The Poetry of John Clare

by John Wareham

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SCOPE OF TOPIC

This Bookmark is an introduction to the poetry of John Clare. It considers through a selection of poems something of the range of Clare’s poetry, of its characteristic concerns and of the way the poems make their effects.

‘My life hath been one chain of contradictions’.

(John Clare, ‘Child Harold’ (1841)).

Dear Sir

I am in a Mad house and quite forget your Name or who you are you must excuse me for I have nothing to communicate or tell of and why I am shut up I dont know I have nothing to say so I conclude

yours respectfully John Clare

(Letter to James Hipkins, March 8th 1860)

In every language upon earth
On every shore, o’er every sea,
I gave my name immortal birth,
And kept my spirit with the free

(John Clare, ‘A Vision’)

BOOKS TO READ


BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

John Clare was born on 13th July 1793 in Helpstone (now Helpston), Northamptonshire. ‘...my mother knew not a single letter . . . my father could read a little in a bible or testament . . . I was not older than 10 when my father took me to seek the scanty rewards of industry Winter was generally my season of imprisonment in the dusty barn Spring and Summer my assistance was wanted elsewhere in tending sheep or horses in the fields or scaring birds from the grain or weeding it . . . ’ His schooling finished when he was twelve; years of agricultural labouring followed. He found fame with his first volume Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery (1820) but suffered increasing literary neglect thereafter. In 1837 he entered Dr Matthew Allen’s asylum in Epping Forest from where in 1841, homesick, he walked to his home in Northborough, Northamptonshire. After some six months of freedom he spent the next twenty-three years in Northampton General Lunatic Asylum. He died on 20th May, 1864,
NOTES

Clare is first and foremost a poet – perhaps the poet – of country things and country experience. ‘Beans in Blossom’ takes as its subject the simple, ordinary but piquant ‘scent of blossomed beans’:

The South-west wind, how pleasant in the face
It breathes, while sauntering in a musing pace
I roam these new-ploughed fields and by the side
Of this old wood where happy birds abide
And the rich blackbird through his golden bill
Utters wild music when the rest are still
Now luscious comes the scent of blossomed beans
That o’er the path in rich disorder leans
Mid which the bees in busy songs and toils
Load home luxuriantly their yellow spoils
The herd cows toss the molehills in their play
And often stand the stranger’s steps at bay
Mid clover blossoms red and tawney white
Strong-scented with the summer’s warm delight

Six lines set the scene at the wood’s edge where a blackbird sings before the poem homes in on the heady scent. This in turn leads to the bees which, in a sensuous phrase, ‘Load home luxuriantly their yellow spoils’. Bird, beans, bees, herd cows and molehills represent nature’s unity as does the syntax of ‘While sauntering in a musing pace’ which can apply both to the poem’s ‘I’ and to the south-west wind. The only marginally discordant image, ‘the stranger’ is man himself set somewhat at odds with the harmonious scene yet standing, in precisely appropriate idiom, ‘at bay’, in suspenseful anticipation of the experience of the scent. All disharmony is resolved in the final couplet of this unorthodox sonnet. Founded in the actual, descriptively acute and direct, the poem celebrates the transient. The essence of the ‘rich disorder’ of experience has been caught and fixed.

While ‘Beans in Blossom’ represents one form of capturing, the much-anthologised ‘Little Trotty Wagtail’ represents another: the nervous movements of the bird in the rain are caught in language extraordinary for its vitality, aptness and playfulness. ‘Trotty’ enacts its gait while the precarious ‘tittering’ (close to standard English ‘teetering’) and ‘tottering’ convey its restless instability. Just as Keats writes of entering the identity of other things – ‘if a sparrow were before my window, I take part in its existence and pick about the gravel’ (Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November, 1817) – so too Clare takes part in his wagtail’s altogether more watery existence while simultaneously recording the bird’s unhuman individuality and strangeness. The second and third stanza’s ‘water pudge’, Northamptonshire dialect for puddle, is part of the alliterative pattern, and ‘chirrupt’ implies both a fluffing-up of feathers and a twittering sound. Quick, precise movements are encapsulated in the verbal ‘you nimble’ while ‘dimpling’ describes the ripples and splashes these movements create in the puddle. Words of standard English, of dialect and of Clare’s own coining combine to express the physicality and quiddity of the wagtail in its surroundings. Clare makes us see and feel the bird in its essence. Dialect words in Clare’s poetry are not a problem for the reader as modern editions include a glossary; rather they are uniquely expressive. The poem is one of more than sixty bird poems by Clare, not mere descriptions but re-enactments which raise profound issues of the relations between man and, in pre-Darwinian terms, the rest of creation. Twenty less anthologised pieces will be found, appropriately illustrated by Bewick wood-block prints and facsimiles of Clare’s manuscript in Birds Nest (ed. Anne Tibble, 1973, Mid NAG, ISBN 0 9501109 X).
Clare’s identification with other life-forms extends in ‘Clock a Clay’ to the ladybird through which Clare speaks: so effectively does Clare become the ladybird (‘clock a clay’ in his dialect) that the Shakespearean echoes (two of Ariel’s Songs from The Tempest) are almost overridden. The glossary tells us that the first line’s ‘peeps’ refers to the single florets in a flower cluster: there the insect has ensconced itself. The clock a clay waits and watches for the time of day because in country lore it, like the dandelion seed-head, tells the time: “Click clock a clay/ What’s the time of day/ One o clock, two o clock/ Time to flye away”:

Day by day and night by night
All the week I hide from sight
In the cowslip’s peeps I lie
In rain and dew still warm and dry
Day and night and night and day
Red black-spotted Clock-a-Clay.

The complete poem is remarkable for its lack of sentimentality as are most of Clare’s poems including those which, like ‘The Badger’, hard-headedly present man’s beastliness to animals. In five sonnet-stanzas ‘The Badger’ tells of how, baited by men and dogs for hours, ‘The badger grins and never leaves his hold’ even when ‘They loose them all and set them on’:

Till kicked and torn and beaten out he lies
And leaves his hold and cackles groans and dies.

Clare draws no moral yet his empathy leaves no room to doubt where his sympathies lie. The ‘grin’ is a grim, automatic, despairing clenching of teeth, the badger a victim as hero. Clare’s poems about animals spring from intense acts of perception. Until the twentieth century only Clare was writing such poems.

All through his life Clare wrote love poems. One of the greatest is ‘Mary: It is the evening hour’. Evening sets the prevailing mood of silence, stillness and reflection. There is the merest hint of a pun on ‘lie’ in the second line and again in the sixth, there associated with the ‘flaggy’ (i.e. iris-edged) and mirror-like lake that may not truly represent the here-and-now. All is not as it seems for the scene is dominated by the horned moon, that repository of unfulfilled desires; and ‘we’, an emphatic plural, will turn out to be but wishful thinking. The second stanza too with ‘Stories of sweet visions’ suggests that the lovers’ togetherness may be illusory and the ‘spirit of her I love’ literally true. It proves to be so in the third stanza where ‘the bright sun tomorrow’ is negated by the dead girl’s dark eyes and by the flowers that are now more funereal than amatory. The ‘still hour’ is revealed both as a time of love’s growth – with the possibility of its persistence as precarious as the ‘dew’ with which ‘grew’ so adroitly rhymes – and as a time of mourning and disconnection. Having considered the ‘sweet visions’ of united lovers it is the more touching and shocking to discover the poet in reality quite alone. ‘Mary’ no doubt offends the technical purist because of its apparently casual observance of the chosen rhyme scheme: ‘face’, for instance, does not rhyme with ‘hour’, and the rhyme of ‘me’ should not be another ‘me’. Metrically, the line ‘As the bright sun shines tomorrow’ contains too many stresses. But such stringencies are almost irrelevant: the poem is a superlative expression of love and isolation.

One of Clare’s major themes is his Helpstone childhood considered as an Eden in an eternal nature. It receives major treatment in ‘The Flitting’ [moving house] prompted by Clare’s uprooting himself from Helpstone in 1832 to Northborough. Although only three miles away, Northborough presents a nature from which Clare is alienated:

The summer like a stranger comes
I pause and hardly know her face

and ‘all is strange and new’ so that even bird-song there is less sweet than the shrill pudding [kites] at the familiar Royce Wood. Books do not raise his spirits for they are ephemeral and, following fashion, do not adhere to ‘old esteems’. Moreover
. . . passions of sublimity
    Belong to plain and simple things
such as the little moss that persists when the pomp of ancient tales has long passed away.
In Clare's Helpstone-Eden

. . . every weed and blossom too
    Was looking upward in my face
    With friendship's welcome

yet with the realisation that the things of nature are

    All tennants of an ancient place
    And heirs of noble heritage
    Coeval they with Adam's race
    And blest with more substantial age

comes a partial resolution of Clare's predicament. The completion of that resolution is the recognition not only of the persistence of nature but also of the persistence of memory:

. . . this 'shepherd's purse' that grows
    In this strange spot - In days gone bye
    Grew in the little garden rows
    Of my old home now left

for, optimistically,

    Times will change and friends must part
    Their memory lingers round the heart
    Like life . . .

The poem closes with the triumph of plain and simple things, the very things of Clare's poetry:

    And still the grass eternal springs
    Where castles stood and grandeur died.

In a related poem, 'Decay', the loss of poetic imagination precludes Clare's seeing in nature the power to 'make amends' since 'nature herself seems on the flitting'.

Clare saw nature, and change within nature, as essentially benevolent. Change wrought upon nature by men in a social position to change it was another matter. 'The Fallen Elm' is both lament for and protest against the landlord's threat to cut down the trees behind Clare's cottage: 'the savage who owns them thinks they have done their best & now he wants to make use of the benefits he can from selling them' (Letter to Taylor, 7th March 1821). The trees were granted a reprieve but the poem remains as a monument both to Clare's gentleness towards the elms and the way of life they stand for and to his anger at the misappropriation of earth's bounty. The first half of the poem presents a community of nature in which elm, man, mavis [thrush], rabbit and cow mutually co-exist. The elm's murmuring is the 'sweetest anthem' and the elm itself time's 'sacred dower', phrases which relate to Clare's belief in the eternity of natural things. In that state the elm still experiences
change ‘Though change till now did never injure thee’. The atmosphere of protection, friendship and happiness is ‘betrayed’ by the felling of the elm, and Clare’s language now turns to sarcasm and attack:

Self-interest saw thee stand in freedom’s ways
So thy old shadow must a tyrant be
Thou’st heard the knave abusing those in power
Bawl freedom loud and then oppress the free
Thou’st heard the knave supply his canting powers
With wrong’s illusions when he wanted friends
That bawled for shelter when he lived in showers
And when clouds vanished made thy shade amend
With axe at root he felled thee to the ground.

Clare is impugning not only the felling but a social system that hypocritically sanctions the freedom to oppress. Invective against the misuse of power is allied in the poem with a concern for the safeguarding of the environment’s balances.

‘Thus came enclosure – ruin was its guide’ runs a line in ‘The Fallen Elm’. The coming of enclosure was indeed seen as ruin for Clare’s vision of the countryside. Enclosure closed the common lands and made them private property, stopped paths, dammed streams and felled trees, and so drove a wedge between Clare and the landscape and customs of his boyhood.

‘The Mores’ [The Moors] is a lament for the lost Eden of open-field and childhood. The wholly destructive ‘blundering plough’ intrudes between the ‘eternal green’ of the moors and their ‘spring’s blossoms’ just as surely as the ‘fence of ownership’ creeps in between the landscape’s ‘unbounded freedom’ and the ‘circling sky’. Throughout, passages describing the vanished but remembered landscape are broken into and subverted by passages recording the damaging effects of enclosure.

The final 16 lines advance a bleak picture of the present in which the ‘eternal green’ and the sense of limitless freedom are no longer a reality. Once the poet’s visions of place had heavenly attributes as if ‘fallen from an evening sky’ but now they are fallen because degraded by ‘lawless law’:

A board sticks up to notice ‘no road here’
And on the tree with ivy overhung
The hated sign by vulgar taste is hung
As tho’ the very birds should learn to know
When they go there they must no further go
Thus, with the poor, scared freedom bade goodbye
And much they feel it in the smothered sigh
And birds and trees and flowers without a name
All sighed when lawless law’s enclosure came.

The twenty-six stanzas of ‘The Lament of Swordy Well’, a poem in ballad metre, speak in the voice of the landscape itself, a place of beauty turned into a gravel pit:

The silver springs grown naked dykes
Scarce own a bunch of rushes
When grain got high the tasteless tykes
Grubbed up trees, banks, and bushes
And me, they turned me inside out
For sand and grit and stones
And turned my old green hills about
And pikt my very bones
so that
The bees flye round in feeble rings
And find no blossom bye

as the poem circles obsessively round the enormous gap between what was and what is:

Of all the fields I am the last
That my own face can tell
Yet what with stone pits’ delving holes
And strife to buy and sell
My name will quickly be the whole
That’s left of Swordy Well.

The word-play in ‘whole’ remains forcefully active. Exploitation has not merely altered the face of the landscape, it has expunged the identity of the place. Such poems are verbally and politically powerful because in them Clare breaks away from his eighteenth-century antecedents. The pressure of first-hand experience – of living things, of poverty, of the altered landscape – and a mastery of language enables him to do so.

Identity, Clare’s own, is the subject of two poems from the asylum period. In ‘A Vision’ the things of earth, its lusts and joys, fall away as in a distillation of self, leaving a spirit free of earthly concerns. As earth and nature become merely a name, Clare’s own name and fame – fostered, despite the loss of heaven’s love, by the glow of heaven’s flame’ and ‘the sun’s eternal ray – achieves immortality through poetry. The poem hints at inexhaustible depths, perhaps, only because its language is uncharacteristically remote from the concrete, visual and sensuous: Clare is more at home and more himself when the earth is not too far away. ‘I Am’ is one of the best known later poems despite, or because of, its disturbing representation of isolation and alienation. From the very start the assertion of existence is qualified by doubts about the reality of that existence, ‘like a memory lost’, the poet’s troubles apparently of concern solely to himself: in a particularly memorable phrase, he is the ‘self-consumer’ of his woes (where to consume includes its full implications of to eat away, destroy and waste). Those woes take their apparently meaningless place in ‘oblivion’s host’, along with all things forgotten, in a nightmarish confusion of uncontrollable events: ‘the living sea of waking dreams’. That image is continued in the ‘vast shipwreck’ symbolic of the destructiveness of insanity that alienates even those the poet loves most. Despairing and lonely, he longs for a return to Eden before the Fall, to an idyllic childhood between the elemental and eternal grass and sky.

The question of whether Clare is a ‘great’ poet is irrelevant to the enjoyment of the handful of poems considered in this brief introduction – or indeed of the hundreds of other poems that will readily be found in the many selections of Clare’s work. Those poems are but part of the evidence of Clare’s achievement and there seems little point in arguing whether Clare’s poems of perception or of politics are the greater. Shortage of space necessarily precludes discussion of the longer poems - The Shepherd’s Calendar, The Parish and The Village Minstrel - which are also strong contenders. Mention was just made of the abundant selections of Clare’s work. So many selections make Clare accessible but they create a problem for Clare’s reputation: few readers have the privilege of seeing Clare whole. Unlike Hardy or Yeats, Clare has as yet no single inexpensive volume containing all his poetry. When that ideal volume appears – and it now looks as if the true discovery of Clare is going to be a twenty-first century literary phenomenon – Clare’s greatness will at last be recognised.
FURTHER READING

The Poetry of John Clare, Mark Storey (Macmillan, 1974).


The John Clare Society, The Stables, 1a West Street, Helpston, Peterborough PE6 7DU, publishes an annual journal and four Newsletters yearly.