celtic spirit"; though their novels were "written with an integrity and sincerity," their work was "superficial." Finally, he says of Joseph that though he came closest to being "the ideal of the Christian rebel in the literary world" his failure to realize the complexity of the role was likely "because in his youth he did not, and could not, receive the piercing message of the clay-lands" (Hockings 56-57). The implied contrast is that Clemo, of course, with his utter embrace of earthy Cornwall and his rebel pedigree, understood that message. Though an air of superiority creeps into the poem, the term "pulp Methodism" has

been used to describe the Hocking's novels and their Wesleyan faith.[13] Clemo ends his testimony on a note of triumph—a triumph that makes no mention of his own literary accomplishments but focuses on his loving marriage as the mark of success.

> My dream drained slowly to the blown tress
> And the waking unscourged fingers: wave after wave
> Of pleasure would interpret
> My opened wealth. So there came to your parish
> What old defiant Knox found in Margaret,
> What Burns sought with tears at Mary's grave. (BA 26)

Marjorie Bowes became John Knox's faithful wife, and Mary Campbell was purported to be Robert Burns' betrothed who died before they could make a life together. Clemo imagines theses loves to have been "beyond the Fall" or redeemed by Christ and thus like his own marriage to Ruth.

Even when Clemo is dealing with personal figures of immense influence, such as John Knox, he sometimes leaves them behind, often producing poor poetry. Though "Harpoon" (to John Knox)" was chosen to be included in *Selected Poems* issued by Bloodaxe in 1988, the poem does not work as a whole primarily because the central image, a white whale, has little to do with Knox or Clemo: rather, it leaves the reader conjuring up images of Moby Dick.[14]

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[13] See Alan Kent's *Pulp Methodism: The Lives and Literature of Silas, Joseph and Salome Hocking.*

[14] While there is no link between John Knox and whaling, Clemo knew Herman Melville's novel. The book opens with Father Mapple's famous Calvinist sermon, thus making (at least in Clemo's mind) a link between Knox and whales.

> Knox, it was from your seal-sleek,
> Eagle-clawed coast that the harpoon winged,
> Stilling my fabulous white whale,
> Sperm-taut with its spout and plume
> Of hot texts, your texts, that scalded
> Cool modern currents and shook the minstrel winds
> Over untrafficked straits of my clay. (ET 28)

The poem continues, accurately and lyrically touching upon the watershed moments in Knox's life: his marriage to Marjorie Bowes, the skirmishes with Mary, Queen of Scots, his time at Berwick and the exile in Geneva, and his experience as a French galley slave, during which he is reputed to have thrown a picture of the Virgin Mary overboard (Kyle and Johnson): "You cast away the only grace of colour, / Beauty, charm, for your dour creed's sake." Clemo wonders: "Is this a truth for me, for my harpooned / White whale of vision, speared beyond youth?" For though he "cast off" idolatrous beauty, it was never an "image of living face or limb / That spurred my white whale to warmer waters." The question Clemo asks is not clear, as the reader wonders whether a comparison to Starbuck might be forthcoming. Yet the final lines are expressive and rich, though they are still not sufficient to rescue the poem:

> The undying texts again plume and spiral,
> And my fantastic inner fable
> Reshapes in wholeness at a new mouth.

An allusion to Ruth ends the poem, the "new mouth" being hers rather than the mouth of the harbor where Clemo's whale was harpooned. As in the two

previous poems, Ruth is the ultimate vindication of Clemo's faith in his divine calling.

In the much more successful "Genevan Towers," Clemo makes John Calvin human and accessible by showing him through the eyes of his wife, Idelette de Bure.[15] The poem begins in the early morning: "Earth-hallowed scents of vines and fruit-trees / Teeming on the lake breeze at the bedroom window" are within sight of the towers of St. Pierre Cathedral, "austere and lovely," where Calvin preached in Geneva from 1536 to 1564 (ET 4-5). The tension between sensual language and cold, hard ideas is maintained adroitly throughout the poem:

> He stands with Idelette, soberly domestic:
> No stirring of romance even in the flare
> Of dawn on Jura flanks or Alpine moonrise.
> His mind builds, subtle and massive, in the deep
> Beds of the Word, texts folding on life,
> The bare mystery erected.

Clemo's reading of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* in erotic terms is an accomplishment that perhaps only Clemo could offer. Poetically, his pairing of Calvinism and sexuality surpasses "A Calvinist in Love" as there is an absolute economy of word and yet a greater depth of feeling.

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[15] Calvin's commentary on Ephesians 5:28-33 express his views on marriage: "God has ordained marriage in order that two may be made one person—a result which, certainly, no other alliance can bring about. When Moses says that a man shall leave father and mother and cleave unto his wife, he shows that a man ought to prefer marriage to every other union, as being the holiest of all. It reflects our union with Christ, who infuses his very life unto us; for we are flesh of his flesh, and bone of his bone. This is a great mystery, the dignity of which cannot be expressed in words" (Schaff, sec. 92). However, Calvin was in no hurry to marry, and it was his followers who recommend Idelette, a widow with children, as a suitable wife.

In the year when Calvin and Idelette were married, a stone bridge was built to link St. Gervais with Geneva, replacing the existing wooden one. The narrator reminds his readers these are the "enduring structures, spirit's bond, stone bridge." And, of course, Calvin's creed, which though "Less romantic, less prone to rot," is no less sensual and satisfying to Clemo, as the fifth and final stanza returns to the bedroom:

> He caresses Idelette, this target of Rome's
> Rage, this sharp lean scholar, known to her
> As a tender husband (and their only child has died).
> She sighs at the open window, aware
> That perverse storms will twist his towering arches
> As they spread across Europe, that the man she loves
> Will be obscured to future ages
> Because he built with cold offensive stone,
> Scarring men's pride, and because he burnt rotten bridges—
> And because her soft towers, warming his manhood, stayed
> (As she guesses) hardly a decade.

The poem begins with the towers of St. Pierre Cathedral and ends with the "soft towers" of Idelette's breasts—an explicit sexual image, but one expressing warmth, tenderness, and comfort, which seemed to be characteristic of their marriage.

The father of the Reformation, Martin Luther, also appears in Clemo's poetic gallery, but like Calvin, he is present thanks only to his wife. Katherine von Bora was one of nine nuns who left their convent at Nimptsh under the influence of Luther's preaching. She later married Luther, according to Clemo, only "Because Melanchthon urged you to choose me" (ET 49). "Katharine Luther" is a dramatic monologue given by the subject on the

evening of her husband's fiftieth birthday. It is a warm and personal poem, though four of its five stanzas focus on Luther's life history.

Katherine gives her own testimony by affirming Clemo's vision of Christian marriage: "Yet love grew personal, Martin, it went deeper / Because it served faith and not appetite." The final stanza focuses on their marriage and its emblem, the betrothal ring:

> Few people guessed why my wedding ring
> Was embossed with emblems of that Death you preach.[16]
> The sun's eclipse, the thorn-barbs, spear,
> Nail-pocked wood in the earth's quake and swell—
> These Passion-signs were drawn within
> The bond of our blood. This ring—see,
> It's my stigmata, meaning death of a sort,
> Heralding a new order of sainthood:
> Death within which I bear you children
> And the golden caress blooms in the grey cell. (ET 49)

Whereas Clemo characterizes her early monastic life as "barren" (ET 49), her life with Martin attests to a new idea of "sainthood" than her previous one—bearing Martin six children, welcoming orphans and students, nursing him in his often ill health, and running a successful and complex household (Bainton 226-237).

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[16] The ring that Luther gave her was a complex work of art depicting the Passion: "In the center is the crucified Savior: on one side the spear, with which the side was pierced, and the rod of reeds of the flagellation. On the other is a leaf of hyssop. Beneath are the dies with which the soldiers cast lots for the garment without seam, and below are the three nails. At the back may be distinguished the inside of the ladder, and other symbols connected with the last act of the Atonement; the whole so grouped as to make a large cross, surmounted by the ruby, the most salient feature of the device" (H. Noel Humphrey (*Intellectual Observer,* February 1862) qtd. in Jones 484).

In the only poem specifically devoted to the founder of Methodism, "John Wesley" recalls the life of the preacher/reformer in six ten-lined rhymed stanzas conveying Wesley's emotional experiences, mostly focusing on his unfulfilled romantic life and unhappy marriage.

> Of his poignant pilgrimage –
> More poignant than an artist's,
> For a grace was brought
> Deeper than art probes. The baptism
> Of lovers' tears at Stanton,
> Savannah, Leeds, lit and softened
> His hymn of crucifixion. (BA 28-29)

"Stanton" refers to Wesley's first love, Betty Kirkham, whose father was rector at Stanton. Wesley's unfortunate missionary trip to America was headquartered at Savannah, Georgia, where he became enamored of Miss Sophia Hopkey, only to be charged with jilting her by breaking off the engagement. Many have argued that Grace Murray was the love of his life, but at the urging of Charles Wesley she married another. John Wesley was given this sad news in Leeds. He eventually married Molly Vazeille, who was, by many accounts, an unpleasant woman. Clemo describes her as a shrew and Wesley as thus enduring "conjugal horrors." In reading this poem it seems that Wesley's main contribution to Clemo's vision is to serve as a cautionary tale against a bad marriage.

Such a litany of failed loves hardly seems an appropriate acknowledgment of Wesley's impact on Clemo's religious life. That recognition is scattered throughout other poems, however, such as "A Night

in Soho" (BA 34), a poem about John Donne. Here Clemo makes reference to his early religious calling as coming from the "Wesleyan cell." In "The Harassed Preacher" he imagines congregants of the past taking "Fresh shape in Wesley's air" (BA 30-31). And, in one of his later poems, Clemo reflects "On the Prospect of Leaving My Birthplace":

> My roots are in my soul's Jerusalem,
> Which has appeared in many forms
> Of the warmed heart: Wimpole Street, Aldersgate Street,
> Spurgeon's Tabernacle, Bernadette's shrine,
> The Brownings' Florence and Barth's Safenwil. (ATM 20)

The "warmed heart" is a reference to John Wesley's celebrated conversion experience, which occurred in an Aldersgate Street chapel in London.[17] Clemo's widely distributed and almost casual references to Wesley testify to the pervasive influence he had on Clemo's own faith, which is not surprising given his devout Methodist mother. Wesley shows up repeatedly (as does Barth, Calvin, the Brontës, St. Bernadette and, above all, the Brownings) because he is often on Clemo's mind.[18]

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[17] From *The Journal of John Wesley*, May 24, 1738: "In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while the leader was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death" (*Christian Classics Ethereal Library*).

[18] It is worth pointing out Clemo's recurring pattern of closely associating a physical location with his poetic personages. Clemo is very much a landscape poet, with almost all of his poems making a connection to a place in one way or another (see Stephen John Lane's aptly named dissertation "Jack Clemo: Cartographer of Grace," 1989). However, in later poems Clemo simply names a place to invoke a person or experience, a tactic that can be problematic for a reader unfamiliar with either Clemo's life or the history of his subject.

Clemo did not look only to Protestants as he worked out his vocation. His many poems about Catholics have been virtually unacknowledged by critics. In the poem "Jean Pierre de Caussade" Clemo makes a comparison between himself, for example, and a French Catholic Jesuit who died in 1751. De Caussade was the spiritual director to the Nuns of the Visitation at Nancy, but he is best remembered for *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, in which he articulates his belief that self-abandonment to the present moment and its needs can constitute a holy state of being (Foster xiii-xiv). Clemo notes that no one knew of de Caussade's acute theological insights for a century after his death.[19]

In the first stanza, Clemo recounts de Caussade's life-story, bringing the reader into de Caussade's seventh decade. Having become blind, de Caussade "Groped for candles and the holy cup" at the Jesuit house in Toulouse, where he was director of theological students. Clemo thus begins the second stanza: "Age and the quenched rainbow set me / Near him," since he wrote the poem in his later years. He acknowledges a sense of kinship with the monastic: "I am rare, for I stress prayer / And, like Jean-Pierre, know the purged soul's delights." Yet as with all his Catholic subjects, Clemo firmly rejects celibacy or any other kind of bodily asceticism. He also rejects de Caussade's central thesis in *Abandonment to Divine Providence,* for "my

[19] De Caussade's notes and letters to the sisters were lovingly preserved and circulated during this time, and kept underground for fear a casual reader might charge the Jesuit with being a Quietist (Foster xv).

human probe / Flared far from his placid theory." Clemo thus can only partially affirm de Caussade's spiritual direction:

> But the ties, the tides, the tidings do not tally.
> The ascetic hint from uncomfortable mists
> Seems a scurrilous thorn to me, chiding my praise
> For a secure day's
> Teeming caress and the sea-foam on her hair.

This wonderfully musical stanza sings with effective alliteration and a deceptively simple, sensuous ending that brings the reader unexpectedly into an intimate moment. With economy Clemo persuasively shares the experience of spiritual warmth and bodily tenderness as an alternative to the ascetic life.

In a less intimate poem simply titled "Newman," Clemo muses on the English Catholic cardinal and author John Henry Newman who was a key figure in the Oxford Movement, which sought a renewal of "catholic" thought within the Church of England in the early 19th century. Clemo begins the first of three short stanzas as follows:

> Too stagnant in Bonifacio's
> Strait for that rapier mind!
> . . . .
> The sick priest paced the deck, watched a distant
> Shore-light at night. What light could be kind
> Which did not lead him further? (CA 26)

The reader would have to be familiar with Newman and the fact that he authored what came to be known as the hymn "Lead, kindly Light" to fully appreciate the poem. Always interested in the details, Clemo recounts Newman's journey home from Sicily through the strait of Bonifacio (between

Corsica and Sardinia) after recovering from a serious illness. In the strait, the boat was becalmed for a week, and the restless Newman wrote what became a popular hymn.[20] Clemo also remarks on Newman's struggles with church discipline: "He was led on by a higher gleam, / But always as a sad exile, / A misfit, target of Church storms" (CA 26). Clemo had identified himself as a misfit and exile of sorts from modern Protestantism, and so he would be sympathetic to Newman's following his own path despite the personal cost.

Though Clemo was a conservative evangelical in dogma, he was no sectarian, as is demonstrated by "Reception," a poem celebrating Pope John-Paul II's visit to England in 1982. As "a golden ray / Spreads from basilicas, " striking even Clemo's cottage, he also feels "there's a welcoming harp / in Knox's citadel" (ATM 43). Clemo explains:

> My roof stays simple, close to Billy Bray,
> But I called him a St. Francis, and I share,
> In this half-foreign light, the rare
> Heart's leap where crossed Whit winds have blown.

Billy Bray was an early 19th century Cornish tin-miner and evangelist whom Clemo admired, and who in "After Billy Bray" Clemo associated with the image of a Franciscan feast day. "Whit" refers to the Pentecostal season known as Whitsuntide, and also perhaps the homily on the "Solemnity of Pentecost" that the Pope gave in Coventry on May 30, 1982, during his

[20] Originally titled "The Pillar of the Cloud," Newman wrote it as a poem on June 16, 1833 (Elder *Newman Reader*).

apostolic journey to Great Britain.[21] The "Whit winds" would be the Holy Spirit, and the "Heart's leap" is the answer to the Pentecostal power that binds Bray, St. Francis, John Paul II and Clemo together.

Clemo mentions Billy Bray with warmth and respect often in *Confession of a Rebel*, *Marriage of a Rebel*, and his Christian manifesto, *The Invading Gospel*. Bray was a local product, an illiterate tin-miner born in 1794 in Twelveheads, a town located near Clemo's birthplace of Goonamarris. After reading Bunyan, Bray gave up his drunkard's life and began to preach in the local Bible Christian chapels.[22] Bray was exuberant, often leaping and shouting his joy, as Clemo illustrates in "After Billy Bray": " 'Life and death have lost their sting: / Picked for heaven (Hallelujah!), / I'm a King's son and I will sing' " (ET 50). Spurgeon devoted a chapter to him in *Eccentric Preachers* entitled "Billy Bray, The Uneducated Soul-winner," mentioning that he "could not tolerate 'deadness,' as he expressively called it, whether in a professing Christian or in a meeting" (213). The poems immediacy is accomplished through vivid, sensory, deeply felt details, as Clemo brings the reader to participate in Clemo's quiet toned rejection of Bray's followers for abandoning his Pentecostal vitality for academic deadness.

> I sensed the advance beyond his Kingdom,
> The subtle strut without the song:
> Our gay Franciscan feast was ended;

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[21] Bishops' Conference of England and Wales*, Pope John Paul II's Pastoral Visit to Britain.*

[22] Clemo's boyhood church, Trethosa Chapel, belongs to this small denomination.

The enquiring mind had proved it wrong.
I felt the bristle, I was betrayed
In the new rising of a sunless search.

The "sunless" search could also be "son-less," as Clemo finds the modern church had abandoned Christ for its own arid theology. The encroaching religious tide of Protestant Liberalism forces Clemo back to his claytips, his church of refuge:

The owls, the rooks, the chilly light
Drove me up to the clay perch
Where I fashioned the mystic's answer,
Blent Haworth, Geneva, Lourdes
With the lost song of the Cornish miner,
And found my poet-world restored. (ET 50)

By way of the Brontës (Haworth), Calvin (Geneva), and St. Bernadette (Lourdes), Billy Bray's unapologetically vivid faith renews Clemo's own.

Theses poems may finally become Clemo's most enduring works, for they are poems in which Clemo's art is most fully fused with his message. He was himself a poetic preacher and theologian; an artist who would not have written at all, or else written badly, apart form his theology and his desire to proclaim it, and apart from the community he was able to construct through poetry.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

The attempt to understand private experience and make it publicly available was far from easy: the more interesting the writer, the more individual and troubled his gropings toward the meaning of his life.

Leopold Damrosch: *God's Plot & Man's Stories*

I have demonstrated that Jack Clemo's twin vocation to evangelical poetry and erotic Christian marriage frames the subjects of his dramatic monologues and portrait poems, and that, in turn, these subjects create a personal literary context that both reflects and transforms his pursuit of his divine calling. Clemo's drive to fulfill his dual vocation structures his poems on historical figures, saving them from being merely a collection of sentimental remembrances and tendentious moralizings. His portraits of actual personages also provide concrete expression of Clemo's evangelical message of the "good news" and the redemptive possibilities of a Christ-centered marriage. Moreover, these figures, whether they affirmed, challenged, or revised Clemo's vision, offered the poet a way to interact with the world.

This essay has been deliberately modest, as I acknowledge that I have not dealt with the whole of Clemo's oeuvre. However I have sought to establish the importance of Jack Clemo as a minor poet to be reckoned with rather than forgotten. There are many published poets who quickly fall into oblivion, and Clemo could be in danger of such a fate. His volume of *Selected*

Poetry (1988), one that would be the most accessible introduction to his work, has gone out of print. Donald Davie helps explain such regrettable inattention to evangelical poets such as Clemo. He argues that English aesthetics are almost exclusively devoted to the Anglican tradition, while Nonconformity has been hugely overlooked. Art curator Alan Bowness commented on the primitive painter Alfred Wallis in ways that could also apply to Clemo:

> [Wallis] was not an isolated and eccentric figure, but someone who was every bit as necessary to English painters as the Douanier [Henri] Rousseau was necessary to Picasso and his friends. When art reaches an over-sophisticated stage, someone who can paint out of his experience with an unsullied and intense personal vision becomes of inestimable value. (Bowness)

Just as Davie sought to reclaim John Wesley and Isaac Watts for the English canonical tradition, so have I endeavored to reclaim Jack Clemo.

I have sought to address a new kind of audience by opening up a much underestimated and therefore much neglected aspect of his poetry that I think is key to his work. The "character sketches" as he calls them best put into relief Clemo's vocation as "priest and lover," the twin callings that inform and undergird the vast majority of his poetry. By grouping his poetic assessment of actual people into the categories of artists and writers, saints and missionaries, and theologians and preachers, I have helped to sharpen the focus on the tensions between being a poet and a Christian, his belief in "creedal marriage" as the fullest expression of the Christian life, and his evangelical message. I have tried to enlarge the understanding of Clemo as

someone far more than a regional poet whose work is remarkable chiefly for overcoming his disabilities or as a mere example of a working-class poet with no larger significance.

This reclamation project places Clemo's poetry within a much larger tradition. Considering how Clemo's spiritual vocation shapes and is shaped by the poems touching on historical figures suggests these portrait poems fit into a larger story theologically and historically. It is in narrating the lives of the heroic or often obscure figures within the church and culture alike, usually by others, that Christians often sustain their faith. Christianity is a personal faith witnessed by and embodied in historical figures, not in doctrines alone. It is a communal religion at its core, and the way it is communicated is largely through biographical example, stories or poems, which recount acts of remarkable witness—or else offer critiques of those who failed to fully embrace the faith. Clemo is not a hagiographer; his tough-mindedness guards against such sentimentality, even though he is clearly seeing these figures through his own lenses. Clemo was unconsciously doing what James McClendon would call "Biography as Theology." According to McClendon "the lives of our saints significantly participate in the life of Christ; telling their stories is a part of telling *that* story" (McClendon 201). And telling how God has made a transforming difference in his life and the lives of others was Clemo's evangelical mission.

Clemo intentionally crafted his poetic dramatizations and portraits as commentaries upon the ideas and beliefs by which their subjects lived, whether for better or for worse. McClendon argues that by recognizing that the "convictions" by which we live create the contours of actual lives, "we open ourselves to the possibility that the only relevant critical examination of Christian beliefs may be one which begins by attending to lived lives" (37). Clemo is not engaging in biography, not in any real sense of the word, in his poems. They are more in the nature of testimonials that confirm either by affirmation or negation his own vocational convictions, and they thus are part of his larger work that constitutes his spiritual autobiography. James Olney's statement that autobiography is as "at once a discovery, a creation, and an imitation of the self" seems an apt description of the impetus behind Clemo's poetry of tribute and critique (19). According to the critic Steven Kepnes, Martin Buber would argue that the stories we tell about each other or ourselves ultimately serve "to awaken the tellings of others. Our telling is a cry, a search [. . . .] What we seek is not a repetition of our own story but the rejoining voice of another's story, a different story" (Kepnes 114).[1] Given his disabilities, the written word was Clemo's only way of entering into dialog with others.

[1] This claim deeply resonates with Martin Buber's relational view of the self. "For the inmost growth of the self is not accomplished, as people like to suppose today, in man's relation to himself, but in the relation between the one and the other [. . .] together with the mutuality of acceptance, of affirmation and confirmation" ("Distance and Relation" 71).

Clemo's grappling with these historical figures was certainly self-oriented. These poems were written as a dialog about his very personal concerns with what it meant to be a Christian poet and lover. Holland's theory of self-replication can shed light on some of the psychological processes at work in Clemo's poetry as he comments on their work and their lives. But in fact Clemo was not merely finding himself mirrored in a text—he was looking to place himself within a larger community. At his best, Clemo can be said to transcend his merely personal concerns and to compel his readers to make their own engagement with his various historical figures.

At his worst, Clemo keeps returning to his own self-centered world time and again, and sometimes the result is poor poetry. I have noted when the poet's voice, either in the first person or third person becomes intrusive, as is blatantly the case in "Beyond Lourdes" or less problematically in "Henry Martyn." Regarding the self-centered nature of his poems, Davie comments: "How could it be otherwise? Since physical circumstance and historical accident have placed Clemo in a universe so special that hardly anyone shares it with him, how could he not put himself at the center of it?" (*Dissentient* 54). While Davie is correct, it is nonetheless true that Clemo has demonstrated a balance of personal experience and universal insight in his better poems, such as "Genevan Towers" or "Mould of Castile." Hence the need for a critical approach that acknowledges and criticizes the imaginative imbalances, inconsistencies, and unresolved conflicts in his work.

One corollary of being self-centered is being too privately self-referential, resulting in the need to clarify the poetic allusions if the reader is to have more than a casual understanding of some of Clemo's poems. The emotional and spiritual impact Clemo wishes to evoke solely by reference to a place name is lost if one does not recognize the connection between the place and the person. Indeed, there are more than a few poems where this is the case; however, in the breadth of poems I have considered, this is the exception rather than the rule.

> The wonder and the achievement is that Jack Clemo has so seldom succumbed to that temptation; that, representing as he does a sort of experience so far from the mainstream of English culture in our time, he has so often found a form of words to communicate that experience to the majority who find that experience foreign (Davie, *Lecture, 10).*

Some of Clemo's poems would need footnotes simply because Biblical literacy can no longer be taken for granted. Also, some additional information would be necessary for the more obscure historical figures Clemo has written about: Alfred Wallis, for example.

Theologically, Clemo can be criticized for granting marriage salvific significance and power. Clemo the evangelical Protestant effectively turns it into a sacrament. As a further instance of seemingly theological confusion, he seems self-contradictory in elevating the Virgin Mary, as the ultimate Christian and co-redemptrix with Christ, so that she becomes his feminine ideal. Clemo was not unconsciously moving towards Catholicism; these

illustrations only highlight the rather eclectic and personal nature of his theology—a subject that merits closer and fuller attention.

There are many areas I have consciously not explored in this paper, though I have opened them up for further inquiry. Most critical considerations of Clemo have explored his work as landscape poetry; the next step might be answering how he challenges, affirms, or revises the English pastoral tradition. Clemo's work begs further examination from those interested in poetry as theology and/or theopoetics. I have certainly only touched on the possibilities of narrative theology here. Those interested in disability studies in literature might consider not only the poems in themselves but the actual production of the poem by a blind and deaf writer. The influences of the Cornish dialect and culture on Clemo's poetry, particularly as he does not knowingly embrace his Cornishness, would be an area for study. Comparative studies with R. S. Thomas, T.F. Powys or John Betjeman would also be illuminating. The potential scholarship deriving from the study of Clemo's work by cultural, social, and psychoanalytic theorists is too rich to list; suffice it to say that his relationship with his parents, or the fact that he is an autodidact, could be the basis for entire books. His relationship with the Brownings is the most obvious area for future exploration. One of the most fertile areas of continuing study concerns Clemo's melding of sexuality, eroticism, and Christianity. What does Clemo add to the current conversation on a theology of *eros*?

Donald Davie offers the remarkable claim that "we need to discard an assumption, now I fear very common, that when a poet draws on Scripture he ceases to be a poet and becomes a preacher or an evangelist" (Davie *Lecture* 4). Clemo's poetry is only enhanced by his reliance on Scripture and his desire to proclaim the Gospel. Far from making Clemo into a mere preacher or evangelist, he became all the better poet for being steeped in biblical language and formed by biblical preaching. Clemo remained faithful to his religious vision through writing poetry of literary interest and spiritual discovery. As both "priest and lover," Clemo offers perhaps his arresting testimony to this union of faith and art in "Broad Autumn":

> True faith matures without discarding:
> . . . .
> I have not changed my country;
> I have grown and explored
> In my faith's undivided world.
>
> I discard no primal certainty, no rasped
> Sky-sign of the Cross;
> But now in broad autumn, feeling a new peace
> And the old poise of defence,
> I accept the pure trysting lochs,
> The full antlers in the glens.

The path he travelled during his lifetime was unthinkably remote from ours, but "it may well be because of this different pathway that his poetry contains much of lasting value and much that challenges the inbuilt and often unconscious assumptions of our time" (Lane, *Poets,* 6). While he addresses almost entirely Christian themes in his personal poems, he wrestles with

questions of faith and doubt in such a fashion as to give this work enduring appeal.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

The Excavator

I stand here musing in the rain
This Sabbath evening where the pit-head stain
Of bushes is uprooted, strewn
In waggon-tracks and puddles,
While the fleering downpour fuddles
The few raw flowers along the mouldering dump
Ridge hollowed and rough-hewn
By the daily grind and thump
Of this grim excavator. It shields me
From lateral rain-gusts, its square body turned
To storm-lashed precipices it has churned.

I feel exultantly
The drip of clayey water from the poised
Still bar above me; thrilling with the rite
Of baptism all my own,
Acknowledging the might
Of God's great arm alone;
Needing no ritual voiced
In speech or earthly idiom to draw
My soul to His new law.

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.
This too has power to worm
The entrails from a flint, bearing the scoop
With every searching swoop:
That broken-mouthed gargoyle
Whose iron jaws bite the soil,
Snapping with sadist kisses in the soft
White breasts of rock, and ripping the sleek belly
Of sprawling clay-mounds, lifting as pounded jelly
Flower-roots and bush-tufts with the reeking sand.

I fondle and understand
In lonely worship this malicious tool.

Yes, this is Christian art
To me men could not school
With delicate aesthetes. Their symbols oft
Tempt simple souls like me
Whom Nature meant to seal
With doom of poetry,
And dowered with eye and brain
Sensitive to the stain
Of Beauty and the grace of man's Ideal.
But I have pressed my way
Past all their barren play
Of intellect, adulthood, the refined
Progressive sickness of the mind
Which throws up hues and shapes alien to God's
Way with a man in a stripped clay desert.
Now I am a child again,
With a child's derision of the mentors' rods
And a child's quick pain,
Loving to stand as now in outlawed glee
Amid the squelching mud and make a vow
With joy no priest or poet takes from me.

I cannot speak their language; I am one
Who feels the doggerel of Heaven
Purge earth of poetry; God's foolishness
Laugh through the web man's ripening wisdom spun;
The world's whole culture riven
By moody excavations Love shall bless.

All staining rhythms of Art and Nature break
Within my mind, turn grey, grow truth
Rigid and ominous as this engine's tooth.
And so I am awake:
No more a man who sees
Colour in flowers or hears from birds a song,
Or dares to worship where the throng
Seek Beauty and its old idolatries.
No altar soils my vision with a lax
Adult appeal to sense,
Or festering harmonies' magniloquence.
My faith and symbol shall be stark.

My hand upon these caterpillar-tracks
Bogged in the mud and clay, I find it easier to pray:
'"Keep far from me all loveliness, 0 God,
And let me laud
Thy meaner moods, so long unprized;
The motions of that twisted, dark,
Deliberate crucial Will
I feel deep-grinding still
Under the dripping clay with which I am baptised."

APPENDIX B

Prologue: Cornish Anchorite

Deep in the clay-land winter lies my brain,
All faculties that human growth could stain
Dissolved to weedless nescience: here is soil
No poet's pen can scratch, no culture's light despoil.
This vein beyond sap's reach
Teems with no beauties that can teach
My senses mortal joy or mortal pain.
I am exempt at last,
In Dogma's fold till Nature's rhythm be overpast.
I feel a truth the ironic Word has sown,
Truth that draws fibre of human knowledge back
To grey agnostic bone,
Breaks down the nerve of natural piety
To its foul core, turns slack
The muscle of bold self-sufficiency,
And lets the once proud clay
In dumb humility decay.
There is no worship here, only the worm I call
Original sin, and fire of the Fall.
Worm and fire at my roots, how should I know
Your sunshine, song of your birds, you poet brood?
How should I share your pagan glow?
I am beyond your seasons: food
For these is in your blood but not in me.
I lapse from Nature towards a birth
Of Heaven's fertility
That blasphemes Spring upon your earth.

APPENDIX C

Epilogue: Priest Out of Bondage

Dark, mutinous land: I shared
Its moods through my dead youth, but I am spared
To wake and live and know it a husk and tetter
Which faith and sunrise peel from my soul.
I slip with every other fetter
The Cornish bond, for I must be whole
Within the eternal Moment, and have no root
In soil or race, in the annals
Of the Celt, or in the dubious channels
Whence idiosyncrasies and tensions shoot.

I rise, no longer dark,
No longer mutinous, and embark
On the journey outward, the escape
To air that is rid of superstition, to a pulse
That draws no heavy blood from the obscure
Cycles of savagery, the historic shape
Of atavism. I shed the lure
Of a dim mother-breast I have outgrown,
And while the Moment's hot fierce joys convulse
My heart I take the irrevocable step beyond
Loyalty to this dead land: no longer bone
Of my bone is its granite, nor flesh
Of my flesh its clay:
The bright blade of the Word severs the barbarous bond.

Christ calls from the tarred road and I must go,
Not as an exile, no,
Nor as one deprived, but as one
Moving to fulfilment, moving home
Out of the ancestral mesh,
Out of the bitter moorlands where my tears
Fell on the sullen bramble and the dun
Rock of the derelict years.
Heir of the Moment and the electing Way
Whence all my treasures come,
I tread in the newness of truth

Where dawn-flushed pylons trample the uncouth
Spells of the tribal night.
And this dead land
Which bore and moulded me for a fate
Sour as its soil and hard with its hate
Smoulders and glowers behind the plucked brand
It will never regain or understand.

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