Major Works
JOHN CLARE
Edited by ERIC ROBINSON & DAVID POWELL
Introduction by TOM PAULIN
Oxford University, $16.95 paper, ISBN 0-192-80563-0

"I Am"
The Selected Poetry of John Clare
Edited by JONATHAN BATE
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $17.00 cloth, ISBN 0-374-52869-1

John Clare
A Biography
JONATHAN BATE
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $40.00 cloth, ISBN 0-374-17990-5

Since his death in 1864, John Clare has been relegated to the ranks of minor Romantic poet, nature poet, and poet's poet, but now two new selections of his work and a major biography allow 21st-century readers to see him for what he has always been: a poet of the first rank. In his introduction to the Oxford edition of Clare's *Major Works*, poet and critic Tom Paulin classes Clare with Gerard Manley Hopkins and claims that "Clare enriches and extends the English language in ways that Coleridge and Wordsworth never could"; while Jonathan Bate in "*I Am*" asserts that "John Clare is England's greatest poet of childhood"—a title that, as eminent Shakespeare scholar Bate must be aware, is usually reserved for Wordsworth. All of this back-and-forth about status would be of little interest to the general reader did it not result in a wider availability of Clare's poems: Whereas once his work was only widely accessible in anthologies, today I count four selections (the two under review here, as well as editions from Penguin Books and Everyman's Library) in my local bookstore. Clare *needs* to be read in selected editions. As Bate notes:

> *Clare wrote over three and a half thousand poems. Less than a quarter of his output was published in his lifetime. Poetry was his addiction.*

Yet many of Clare's best poems were published only in the 20th century, and when placed alongside anthology poems, such as "I Am" and "[The Badger]," these lesser-known poems create what Paulin calls a "twenty-first century Clare" whose breadth is only now available to the general reader.

During his lifetime, John Clare's literary star rose and fell with the early 19th-century vogue for "peasant poetry," and indeed Clare's background was humbler than almost all of his Romantic contemporaries'. Born in 1793 in the village of Helpstone, England, to a casual agricultural laborer and his illiterate wife, by age 15 Clare had worked as a thresher, ploughboy, potboy at a local inn, weeder, tender of horses, and gardener at a nearby estate. In his teens two events changed his life irrevocably: He found James Thomson's book-length poem *The Seasons* and vowed to become a poet himself, while Helpstone and its neighboring parishes were enclosed by a Parliamentary Act in 1809—a bitter process by which the traditional English commons were privatized. In his introduction to Clare's *Major Works*, Paulin asks, "how did Clare make the immense leap from agricultural labourer to published poet?"

This question is answered at length in Bate's thorough and lively *John Clare: A Biography*, which provides a more nuanced view both of Clare's psychological complexity as a person and of the possibilities for artistic and intellectual development available in the milieu of Clare's upbringing than has hitherto been available. The portrait of Clare and his world that emerges from Bate's biography complicates the traditional picture of a poet caught between cosmopolitan, literary London and a totally illiterate, rural culture. A few other facts are in order before turning to the poems themselves: Clare's four books were published in London (the first two by Keats' publisher) between 1820 and 1835. In 1832, Clare moved from his native Helpstone to Northborough, a village a few miles to the northeast, and this move, which inspired such moving poems as "The Flitting" and "Decay A Ballad," contributed to his psychological disintegration. By 1837, Clare had been certified as insane. He spent the rest of his life in two different asylums, where he continued to write copiously.

First-time readers of Clare should be aware that there is still a lively controversy about how the texts of his poems should be presented. Because so much of his work exists only in manuscript, editors such as Robinson and Powell present his poems—even the published ones—in the "raw," sparsely punctuated form of those manuscripts, while Bate believes strongly that Clare himself wanted, and that his poems still need, a certain amount of punctuation from his editors, and his edition presents the poems accordingly. Having been raised on the unpunctuated Clare, I find Bate's versions of the poems to be too tidied up, but his punctuation is light enough to give a sense of the poems' headlong texture. If forced to choose between *Major Works* and *"I Am,"* I would choose the former, but both editions contain poems not contained in the other. (Neither book contains my absolute favorite Clare poem, the sonnet "Obscurity," which can be found in the Penguin selection and Carcanet's edition of *The Midsummer Cushion*.)

Since a brief review makes it impossible to give a sense of the breadth of Clare's genius, I will focus on three of its major aspects: his power as a descriptive poet, his unique form of protest poetry, and the spookily visionary quality of his later poems. I agree with Bate that

> *the best of Clare's nature poetry is to be found in the body of work that he assembled for a fourth book. He wanted to call it "The Midsummer Cushion," an allusion to the local custom of gathering flowers in springtime, but was persuaded ... to settle on the more conventionally poetic title* The Rural Muse *(1835).*

(*The Midsummer Cushion* is available from British publisher Carcanet Books in a 1990 edition edited by R.K.R. Thornton and Anne Tibble, and any serious reader of Clare will want to obtain it.)

The gap between the colloquial title, *The Midsummer Cushion,* and the less evocative title, *The Rural Muse,* is an entry point for understanding the way Clare's descriptive poetry is different from that of his better-known Romantic contemporaries. More than, say, Wordsworth, Clare's poetry puts the reader *in* the natural scene both with the use of dialect words (both selections

under review here contain glossaries) and with the radical particularity of his descriptions. In the 1830s, Clare wrote a series of brilliant poems about birds and their nests, of which the sonnet "The Firetails Nest" is an example:

Tweet pipes the robin as the cat creeps bye
Her nestling young that in the elderns lie
And then the bluecap tootles in its glee
Picking the flies from blossomed apple tree
And pink the chaffinch cries its well known strain
Urging its mate to utter pink again
While in a quiet mood hedgesparrows trie
An inward stir of shadowed melody
While on the rotten tree the firetail mourns
As the old hedger to his toil returns
And chops the grain to stop the gap close bye
The hole where her blue eggs in safety lie
Of everything that stirs she dreameth wrong
And pipes her "tweet tut" fears the whole day long

The aim of this poem seems twofold: to describe the birdcalls as accurately and evocatively as possible—to this end such dialect words as "tootles" are their own gloss—and to emphasize the vulnerability of birds in the face of "cat[s]" and "hedger[s]." In this poem the birdsongs are portrayed, as much as possible, from the perspective of the birds themselves. The speaker is positioned halfway between the intruding human and the visionary translator of the birds' nonhuman—but no less eloquent—language. This tendency reaches its apex in "The Progress of Rhyme," a poem unpublished in Clare's lifetime, which contains this tour-de-force passage about a nightingale's song:

The more I listened and the more
Each note seemed sweeter than before
And aye so different was the strain
Shed scarce repeat the note again
—"Chew-chew Chew-chew" and higher still
"Cheer-cheer Cheer-cheer"—more loud and shrill
"Cheer-up Cheer-up cheer-up"—and dropt
Low "tweet tweet tweet jug jug jug"—and stopt
One moment just to drink the sound
Her music made and then a round
Of stranger witching notes was heard
As if it was a stranger bird
"Wew-wew wew-wew chur-chur chur-chur
Woo-it woo-it"—could this be her
"Tee-rew Tee-rew tee-rew tee-rew
Chew-rit chew-rit"—and ever new
"Will-will will-will, grig-grig grig-grig"
The boy stopt sudden on the brig
To hear the "tweet tweet tweet" so shill
Then "jug jug jug"—and all was still
A minute—when a wilder strain
Made boys and woods to pause again
Words were not left to hum the spell

These lines seek not merely to evoke but to *embody* the birdsong's "strange[ness]" on its own terms. Clare takes his use of dialect words one step further by attempting to apprehend the bird's song as a song with its own structural integrity, however much that integrity defies "words." This passage exemplifies what Paulin in his introduction to *Major Works* terms

> *an animism in Clare which suffuses his treatment of living things, making them absolutely and uniquely themselves, yet at the same time the representation of the haynish poet who so lovingly observes and describes them.*

The central political event of Clare's life was not the French Revolution but the General Enclosure Acts of the early 18th century. "To a Fallen Elm," a masterpiece of Clare's *Midsummer Cushion*-era poems, demonstrates the way he was able to turn a poem of personal remembrance into a scathing political protest. The poem starts off more or less like William Cowper's "Yardley Oak":

Old Elm that murmured in our chimney top
The sweetest anthem autumn ever made
And into mellow whispering calms would drop
When showers fell on thy many colored shade
And when dark tempests mimic thunder made
While darkness came as it would strangle light
With the black tempest of a winter night
That rocked thee like a cradle to thy root
How did I love to hear the winds upbraid
Thy strength without while all within was mute

This loving evocation of a particular tree could serve, as it does in Cowper, as the springboard for a meditation on the vicissitudes of Time, but Clare's poem takes a startlingly vehement turn:

Thus came enclosure—ruin was her guide
But freedoms clapping hands enjoyed the sight
Tho comforts cottage soon was thrust aside
And workhouse prisons raised upon the scite
Een natures dwelling far away from men
The common heath became the spoilers prey
The rabbit had not where to make his den
And labours only cow was drove away
No matter—wrong was right and right was wrong
And freedoms brawl was sanction to the song

Such was thy ruin music making Elm
The rights of freedom was to injure thine
As thou wert served so would they overwhelm
In freedoms name the little that is mine
And these are knaves that brawl for better laws
And cant of tyranny in stronger powers
Who glut their vile unsatiated maws
And freedoms birthright from the weak devours

The rage and passion of the poem's conclusion are Clare's unique contribution to the pastoral tradition. "To a Fallen Elm," as Bate suggests in his biography of Clare,

> *is one of his starkest attacks on the hypocrisy whereby "improvement" and enclosure are embarked upon in the name of "freedom" but bring only oppression. ... This magnificent lyric, at once elegy and protest poem, lay unknown and unpublished in the Peterborough Museum until well into the twentieth century.*

How would Clare's oeuvre have been read and appreciated differently had this poem, and others just as masterful from the *Midsummer Cushion* manuscript, been published in his lifetime?

Besides a few of the well-anthologized descriptive poems, Clare's asylum poetry has been the most read and celebrated of his work since his death. Such well-known poems as "I Am," "Clock a Clay," and "Song" ("I hid my love when young while I") deserve their fame for the way they modulate mournfulness and the ecstasy of visionary experience. I will close this review with one of the more out-of-the-way asylum poems, "Autumn," with a hope that the reader has been sufficiently convinced of Clare's inimitable greatness to seek out the poems collected in these two recent selections.

The thistle down's flying Though the winds are all still
On the green grass now lying Now mounting the hill
The spring from the fountain Now boils like a pot
Through stones past the counting It bubbles red hot

The ground parched and cracked is Like over baked bread
The greensward all wrecked is Bents dried up and dead
The fallow fields glitter Like water indeed
And gossamers twitter Flung from weed unto weed

Hill tops like hot iron Glitter hot i' the sun
And the rivers we're eyeing Burn to gold as they run
Burning hot is the ground Liquid gold is the air
Who ever looks round Sees Eternity there ■

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