John Clare, *Autobiographical Fragments*  
(written from 1821 and published in Eric Robinson and David Powell, *John Clare: By Himself* [Fyfield Books, 1996]; the numbers below refer to the manuscript fragments)

The spring of our life — our youth — is the midsummer of our happiness — our pleasures are then real and heart stirring — they are but associations afterwards — where we laughed in childhood at the reality of the enjoyment felt we only smile in manhood at the recollections of those enjoyments — they are then but the reflections of past happiness and have no more to do with happiness in the reality then the image of a beautiful girl seen in a looking glass has in comparison with the original — our minds only retain the resemblance the glass is a blank after her departure — we only feel the joy we possessed — we see the daisy and love it because it was our first favourite in childhood we hear the nightingale and are delighted because it was such a favourite in youth and the haunts of its annual visits being the paradise of boyhood — green thickets where the leaves hid him from all but joys

[D10, 7r]

There is nothing but poetry about the existence of childhood real simple soul moving poetry the laughter and joy of poetry and not its philosophy and there is nothing of poetry about manhood but the reflection and the remembrance of what has been nothing more

[A46, 106]
I had plenty of leisure but it was the leisure of solitude for my Sundays was demanded to be spent in the fields at horse or cow tending and my whole summer was one days employment as it were in the fields I grew so much into the quiet love of nature's presence that I was never easy but when I was in the fields passing my sabbaths and leisure with the shepherds and herd boys as fancys prompted sometimes playing at marbles on the smooth beaten sheep tracks or leap frog among the thimby molehills sometimes ranging among the corn to get the red and blue flowers for cockades to play at soldiers or running into the woods to hunt strawberrys or stealing peas in church time when the owners was safe to boil at the gipseys fire who went half shares at our stolen luxury we heard the bells chime but the fields was our church and we seemed to feel a religious feeling in our haunts on the sabbath while some old shepherd sat on a mole hill reading aloud some favourite chapter from an old fragment of a Bible which he carried in his pocket for the day a family relic which possesses on its covers and title pages in rude scrawls genealogys of the third and fourth Generations when aunts uncles and grandmothers dyd and when cousins etc were marri[e]d and brothers and sisters born occupying all the blank leaves in the book and the title pages borders which leaves were prese [r]ved with a sacred veneration tho half the contents had been sufferd to drop out and be lost

I lov'd this solitary disposition from a boy and felt a curiosity to wander about the spots were I had never been before I remember one incident of this feeling when I was very young it cost my parents some anxiety it was in summer and I started off in the morning to get rotten sticks from the woods but I had a feeling to wander about the fields and I indulged it I had often seen the large heath call'd Emmonsales stretching its yellow furze from my eye into unknown solitudes when I went with the mere openers and my curiosity urg'd me to steal an oppertunity to explore it that morning I had imagin'd that the worlds end was at the edge of the orison and that a days journey was able to find it so I went on with my heart full of hopes pleasures and discoveries
I usd to be fondly attachd to spots about the fields and there were 3 or 4 were I used to go to visit on Sundays one of these was under an old Ivied Oak in Osey wood were I twisted a sallow stoven into an harbour which grew into the crampd way in which I had made it two others were under a broad oak in a field calld the Barrows and Langlely Bush and all my favourite places have met with misfortunes the old ivied tree was cut down when the wood was cut down and my bowcr was destroyd the woodmen fancied it a resort for robbers and some thought the crampd way in which the things grew were witch knotts and that the spot was a haunt were witches met I never unriddel the mystery and it is believd so still for I got there often to hide myself and was ashamed to acknowledge it — Lee Close Oak was cut down in the inclosure and Langlely bush was broken up by some wanton fellows while kidding furze on the heath — the Carpenter that bought Lee Close oak hearing it was a favourite tree of mine made me two rules and sent me and I preseved a piece of the old Ivy the thickest I have ever seen

‘Will with a whisp’ ‘Jimmy Whisk’ ‘Jack with a lanthorn in this november month they are often out in the dark misty nights — on ‘Rotten Moor’ ‘Dead Moor’ Eastwell moor — Banton green end Lolham Briggs Rine dyke furlong and many other places in the lordship I have my self seen them on most of these spots — one dark night I was coming accross the new parks when a sudden light wild and pale appeared all round me on my left hand for a hundred yards or more accompan[i]ed by a crackling noise like that of peas straw burning I stood looking for a minute or so and felt rather alarmed when darkness came round me again and one of the dancing jack a la[n]thens was whisking away in the distance which caused the odd luminous light around me — crossing the meadow one dark Sunday night I saw when coming over the Nunton bridge a light like a lanthorn standing on the wall of the other bridge I kept my eyes on it for awhile and hastened to come up to it — but ere I got half over the meadow it suddenly fell and tumbled into the stream — but when I got on the bridge I looked down it and saw the will o whi[s]p vapour like a light in a bladder whisking along close to the water as if swimming along its surface but what surprized me was that it was going contrary to the stream
If common fame was the highest species of fame — I would rather chuse to be the Author of cock robin the babes in the wood etc then Paradise lost or the fairey queen for you cannot find a village in england that owns an old woman to be a stranger to cock robin or the babes in the wood you may find a thousand were even the highest people in it know nothing of Spencer or Milton further then the name and very often not that

[B3, 80]

to look at nature with a poetic feeling magnifies the pleasure yet Naturalists and Botanists seem to have little or no taste for this sort of feeling they merely make a collection of dryd specimens classing them after Lienneus into tribes and familys as a sort of curiosity and fame I have nothing of this curiosity about me tho I feel as happy as they can in finding a new spicies of field flower or butterfly which I have not before seen yet I have no desire further to dry the plant or torture the butterfly by sticking it on a cork board with a pin I have no wish to do this if my feelings would let me I only wish them to settle on a flower till I can come up with them to examine the powdered colours on their wings and then they may flutter off from fancied danger and welcome I feel gratified

[B5, 46]

Common sense would never covet the property that belongs to another

I could not feel happy with the wealth that I had no right to and therefore feel a greater happiness in peace and poverty then I should do in the riches of lawless force and unchecked rebellion — I do not know from what cause I inherit this feeling unless the little wisdom I have gotten imbued me with it — but this I do think if I had not been taught to read and write I should not have indulged in such scruples tho I might not have joined the violence of mobs I should not have seen the unlawful cupidity of their notions of right and freedom as I do now and therefore I feel happy with the little learning that my parents gave me as the best legacy fortune could ever bestow

[B5, 74]