2011

John Clare and the Art of Politics

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Imagine, if you will, that you are a young student enrolled in a private university in the United States of America. Yours was an essentially conservative, middle-class upbringing. You are earnest and intellectually ambitious to a degree. Good grades came easily. You graduated near the top of your secondary school and so excelled in English that you may harbour ambitions of becoming a writer yourself. What are you to make of the following three stanzas from John Clare's 'Don Juan'?

*Children are fond of sucking sugar candy*
*& maids of sausages – larger the better*
*Shopmen are fond of good sigars & brandy*
*& I of blunt – & if you change the letter*
*To C or K it would be quite as handy*
*& throw the next away – but I’m your debtor*
*For modesty – yet wishing nought between us*
*I’d hawl close to a she as vulcan did to venus*
*I really can’t tell what this poem will be*
*About – nor yet what trade I am to follow*
*I thought to buy old wigs – but that will kill me*
*With cold starvation – as they’re beaten hollow*
*Long speeches in a famine will not fill me*
*& madhouse traps still take me by the collar*
*So old wig bargains now must be forgotten*
*The oil that dressed them fine has made them rotten*
*I wish old wigs were done with ere they’re mouldy*
*I wish—but heres the papers large & lusty*
*With speeches that full fifty time they’ve told ye*
*—Noble Lord John to sweet Miss Fanny Fusty*
*Is wed—a lie good reader I ne’er sold ye*
*—Prince Albert goes to Germany & must he*
*Leave the queen’s snuff box where all fools are strumming*
*From addled eggs no chickens can be coming*
One of the first things you might notice is how little this conforms to your experience of poetry – neither the rich, expressive vein of lyric worked by so many poets since Wordsworth, nor the glimmering shards of High-Modernist assemblages such as The Waste Land. Written while Clare was incarcerated at the High Beech asylum, ‘Don Juan’ is a fractious, allusive, topical, and decidedly promiscuous poem that presents numerous problems in the classroom.

There are what we might call its moral challenges. The vulgar sexual punning of ‘Don Juan’, its implications of genitalia and fellatio, and deep-seated misogyny form a hurdle for my mainly conservative Midwestern students. In addition to these moral provocations, which test our sensibilities more than our comprehension, ‘Don Juan’ presents numerous cognitive challenges. What are we to make of its obsession with consumption? To what extent do we follow its vexing puns or its elastic metaphors? How readily do we sift and make sense of its abrupt shifts in tone, register, and topic? For some, the poem’s thirty-four ottava-rima stanzas seem less a cohesive utterance than a ‘circuit for intensities’. Finally, there are the practical challenges. A thicket of political reference and allusion, ‘Don Juan’ is exceedingly topical. For undergraduates with little knowledge of the mid-nineteenth-century political landscape – of Queen Victoria’s marriage to Prince Albert; of Melbourne, Wellington, and Peel, Whigs and Tories, and the election of 1841; of Corn Laws (1815) which kept the price of grains at artificially inflated levels; of the Reform Act (1832) which extended the franchise and remapped political boroughs; of Enclosure (1801) and the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834) which exacerbated the sufferings of many agricultural laborers – the poem can be extremely frustrating.

You will not be surprised, then, to hear that almost invariably students come to class piqued. They are thoroughly convinced that ‘Don Juan’ is a bad poem, that Clare is a bad poet, and, I suspect, that I am a bad person for having made them read it. Although the intensity of their response short-circuits the kind of critical analysis I hope to foster, it also offers me a way in. So that’s where we start – why they are so put out by a poem. Quite simply, they feel duped. They know what a poem is supposed to look like, what it should sound like, what it should feel like as you turn it on your tongue. They know what a poem is supposed to do. ‘Don Juan’ fails to conform to their notion of poetry. In other words, comparing it to the stock of literature – however rich or scant – they have
built up over their years as readers, they have formed some sort of opinion about its merit as a poem. Although I don’t frame our discussion in these terms, this initial foray suggests how ‘Don Juan’ opens the question of aesthetic value, generic norms, and reader expectations. By the end of the class period, I want the students to realize that this is exactly what Clare’s poem is designed to do.

And that is what I want to suggest here as well. Briefly exploring some of the poem’s elusive political references and overt Byronic re-imaginings, I want to share how an eye to the poem’s political valences encourages us to reconsider aesthetic value and the historical contingency of such sensibilities.³
In the poem’s thirtieth stanza Clare writes:

Lord Byron poh – the man wot rites the werses
& is just what he is & nothing more
Who with his pen lies like the mist disperses
& makes all nothing as it was before (ll. 263-6)

Hold on to Byron for a moment. I want to begin with the word *mists*, which links the poem to the Enlightenment discourse on taste and the humoral theory upon which it drew. That theory, as Denise Gigante has noted, held that ill-digested food could breed corrupt humors that would ascend directly to the brain from the stomach. These mists or vapours would obstruct the operations of mind until properly dispersed. Throughout the eighteenth century, debates about Taste applied this concept metaphorically to aesthetic sensibility. David Hume, for instance, posited that such mists could corrupt the faculties of the Man of Taste. We can, though, rid ourselves of the mists of humoral defect, Hume believed, purging our way to clarity. Physical taste thus served as an analogue for the aesthetic discernment by which the Man of Taste was distinguished. Edmund Burke, too, located aesthetic taste in the body but believed that these sensations could not be rooted out. The most we can do is hide our appetite, regulate our brute and asocial desires. The goal of the Man of Taste, then, was to transcend the material body, and over time the metaphorical connotations of taste quickly overshadowed its original bodily reference as Hume, Burke, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, and others sought to refine unruly appetite into aesthetic taste.

The embodied basis of aesthetic taste would, of course, have profound implications for Burke’s political work years later in light of the French revolution, where the ‘swinish multitude’ having succumbed to their ‘filthy Appetites’ threaten the social order. As Gigante observes, ‘Burke capitalized on the shameless appetite of the food-grubbing swine as a symbol for those who threatened the aestheticized ideal of national community’. The inner struggle between physical appetite and social propriety enacted within the individual Man of Taste was projected into the social realm and fierce debates over national identity.

To help students grasp this process, I provide them with copies of several political prints. In *French Liberty. British Slavery* (1792), for example – in which an emaciated Frenchman celebrates his
liberty while gnawing on leeks in contrast to a rotund John Bull who grumbles about high taxes while setting to a sizable repast of meat and ale – consumption functions as a process through which national boundaries, or, social bodies, were delineated and debated. The patriotic design of *Reform Advised, Begun, Compleat* (1793) offers a similarly admonitory tale in which a well-fed John Bull – whose 'good constitution' is both physiological and political – is duped and physically depleted by French reformers.⁶

The iconography of consumption was utilized as well to contest the social order in Britain. In *Substitutes for Bread; – or – Right Honourables, Saving the Loaves & Dividing the Fishes* (1795), government ministers feast on food made of tax money while a crowd identifying itself as the 'starving swine' petitions for relief. As such images suggest, I tell my students, starvation was never far away for the multitude of Britain’s laborers throughout this period. In 1795, unusually cold weather devastated crops, doubled the death rate, and caused riots.⁷ We discuss as well how poor harvests in 1816-1818, in the late 1820s, and again in the late 1830s caused considerable distress and political unrest across the nation. Early in the century, Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote to Thomas Poole: 'The Farmers in these Northern Countries are getting rich. Their Crops last year were excellent; but the Country itself is starving'.⁸ So dire were the circumstances, observed Coleridge, that England had become 'a place where the laborious Poor are dying with Grass with[in] their Bellies!'⁹

As he recounts in his ‘Journey out of Essex’ (1841), Clare himself had been forced to such measures, subsisting on grass during his brief escape from the asylum in July 1841. And in ‘Don Juan’ he specifically invokes the spectre of material deprivation borne by those barely able to clothe or feed themselves:

—I wish for poor men luck—an honest praxis
Cheap food & cloathing—no corn laws or taxes

I wish—but there is little got bye wishing
I wish that bread & great coats ne’er had risen
I wish that there was some such word as ‘pishun
For rhyme sake for my verses must be dizen
With dresses fine—as hooks with baits for fishing
I wish all honest men were out of prison
I wish M.P’s. would spin less yarn – nor doubt
But burn false bills & cross bad taxes out (ll. 47-56)
Clare desires an honest praxis for his peers that stands against the yarn-spinning of M.P.s, whose fiscal policies – ‘corn laws’ and ‘taxes’ – contribute to the abject condition of Britain’s workers struggling to acquire the bare necessities of life. As I have suggested elsewhere, Clare decries the fiscal policies and false promises that inflated prices for manufacturers while exacerbating hardship for the laboring poor. More to the point, however, is the method by which the poem articulates this concern. Again and again ‘Don Juan’ registers its political complaint against the backdrop of the lived reality of hunger and want: ‘Long speeches in a famine will not fill me’.

III.

In tracing this social history, I have treated mists as what Richard Strier would call a ‘mention’. That is, the mere mention of a word – mists – allows the critic to consider some aspect of culture more generally – the hardships faced by Britain’s laboring poor. We might also ask ourselves, though, how mists is ‘used’ within the poem, allowing the work itself to provide the initial context. For while it is true that ‘Don Juan’ encourages us to look beyond the text to its political context, it also consistently calls attention to itself as a literary artifact, a deliberately shaped work of art. For instance in the thirtieth stanza:

Lord Byron poh – the man wot rites the werses
& is just what he is & nothing more
Who with his pen lies like the mist disperses
& makes all nothing as it was before (ll. 263-6)

Dismissing poetic identity as little more than style, these lines interrogate the very nature of aesthetic production. Considering mist as a ‘use’ helps us recognize that the poem’s political critique is, at the same time, a critique of nineteenth-century aesthetics.

That Clare was familiar with contemporary aesthetic debates is clear from his unpublished ‘Essay on Landscape’. Denouncing the ‘extravagances of false effects [...] by which beautiful effective compositions are produced but not paintings from Nature as they profess to be’, Clare contends that for a painting to have any merit, it must demonstrate a fidelity to the scene as it exists. Such merit Clare locates in Peter DeWint, ‘[s]he only artist that produces real English scenery in which British landscapes are seen’. DeWint’s treatments of the broad, Lincolnshire landscape ‘are the very copys
of nature'.

‘There are no mountains lifting up the very plains with their extravagant altitudes no old ruins with their worn & mossy claptrap for effect but simple woods spreading their quiet draperys to the summer sky & undiversified plains bask in the poetry of light & sunshine’. Such work emerges necessarily out of intense, direct observation. For Nature, Clare observes, ‘rewards the faith of her worshippers by revealing such beautys in her settings that the fanciful never meet with — tho they imagine mountains & rivers & rocks & cataracts where they are not’. Essentially Clare believed that we can experience the beauty of the natural world, its ‘simplicity of merit’, only in a direct, phenomenological encounter unmediated by pre-conceptions. In other words, we need to look through our eyes rather than through our own expectations.

As Clare’s terms indicate, the ‘Essay’ is a rejection of the generalizing tendencies of picturesque conventions — its predilection for broken lines, rough edges, crumbling ruins, and jagged mountains. ‘[T]hat peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture’, the picturesque reads the landscape through abstract principles culled from the work of artists such as Claude Lorrain, Nicholas Poussin, and Salvator Rosa. ‘[C]hastened by the rules of art’, the picturesque imagination refines nature. Faced with a pleasing prospect, for instance, ‘[w]e examine what would amend the composition: how little is wanting to reduce it to the rules of our art’. To identify something as picturesque, then, is already to experience it second-hand, to see it in terms of an artistic re-presentation: ‘We must ever recollect’, Gilpin observed, ‘that nature is most defective in composition; and must be a little assisted. Her ideas are too vast for picturesque use, without the restraint of rules’.

Wildly popular, Gilpin’s work encouraged a multitude to seek out the ‘artistic effect’ in nature — rather than nature itself — opening the landscape to visual consumption as leisured tourists chased after scenes and prospects that would conform to picturesque principles. If the vogue for the picturesque was a passing fad, Clare recognized its far-reaching effects. For the kinds of observation encouraged by picturesque principles cultivated habits of experience as well. They organized ways not just of seeing but also of being in the world.

In contrast to the aesthetic detachment fostered by picturesque travel — ‘the province of the picturesque eye is to survey nature [...] It throws its glances around in the broad-cast stile. It comprehends an extensive tract at each sweep’— Clare championed a more particular relationship to the natural world, a relationship based
in close physical encounter and intimate local knowledge. What we might call an aesthetic of participation rather than prospect, 'I love good fellowship & wit & punning', he writes in 'Don Juan':

I love 'true love' & God my taste defend
I hate most damnably all sorts of cunning –
I love the Moor & Marsh & Ponders end – |ll. 146-8|

Against deception and false appearances, 'all sorts of cunning', Clare sets his 'taste' for truth, companionship, and the local natural world. The moor & marsh – a far cry from picturesque mountains and mossy ruins – are complemented by the named locale, Ponders End, which grounds Clare's experience in a particular, local context.

In a recent article, Simon Jarvis has suggested that 'technique' is 'the way in which art thinks and the way in which the work of art most intimately registers historical experience'. This seems especially relevant to 'Don Juan', a lewd and fractious denunciation of polite English society. By the 1840s, when Clare was drafting the poem, middle-class consumerism had begun to regulate and organize social relations, part of a civilizing process through which the Victorian nation came into being. Taste, discernment, and civility were established as moral imperatives, while appetite and its corollary, desire, were sublimated, displacing materiality from public space.

In contrast to this trend, Clare cultivates a carnal aesthetic that challenges middle-class mores through its erotic imagery and promiscuous street-slang. Like Byron before him, Clare recognized that truth was correlative with the body. In his own 'Don Juan', however, Clare forgoes Byron's subtle punning for a more explicit profligacy: 'Prince Albert goes to Germany & must he / Leave the queens snuff box where all fools are strumming' (ll. 87-8, emphasis added). Identifying Queen Victoria's vagina as a luxury item stroked by all comers, Clare insists on the materiality of experience by way of the crudely sexualized body. Here and elsewhere, Clare deterritorializes language, pushing meaning to the point of collapse so that it might 'vibrate with a new intensity'. Frequently, Clare engages in a form of punning whereby sense fractures into a proliferation of potential meanings that deform and inform one another, deliberately resisting closure: 'In bills of fare you'll find a many courses / Yet all are innoccent as any maid is / Put these two dishes into one & dress it / & if there is a meaning – you may
guess it' (ll. 211-14). At other times he presses language beyond the realm of signification into its purely material *expression*: 'I wish that there was some such word as 'pishun / For rhyme sake' (ll. 51-2). Opening the signifying processes through which meaning is made, Clare illustrates how the aesthetic is complicit in the material deprivations borne by the poor.

I suggest to my students that this helps us better appreciate the Byronic oscillations we have encountered, for example in the seventh stanza, where the political lament is interrupted by self-reference:

I wish—but there is little got bye wishing  
I wish that bread & great coats ne'er had risen  
I wish that there was some such word as 'pishun  
For rhyme sake for my verses must be dizen  
With dresses fine—as hooks with bait for fishing  
I wish all honest men were out of prison  
I wish M.P's. would spin less yarn – nor doubt  
But burn false bills & cross bad taxes out

(ll. 49-56, emphasis added)

The interpenetration of style and politics in this stanza might be said to stand for the poem itself, which conjoins a government unresponsive to working-class needs with the aesthetic sensibilities underwriting middle-class consumerism:29

I wish I had a quire of foolscap paper  
Hot pressed—& crowpens—how I coud endite  
A silver candlestick & green wax taper  
Lord bless me what fine poems I would write (ll. 279-82)

Satirizing the public taste for luxury goods, Clare here reduces the poem to a commodity product, its quality determined by the 'fine' material from which it is made—'Hot pressed' 'foolscap paper', 'crow pens'. The political vector of this aesthetic economy is evident as well in Coleridge's letter to Thomas Poole quoted previously. 'The Country is divided into two Classes', he complains, 'one rioting & wallowing in the wantonness of wealth, the other struggling for the necessaries of Life.—The Booksellers feel this—Longman told me "that scarcely any, but Books of expence, sold well. Expensive Paper, & Ornaments &c were never layed out in vain. For the chief Buyers of Books were the Wealthy who bought them for Furniture"'.30
Far from family, friends, and the reading public that had once celebrated him, Clare adopts and extends the Byronic persona for his own ends. Though drafted in the confines of the asylum and bearing the trace of Clare's mental illness, 'Don Juan' is not merely the product of a mind turned in on itself. For in its progressive deterritorialization of language, Clare's poem enacts the suture of the individual and the political characteristic of 'minor' literature, that is, a literature in which 'the political domain has contaminated every statement'. As Deleuze and Guattari observe, the 'cramped space' of minor literature, 'forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensible, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it'. Nothing could be more true of Clare's 'Don Juan'.

To suggest, then, that 'Don Juan' is a work of minor literature is to see past its topical references, to acknowledge its earthy complexity, and to advocate its cutting insights and continued relevance. Offering students a lesson in how aesthetic values contribute to the formation of social bodies in modern consumer society, 'Don Juan' speaks to our own age of post-industrial capitalism, financial deregulation, and ever-expanding markets. It also just might afford them a model for reading and resisting these global currents.
NOTES

1 Lines 65-88. All subsequent references are by line number to Clare’s ‘Don Juan’, Later Poems I, pp. 89-102.


4 The summary that follows is indebted to Denise Gigante, Taste: A Literary History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). See especially the first chapter.

5 Gigante, Taste, p. 63.

6 Clare uses this pun in ‘Don Juan’: ‘O glorious constitution what a picking / Ye’ve had from your tax harvest & your tythe’ (ll. 239-40).

7 Gigante, Taste, p. 65.


9 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 710.


14 On Clare’s strategic use of the forms of Byronism, see Margaret Russett, ‘Like “Wedding Gowns or Money from the Mint”: Clare’s Borrowed Inheritance’, Romantic Circles Praxis Series, March 1999, <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/law/russett/mrusst.htm>, who observes that ‘to win the “title” of poet is to become not Byron but “Byron”’ (paragraph 9). Philip Martin provides a similarly insightful perspective. He observes that Clare’s ‘deliberate confusion of authors [...] raises questions about the point of textual origin’ while simultaneously interrogating ‘how authorial identity is
rendered or granted' (p. 72). As Martin suggests, 'texts engender authors, and not the other way around' (p. 88). In addition to those mentioned here and above, Clare's relationship to Byron is explored in Anne Barton, 'John Clare reads Lord Byron', Romanticism, 2.2 (1996), 127-48; Brewer; Goldsmith; Mark Storey, The Poetry of John Clare: A Critical Introduction (New York: St Martin's Press, 1974); and Edward Strickland, 'Boxer Byron: A Clare Obsession', Byron Journal, 17 (1989), 57-76.


16 Clare, 'Essay on Landscape', p. 212 (emphasis added).

17 Ibid., p. 211.

18 Ibid., p. 212.

19 Ibid., p. 211.

20 Ibid., p. 213.


23 Gilpin, Three Essays, p. 49.

24 Gilpin, Three Essays, p. 67. In one of two supplemental essays on sketching appended to this volume, Gilpin explained that by copying nature he meant its distinct parts, 'not of putting the whole together in a picturesque manner; which we seldom seek in nature, because it is seldom found. Nature gives us the materials of landscape; woods, rivers, lakes, trees, ground, and mountains: but leaves us to work them up into pictures, as our fancy leads' (Three Essays, p. 159).


26 This tendency has been discussed extensively. See, for example, John Barrell, The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare (Cambridge University Press, 1972); Elizabeth K. Helsinger, 'Clare and the Place of the Peasant Poet', Chapter 4 of Rural Scenes and National Representation: Britain, 1815-1850 (Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 141-61; and James McKusick, 'Beyond the Visionary Company: John Clare's resistance to Romanticism', Haughton, pp. 221-37. For a more recent treatment of Clare's particularity see Timothy Morton, 'John Clare's Dark Ecology', Studies in Romanticism, 47 (Summer 2008), 179-93.

27 Simon Jarvis, 'For a Poetics of Verse', PMLA, 125:4 (October 2010), 931.

28 Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature, p. 19.

29 On 'Don Juan' as a commodity object see Russett and Goldsmith.


31 On Clare's use of the Byronic persona at this moment in the poem, see Russett, paragraph 15.

32 Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature, p. 17.

33 Ibid., p. 17.