

Sara Guyer, *Reading with John Clare: Biopoetics, Sovereignty, Romanticism*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015. Pp. 132. £15.99 (Pb.) ISBN 9780823265589.

The first half of the title of this short and challenging book is worded *Reading with John Clare* rather than *Reading John Clare*; and indeed, excluding Guyer's Acknowledgements section, the poet is not mentioned in the main body of the text until page 4. Clare, then, is by design not always the primary or only focus in this project, which is engaged fully with literary and critical 'theory' (3) and which deploys modes of analysis resonant with those of the so-called Yale School and in relation to a number of areas (autobiography and other forms of life writing, posthumous poetic reputation, lyric apostrophe) deemed central to Romantic Studies. At the same time, this approach – 'reading' with Clare through the lens of Paul de Man, Giorgio Agamben, and Michel Foucault and others – certainly leaves us with some rewarding insights on the poet, who is often understood to have been largely ignored by theory. While this understanding may be true to an extent, Guyer's book, nonetheless, follows publications by Lynn Pearce, Simon Kövesi, and Sigi Jöttkandt that read Clare in the context of the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Alain Badiou, respectively.

Clare's reception history is already everywhere marked by studies in his awkward exemplarity as a 'peasant poet' and a mad poet, so Guyer's case for his 'exemplarity' in regard to 'biopolitics' (5) initially feels a little problematic, though Guyer complicates these arguments by her, as she explains, Derridean understanding of the former term. She also suggests, understandably, that Clare's obsession with personal identity makes him a figure highly relevant to current concerns with, as Agamben helps elucidate, online profiles in the age of the technological, 'virtual masks' (59) configured by social media. Judging by the volume of existing and emerging scholarship on Clare, however, Guyer's claim that 'few have spent much time reading him at all' (8) is not quite so easy to credit.

In Chapter 2 Guyer's analysis of Clare's journal entries on plans for his grave and his sketch of a grave will make for a useful comparison with John Goodridge's recent, extensive work on a similar subject. Guyer cites a small range of Clare criticism throughout the book, foregrounding her own style of theoretically informed readings; though the relative lack of reference to the considerable body of scholarship on poetic 'genius', a main concern of this chapter, makes such concepts perhaps feel rather under-theorised. Elsewhere Guyer is often in extended conversation with Jonathan Bate, a manoeuvre which makes sense in light of Guyer's stated aim to move away from the twenty-first century 'redemptive environmentalisms' (4) of such approaches to literature as ecocriticism, at which Bate has been at the 'vanguard' (46).

Bate is also an editor of Clare's texts, and in Guyer's intervention into this subject in Chapter 3 she argues that the two opposing camps here (Bate's 'cooked'/lightly modernised Clare texts versus the 'raw'/unmodernised Clare texts of Eric Robinson and his team) base their own editorial preferences upon claims to be presenting the authentic voice of Clare, a voice which Guyer says never actually existed. Guyer's arguments about these different claims in regard to Clare's language operating as a kind of obscuring mask point to the theorist who is really at the heart of her study: Paul de Man.

The presence of 'I Am' in this chapter is indicative of the fact that Guyer almost exclusively analyses canonical and/or highly anthologised Clare poems. If Guyer's choices here are ultra-conservative, then her analysis of 'I Am' in Chapter 3 is acute insofar as it questions the conventional notion of 'childhood' evident in it. Yet Guyer's claim that the speaker is 'asleep' in the final verse of this famous lyric seems odd (52; 54). The verb formation that controls the final portion of Clare's poem is 'I long': this is a statement of

desire for ‘scenes where man hath never trod’ and, moreover, the contentment of sleep experienced in childhood. Guyer’s attention to figuration in the poem allows her to posit the perceptive point that ‘What never could have been possible (the experience of a world without other men) and would need to be invented is understood as what already has taken place but no longer remains (childhood)’ (52). It may also be the case that ‘I Am’, a poem about, among other things, being forgotten, has attracted so many readings as to displace our capacity to read Clare away from histories of neglect and forgetting.

In Guyer’s Coda, Clare, it is argued, helps us not to forget: ‘For me the constellation – the name – that Clare holds and even saves for us is that of Paul de Man’ (101). Of all the schools of theory, the version of deconstruction with which De Man is associated has been one of the most influential for Romantic Studies and yet the least interested in Clare; the final realignment of this particular poet with this particular theorist is, then, a curious one in Guyer’s provocative and engaging study.

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