

**Stephanie Kuduk Weiner, *Clare's Lyric: John Clare and Three Modern Poets*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 224. £55. ISBN 9780199688029.**

Clare's standing as a poet has probably never been higher. Yet the esteem in which he is held by his academic devotees is not always matched by the judgements of a non-specialist audience. It is never a surprise to find Clare omitted from prominent collections on and of Romantic or Victorian poetry. Readers and critics at large appear in agreement with Keats: 'Scenery is fine, but human nature is finer'.

Clare looks to have dedicated his energies to a lesser order of achievement, as Keats himself suggested as early as 1820 in commenting on the poem 'Solitude': 'the Description too much prevail[s] over the Sentiment'. That remains a charge with which any advocate of Clare's poems has to come to terms. Broadly speaking, there are three defences. The first is to press the ethical or ecological credentials of a commitment to 'Description' over 'Sentiment' (an approach that convinces more in theory than in the actual practice of reading). The second is to point to the hundreds of Clare poems which *are* carried on a current of 'Sentiment', and which thrill on account of the whirling energy of their attempts to express it – 'Loading the heart with joys it cannot bear / That warms & chills & burns & bursts at last / Oer broken hopes & troubles never past' as Clare himself phrased it in 'The Moorehens Nest' (is there any other poet who makes such captivating poetry out of the blurred expression of mixed feelings?). The third response is to show how, in Clare, 'Description' and 'Sentiment' mingle. This is the toughest course. You can say, with Jonathan Bate, that 'for Clare, description is sentiment', but it might well remain the case that, for the reader, 'description is description'. So not least among the virtues of Stephanie Kuduk Weiner's *Clare's Lyric* is the deftness with which it fleshes out its case that Clare's observational art is an affair of human feeling: 'the lyric subject is made vivid and immediate as he perceives, feels, and thinks about the world – acts which in turn invest that world with vividness and immediacy' (3).

The book claims to be 'about mimesis and the medium of poetry' (1). Really, it is something more attractive than that: a book about poets and poems. Its first section offers an account of 'Clare's Lyric Technique'. Three chapters make felt the humane concern guiding Clare's orchestration of his poetry's acoustic world, his sonnets' teasing challenge to the claims of artistic unity, and the resourcefulness of the asylum poems as they strive for an idiom that gets a grasp on absence. At its best, the writing's attentiveness to the minutiae of individual poems gathers towards memorable broad-brush vignettes of the poetry's verbal texture: Clare's voice 'hover(s) between the urgency and immediacy of speech and the formality and polish of print; his language is at once deliberate and provisional' (25); 'His poems scan beautifully, but they often parse difficultly, a tension testifying to the combination of linguistic facility and rebelliousness that comes through in all his mature works' (33).

If the book's title captures the dilemma of an achievement that also feels like a limitation (it is hard to imagine the need for a similar study setting out the case for, say, *Wordsworth's Lyric*), its sub-title intimates the delayed and sporadic nature of Clare's impact upon subsequent poets. Clare sounded like a charmingly rustic version of Keats when he announced his ambition 'to win a niche among the minor bards in the memory of my country'; the second half of *Clare's Lyric*, addressing three twentieth-century poets who adopted and adapted Clare's mimetic techniques, shows Clare's 'memory' to have a habit of cropping up in unexpectedly exotic places. The effect is to emphasise the quirkiness of Clare's imagination, but also what John Ashbery, ostensibly the most alien of the three poets,

called 'his seeming modernity'. Arthur Symons was, as Kuduk Weiner acknowledges, 'a prominent practitioner and the foremost theorist of the cosmopolitan, urban, impressionistic aestheticism of the *fin de siècle*' (125), so he and Clare might seem strange bedfellows; but Symons' 1908 edition of Clare's poems was crucial in repackaging Clare for the new century, and his Introduction to that volume (also printed in *The Romantic Movement in English Poetry*), is full of sensitive and sympathetic insight. Kuduk Weiner demonstrates the surprising kinship between the two writers, and one emerges with a renewed sense of the many-sidedness of their achievements. The chapter on Edmund Blunden shows Blunden's most compelling poems to work in a Clarean sort of way towards a self-effacement which is also a paradoxical form of individuality. A final chapter weaves through Ashbery's creative and critical responses to what he called Clare's 'nakedness of vision' with a precision and agility that epitomizes the whole book.

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