

The Interaction of Poetry and Science in John Clare's Nature Poetry

المزج بين الشعر والعلم في قصائد جون كلير عن الطبيعة

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Abstract

The current study will look closely at how John Clare has brought the aesthetic and the scientific expression together in his nature poetry focusing on two key areas; Botany and botanical ecology. In spite of the fact that Clare has been influenced by the botanical poetry of the Enlightenment period, his nature poetry is distinguished by the use of simple names to refer to plants normally used by villagers instead of the Carl Linnaeus nomenclature which if he used might contradict his idea of simplicity and learning botany in nature itself rather than in laboratory. He has employed the technique of observation and data-collection writing his poetry right on the spot, which is a scientific method generally used by botanists in their study of plants. In his botanical expeditions, Clare has been enthusiastic about mentioning every plant, particularly those that do not look very much interesting to the poetic eye of his contemporaries, such as algae, moss, herbs, and weeds. He wished his poetry would become a record of every plant and its ecological relationship with other living things, which has made it important for him to notice every single plant in its natural habitat in order to achieve botanical accuracy blended with beauty in description.

Key words: John Clare, poetry, botany, botanical ecology,

الخلاصة

تقوم الدراسة الحالية بالنظر عن كُتب الـى طريقة جون كلير في الجمع بين التعبيرين الجمالي والعلمي في شعره عن الطبيعة مركزة على مجالين اساسيين هما علم النبات وعلم البيئة النباتية. وبالرغم من ان الشعر النباتي في عصر التنوير كان له تأثير على كلير إلا ان شعره عن الطبيعة تميز باحتوائه على اسماء بسيطة للنباتات يستخدمها القرويون بدلاً من مصطلحات كارلوس ليننيوس والتي في حال استخدمها كان من الممكن ان تعارض افكاره عن البساطة ودراسة علم النبات في الطبيعة ذاتها وليس في المختبر. إتبع كلير تقنية المراقبة وجمع المعلومات عندما كتب شعره حيث الموقع الذي يقف عليه، ويستخدم هذه التقنية علماء النبات في دراستهم للنباتات. ولقد كان كلير متحمس جداً لذكر جميع النباتات في شعره وخصوصاً تلك التي لم تثر الملكة الشعرية لدى معاصريه كالطحالب والحزازيات والاعشاب والحشائش. رغب كلير في ان يصبح شعره سجل لكل النباتات وعلاقتها البيئية مع الاحياء الاخرى مما جعله يلاحظ كل نبات في بيئته الطبيعية ليحقق الدقة العلمية ممزوجة بجمال الوصف.

الكلمات المفتاحية: جون كلير، الشعر، علم النبات، علم البيئة النباتي

1. Introduction

Subjectivity and objectivity of expression have formed a clear-cut distinction between poetry and science along the ages with respect to nature. Scientists accuse poets of the natural world in terms of personal life, fantastic vision or absent-mindedness among natural existence. On the other hand, poets disapprove of scientists' reliance on facts and accuse them of killing nature in the name of scientific study. Thus, the different perspectives of each party on nature have led to a prolonged dispute between them that is never thought to settle. However, between 18th and 19th Centuries, a physicist; Erasmus Darwin, a chemist; Humphry Davey, a mathematician; William Rowan and many other scientists have published poetry that complements their specializations. Herein the discord has turned into more of harmoniousness during the Age of Enlightenment on the part of the scientists, while for poets, it enhanced into a defense of one of its essentials; imagination, for although fact is essential for them, yet not as essential as imagination when writing poetry.

In terms of nature, being a naturalist, Erasmus Darwin is the first to blend the science of botany with poetry in his poems resulting in what is now known as Botanical poetry, which carried both the observational as well as the aesthetic elements. He has found in verse a more powerful expression of nature than prose to what King-Hele (1999) terms as 'popularizing the subject'. He has regarded Linnaeus' writings 'so deadly dull' (King-Hele, 1999:25), and so he translated them in verse, because he considers prose less effective on readers, making nature seem lifeless and concentrate on nature's scientific side leaving its beauty behind. Thereupon, Darwin has introduced the Linnaeus system of classification in both parts of his *The Botanic Garden; The Love of the Plants and The Economy of Vegetation* in verse. He not only presents the system of classification in his own language, but also in his own style which he sums up in his advertisement of the poem; 'to enlist imagination under the banner of science' (Darwin, 2006:5) and the poem has been praised by critics as being an invaluable guide to science. Darwin's style has had a subtle effect on the next generation of poets. One of the first Romantic poets, who have appreciated Darwin's style and agreed with it, is John Clare. He admires Darwin's narrative natural history, but has held Linnaeus system of classification excessive scientific reflection of nature that lacks poetic feeling.

2. Literature Review

Clare has been interested in facts more than imagination. He enthusiastically embraces the observational style in presenting nature. However, he distinguishes the poetic eye of the man of taste; the poet, from that of the rustic as well as the botanist, the man of science:

the rustic, despite seeing a plant in its original setting, sees it only as a plant while the botanist or naturalist, taking it out of context, sees it only as a particular type of plant. The poetic eye of the man of taste, by contrast, sees the plant in various contexts-environmental, historical, and literary (Weiger, 2008:62).

Clare disagrees with Darwin's use of Linnaeus Latin terminology of plants, and he has encountered great difficulty in learning and memorizing them, but that has not stopped him from writing about every distinct plant he observes in his botanical yet poetical expeditions, which he has made in his village, Helpston. Being a peasant poet, Clare prefers using the vernacular names for plants, which have been used by his fellow villagers. He has had what one would feel it as if his commitment to the natural world of Helpston. Therefore, he has strongly desired to record every single plant in Helpston, whether tiny or huge using a unique

style of uniting the observational with the aesthetic. He rejects the strange-sounding scientific names of Botany and regards them devoid of feelings. Furthermore, he disagrees with the way botanists treat plants not as living organisms, but as subject of study:

I love to look on nature with a poetic feeling, which magnifys the pleasure... I love to see the nightingale in its hazel retreat and the cuckoo hiding in its solitude of oaken foliage and not to examine their carcasses in glass cages yet naturalists and botanists seem to have no taste for this poetical feeling... I feel as happy as they can in finding a new species of field flower or butter flye which I have not seen before yet I have no desire further to dry the plant or torture the butter flye by sticking it on a cork board with a pin (Williams, 2013:215).

Clare has had prose attempts to document plants. He felt the need to have his own book of natural history, especially of Helpston. Unfortunately, he dropped the idea due to his publishers', Taylor and hessy's, warnings. They thought it would take him away from his audience, who have known and admired him as a poet and not prose writer. Moreover, this attempt seemed to have fueled the conflict between the man of taste and the man of science inside Clare. However, this has not stopped him from being the man of both. He has recorded every, if not all, living plants in his village, Helpston, in his poetry. Instead of keeping the plants dead in the laboratory jars for study, Clare has adopted a scientific approach of observation and data collection writing his poems right on the spot during village walks. This approach has been adopted by Darwin decades before Clare, and the former has laid the ground work for the synergy between science and poetry, making a new form of poetry that started with Enlightenment age surviving 'the age of brass' (Peacock, 1921), which favors sentiment over description in nature poetry.

Out of harmony with the prevailing subjective view of nature in Romantic poetry, Clare's nature poetry seems far from subjectivity and framing (Hess, 2008). He found in description the suitable form to convey a vivid picture of what he observes in nature, even though he was poetically underestimated for choosing description over sentiment by a major Romantic poet like John Keats. He has found beauty in every single living being in nature, therefore, more than 370 plants are recorded in his poetry.

3. Methodology

Writing on the spot is Clare's first trial in writing poetry. His very first poems are what Jarvis (1997:184) refers to as 'walking poems'. Most of his nature poems are botanical expeditions made by a passionate botanist to inspect the flora of his region. During these expeditions, Clare has presented details by observing plants in woods, forests and landscapes. The plants he presents are living and not devoid of emotions of their own. They take their part in Clare's poetry as beings and not as abstract ideas. Each single plant adds beauty to the whole. Clare believes that embracing such plant-like beings in poetry is one of the distinguishing qualities of a man of science and taste; 'but he the man of science and of taste/Sees wealth far richer in the worthless waste/Where bits of lichens and a sprig of moss/ Will all the raptures of his mind engross' ('Shadows of Taste' 107-110). Although some of these plants are not aesthetically pleasing like algae or moss, yet they are significantly present in Clare's observations with specific mention of their habitat; tree moss in 'the elm tree's mossy arms ('Summer Evening' 138), watermoss in 'Seek the spring-head lined with moss ('Noon' 56). He might not have used the Linnaean nomenclature to identify types of moss, however, identifying some of their habitat with the word 'mossy' is perhaps a timid attempt to create a taxonomy of this plant. Some of are

identified by shape like Marimo, which he refers to as ‘moss-ball’ (‘Home Happiness’ 122). Although algae is not aesthetically pleasing as mentioned before, Clare has seen it as complementing nature’s divinity: ‘Thou humble clothing of the trees/Moss, in whose meanness genius sees/ A world of wonders shine;/Put on your Satin-smoothing green. /And let your maker’s power be seen, /And workmanship divine (‘Song of Praise’67-72). Moreover, he artistically displays its feature of survival in ‘The Flitting’, (Mahood, 2016) and how it may outlast human existence: ‘and David’s crown hath passed away/Yet poesy breaths his shepherd skill/His palace lost-and to this day/The little moss is blooming still (‘The Flitting’85-88). Clare even observes their use by both Man and bird, by Man as in ‘The Flitting’; ‘cushions’ to form seats, and birds as ‘loose material’ (79) woven into bird nests together with oak leaves and scraps of grass in ‘The Nightingale’s Nest’.

Another plant which Clare has observed while some poets regard as, let us say, aesthetically inferior weeds. They are considered as harmful to other plants; crowding them out and taking their food and water, which prevent the affected plants from growing. However, for a botanist not all weeds are harmful. Clare has made a distinction between beneficial and harmful weeds, referring to their damaging effect upon plants’ growth in ‘Solitude’, ‘murmuring-dribbling drop by drop/ when dead leaves their progress stop’ (31-2). Also, in some of his late lyrics, he calls cornfield weeds as ‘headaches’, indicating the effect of their smell on people (Mahood, 2016), whereas in ‘The village Doctress’, Clare celebrates weeds of widespread fame, viz. herbs. He regards them sacred and wholesome. He uncovers a broad knowledge of herbal medicine. He also lists herbs like Adder’s Tongue, which he calls Earthen Tongue, *Artemisia Absintium* in Linnaean nomenclature appears in the poem as ‘wormwood’ in Clare’s own terminology, *Prunell Vulgaris* as ‘Dwarf heath mallows’, and last but not least ‘creeping five leaved grass’, whose botanical name is Cinquefoil or *Potentilla Reptans*. All of these weeds/herbs are presented with their medicinal benefits of healing wounds, curing cold gout, worms and fever (Lines, 1986). Whether beneficial or not, Clare celebrates weeds’ ‘disorderliness’ (Haughton et al. 1994:112) in nature. He believes them to be the symbol of nature’s exquisite messiness, which Man should not intervene with. They also represent nature’s refusal to subdue to human intervention as weeds withstand improvement and cultivation (Rignall et al. 2012).

Clare’s observations are not limited to plants alone, but he also has inspected the mutualistic relationship between plants and other organisms, particularly the ecological interaction between insects and plants. Many of his poems reveal considerable knowledge of plant ecology. He records the harmonized relationship between flowers and their pollinators like bees, butterflies, beetles ...etc.

In ‘The Eternity of Nature’, Clare refers to some detailed biological facts that are related to the process of bees and flowers pollination particularly in the lines:

What hours the dewy mornings’ infancy
Hangs on each blade of grass and every tree,
And sprengs the red thighs of the humble bee,
Who gins betimes unwearied minstrelsy;
Who breakfasts, dines, and most divinely sups.

(65-9)

Firstly, a honeybee usually carries pollen on the hairs of its hind legs; thighs, which is called the pollen basket or *Corbicula* while it feeds on the flowers’ nectar. Secondly, the dew helps in

moisturizing the bee's legs which eventually doubles the amount of Pollen carried by it (Coletta, 1995).

Clare often describes the symbiotic relationship between bees or any other pollinating insects and flowers as a love relationship. In 'September', 'the butterflye enjoys his hour/ and flirts unchaced from flower to flower' (15-6). Whereas for bees, Clare is aware that they are the most efficient insect pollinators, hence, the love imagery with them appears more powerful;

And when she turned to go O I 'd caught her mantle then,
 And wooed her like a lover by my lonely side to stay,
 Aye knelt and worshipped on as love in beautys bower
 And clung upon her smile as a bee upon a flower.

(*'Remembrances'*: 73-6)

And in 'A Spring Morning', pollination is portrayed as physical love; 'fresh are new opened flower untouched and free/ from the bold rifling of the amorous bee' (5-6).

Description of birds' nests has also carried with it, Clare's observations of plant-bird commensalism. He has had great enthusiasm towards discovering hidden nests and giving detailed description, particularly of the plant detritus, which birds use as material for building their nests. This may highlight the pivotal ecological role dead plants play in nature, in the 'Nightingale's Nest', the nightingale builds its nest with 'dead oaken leaves' (78), and "The Yellowhammer's Nest' is bult with 'bleached stubbles and withered fare/That last year's harvest left upon the land' (10-11). On the other hand, Clare's observations on the relationship between birds like raven, wryneck, sparrows, woodpecker and many other birds, and trees building their nests on their branches, drilling holes in their trunks to nest or using ready- made holes for the same purpose demonstrates his understanding of the commensal relationship between them.

Secrecy is a motif in Clare's bird nests poems, which have been archived via plants. Plants aid birds in hiding their nests from danger and providing it with the protection needed, for instance, the nightingale uses bramble to maintain secrecy and protect its 'hermit's mossy cell' (*'Nightingale's Nest'*:88), which intruders invade by crushing the bramble, and ravens find in branchless old oaks their fortified towers against human nest invaders.

4. Conclusion

Clare has been looking for a way to incorporate both fact and feeling of the natural world in his poetry; therefore, he took the step that Erasmus Darwin had taken before him by writing botanical poetry. He continued the approach through jotting down his expeditions and observations in poetic form. He has developed a unique style, in which he used pastoral names to refer to plants instead of Linnaeus nomenclature, which he regards devoid of taste.

Using the descriptive type of poetry, Clare has documented the beauty he has seen in the natural world of his home village, Helpston. He has also included in his poetry observations of plants with more botanical significance, such as moss, herbs and algae rather than aesthetic value. He has also made sure to mention most of those neglected plants for being far from beauty of nature in Romantic poetic perspective, highlighting their botanical role in nature as well as their aesthetic role, being an integral part of that whole. In addition, he has brought poetry and the science of botanical ecology together when documenting the mutually beneficial interaction between plants and other organisms.

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