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Reviews

David Cooper

John Clare: Nature, Criticism and History by Simon Kövesi
Palgrave Macmillan | 2017 | 266pp | ISBN 978-0-230-27787-8

A grainy, difficult-to-make-out image of a slightly dishevelled middle-aged man. The process of making-strange begins with the front cover of Simon Kövesi's new monograph, *John Clare: Nature, Criticism and History*. Surprising as it always seems, we have a photographic record of Clare in old age: an image taken by W.W. Law and Son in 1862 and now in the National Portrait Gallery. The black-and-white photograph on the cover of this book, though, is unfamiliar. Is this a newly discovered image of a slightly younger Clare? The background makes sense given the poet's imaginative preoccupation with hedgerows as both intimate ecosystems and symbols of political oppression. Confusingly, though, the shoes are not quite right; they look too comfortable, too cushioned. What is more, zooming in reveals that the man is standing on a tarmacked road that is bordered by a concrete kerb. Just who or what, then, is this 'Clare'?

Making-strange emerges as one of the defining characteristics of Kövesi's study. The book begins on an entertainingly polemical note as Kövesi maps out the terrain of recent Clare studies and critiques the persistent tendency to celebrate the poet's unvarnished down-to-earthness: a trope that is even threaded through the work of 'Clare's greatest biographer, Jonathan Bate' (p.6). Kövesi's ire is particularly targeted, however, at the ecocritical deployment of 'Clare as a sort of proto-ecological weapon in a manner which *displaces* him both in terms of space and in terms of history' (p.15). The author's contention is that, 'in self-regarding panic about the fate of the globe', too much ecocritical practice has been predicated on atemporality in an attempt 'to secure the rigging for its contemporary moral agendas' (p.29). Conversely, too much 'historicising critical work' (p.29) has problematically eschewed critical theory or the consideration of ecological thought. Kövesi's critical mission, then, is to bring together historical awareness and contemporary critical thinking, an agenda which necessarily involves the acknowledgement that: 'Place is never straightforward [as some ecocritics would lead us to believe] in Clare, and primarily because of issues of class' (p.28). Kövesi's flexibly spatial, rather than rigidly ecocritical, readings complicate Clare. For example, he argues – via

the seminal scholarship of John Barrell – that a framing of Clare as proto-ecologist needs to acknowledge the intrinsic ambivalence of the poet's attitude towards enclosure, a practice that radically reconfigured the landscape of his native Northamptonshire, yet, simultaneously, brought employment. Kövesi goes further afield to argue that similar dialectical pulls can be traced in Clare's attitude towards London. Over the course of the foundational opening chapter, then, Kövesi engages with extant Clare scholarship, as well as roll-call of prominent spatial theorists from the second half of the twentieth century (including Fredric Jameson, Gaston Bachelard and, perhaps most importantly, Michel de Certeau) to demonstrate the slippery indeterminacy of Clare's poetics of place.

Kövesi builds on these critical foundations in the three overlapping and intersecting chapters that follow, chapters that undergird the author's assertion that the book is 'as much about critical and theoretical practice as it is about Clare' (p.10). Chapter 2, 'Clare and Ecocriticism', illustrates how much ecocritical practice has focused on the perceived anti-anthropocentrism of Clare's poetry, a quality that is invariably situated in antithetical opposition to the Wordsworthian egotistical sublime. Kövesi does not veer too far away from such readings, but, instead, argues that 'Clare's resistance to authorial egotism' (p.88) needs to be resituated within the context of the poet's frequently difficult-to-define politics. Crucially, Kövesi thinks this through via a deep mapping of a single poem – the title-less sonnet, 'The shepherds almost wonder where they dwell' – that involves both recourse to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome and extensive archival work.

Textual scholarship also informs the third chapter, 'Clare Making Text; Making Text of Clare', which begins with a rehearsal of the familiar debates about the most appropriate ways of editing Clare's poetry. Kövesi's central conceit is to propose a 'green' editorial methodology that would allow for, through the affordances of digital space, the construction of 'a decentred and levelling hypertextual frame for the presentation' (p.150) of multiple versions of Clare's poems. Then, in the following chapter, Kövesi offers a further braiding of textual scholarship and ecological thought to examine Clare's 'love and lust poems' (p.167), a focus that leads him to poems that 'seem to rest somewhere between an inclusive ecopoetics and an excluding amorousness' (p.177). The chapter ends with Kövesi examining the listing of Northamptonshire women that can be found in Clare's notebooks, a textual practice that, for Lynne Pearce, encodes the 'profound misogyny' that is laced through Clare's poetic vision. It is evident that

Kövesi remains troubled by the names that Clare listed whilst in the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum; yet, at the same time, he speculatively wonders if such notes might also be read ‘as communitarian nodes – markers of inclusive connection no matter how tenuous’ (p.204).

The first four chapters are not without their problems or issues. Although Kövesi works hard to establish the connective tissues, there are times when the chapters read as discrete essays; as Kövesi makes clear in his prefatory Acknowledgements, ‘some of the work here derived in part’ from a series of previously published ‘articles and chapters’. Moreover, while each of the first four chapters covers an impressive amount of poetic, critical and theoretical territory, in each case, the chapters might have benefited from concluding sections in which the disparate threads are pulled together. Perhaps more significantly, since the manifesto for a new ‘green’ edition of Clare’s poetry is both textually and critically central to Kövesi’s entire project, it suffers from the problem that blights much literary critical scholarship that hovers on the fringes of the digital humanities. That is to say, Kövesi gestures towards the possibilities of a radical new framework for the presentation of Clare’s poetry rather than reflecting on an extant digital resource. There is an argument that, at this stage in the evolution of digital literary studies, there is a need to move beyond mere speculations on yet-to-be-achieved projects.

Ultimately, though, *John Clare: Nature, Criticism* is a study that is characterised by a restless critical energy. Kövesi takes a poet – a writer with whom he has imaginatively lived for much of his scholarly career – and views his life and work from multiple critical perspectives and multiple conceptual prisms. By extension, literary criticism is presented as a dynamically processual act: poems are read and revisited; hermeneutic positions are reconsidered and reconfigured. Perhaps more unexpectedly, literary criticism is also presented as a physical act. Manuscripts are picked up, handled, and turned around. In the opening chapter on place, John Clare Cottage – the poet’s former home in Helpston that is run as a museum – is visited and an optional audio headset is placed to the ear. At such instances, then, the reader is reminded that both reading and critical thinking are embodied and situated practices.

At such moments, Kövesi’s monograph strays into the methodological territory of creative criticism. Towards the end of the first chapter, he reflects on the posthumous appropriation of Clare’s name in a diverse range of contexts and situations: from a primary school to a theatre; from road names to ‘an impressively brutalist concrete’ (p.49) car park

in Peterborough. Kövesi then builds upon the poet's afterlife to offer a fleeting autobiographical reflection on conversations about William Blake with his 'uncle Ron, a postman who lived in Blake Close, part of a poetically named council estate at the foot of Shooter's Hill, in Welling in south-east London' (p. 51). Here again, Kövesi's prose is implicitly informed by questions about what role creative practices might play in the critical exegesis of Romantic poetry.

This is an issue to which Kövesi explicitly turns in his concluding chapter, 'Clare as Our Contemporary; Clare as History', in which he maps out Clare's presence in 'contemporary literary culture' (p.215). Integral to this thought-experiment is a debunking of 'the sealed boxes of a narrow historicism' (p.220) in favour of a method that shuttles between an historical contextualisation of Clare's poetic practices and an awareness of our own embodied, historical moment: an argument that loops back to the twin critiques of ecocriticism and historicism articulated in the opening chapter. One key difference here, however, is that Kövesi undergirds his methodological proposition by turning to Hans-Georg Gadamer's thinking on the intrinsically 'relational and dialogic' (p.221) nature of history. For Kövesi, a reading of Clare's poetry necessarily has to take into account what Gadamer terms 'a fusion of [the] horizons' of the past and present. Ultimately, then, Kövesi argues that the thinking of the Romantic critic can be opened up by engaging with, say, Edward Bond's Marxist play *The Fool* (1975) or Iain Sinclair's 'layered psycho-[mapping]' of Clare in *Edge of the Orison* (2005). By thinking through how such creative writers offer acutely self-conscious readings of their Romantic precursor, he argues, the literary critic might become 'more aware' of the 'historical contingency' (p.233) of his or her own practices and procedures. By extension, therefore, such creative writings show the way towards a methodological rapprochement of the historicist's emphasis on literary pastness and the ecocritics's appropriation of Romantic writing for contemporary ends. Yet, in adopting such an approach, the critic will always remain aware of the provisionality of his or her own analyses.

Kövesi's Clare, then, emerges out of a knotty entanglement of nineteenth-century social politics and late twentieth-century spatial theory, manuscript materials and contemporary literary tourism. So, in the final analysis, what is to be made of that strange front cover? A paratextual note explains that it is a photograph of the actor, Toby Jones, playing Clare in Andrew Kötting's *By Our Selves* (2015), a film in which Kövesi himself appears. In other words, it is an image of a Clare that is both of his time and of our own historical moment, a stark visualisation of Gadamer's 'fusion of horizons'.

Further reading

- Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (London: Penguin, 2014).
- Barrell, John, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730–1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).
- Bate, Jonathan, *John Clare: A Biography* (London: Picador, 2003).
- Certeau, Michel de, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2002).
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. edn, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004).
- Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
- Kötting, Andrew (dir.), *By Our Selves* (SODA Pictures, 2015).
- Pearce, Lynne, 'John Clare's "Child Harold": A Polyphonic Reading', *Criticism*, 31:2 (1991), 139–57.