

Clearsighted

The Threadbare Coat: Selected Poems, Thomas A Clark (170pp, £12.99, Carcanet)

I first heard of Thomas A Clark through an artist friend who had had a small exhibition of his work in Nailsworth at The Cairn Gallery, the space Clark and his partner ran. The gallery showed small, intimate art works, mostly rooted in natural images or minimalism. I also started to come across Clark's poems, often published as tiny pamphlets or cards, in similarly tiny print runs, at various small press book fairs and readings.

If this sometimes added an air of what I can only describe as *preciousness* to Clark's texts, it also suited them. (Although it took me several years to find out that the coloured card in *Three Colours* [Moschatel Press, 1982] actually opened out, and that I hadn't simply bought three pieces of coloured card in a printed wrapper!) Clark's poetry or prose poetry is clearheaded, observant and at first glance simplistic. It uses repetition, lists, variation and pattern to re-present the natural world in small poems or sequences of small poems.

More recently, Clark has published some larger collections with Carcanet, who now offer a selected poems to the reader. I'm very aware of how this changes the work, and I am not sure this change is a positive. When a single poem is all we get within a carefully designed and hand-crafted pamphlet we pay attention to it, a book encourages the reader to move on, perhaps not spending enough time contemplating what we have just read and how it works. Take this untitled poem (p. 54) for instance:

a
thin
trickle
of
water
through
the
watercress
is
enough

A single sentence meanders down the page (although actually it is a repeated indent for every other line), mimicking the trickle of water being written about. There is no description beyond the word 'thin', it is otherwise a simple statement of what is. We are, however provoked into consideration of what this water is 'enough' for? For the watercress to grow? For the narrator to enjoy?

Moving on to the next poem will put pause on us mulling the question over; and as simple (some would say simplistic) poetic statements come one after the other, the effect of these individual poems seem to be neutered rather than intensified. One becomes acutely aware of how little authorial intervention there is here, how little poetic invention; how often Clark uses the same patterns, forms and even vocabulary, to engage with the world around him.

Matthew Welton, who has edited this volume, offers a considered 12-part introduction, 'Thoughts on Form', but fails to mention two matters which I think are important. Firstly the idea of 'imagism', presenting an image anew, even as a someone immersed within the landscape rather than just observing; and secondly the work of Robert Lax within the context of concrete poetry (which Welton does discuss). Lax – whose work Clark has published – uses concrete poetry in a similar manner to Clark, playfully repeating imagistic lines, which sometimes evolve or rebound off other lines, themselves sometimes static, repeated or changing.

There is no doubt that Thomas A Clark is an important, engaged and engaging writer of contemporary nature poems, who playfully subverts the lyrical with a nod to Romanticism. I admire his non-egotistical writing, the way he acts as a lens for what he sees rather than an as an authorial commentator. *The Threadbare Coat* is a beautiful production, and an interesting selection, but its very straightforward book production is perhaps problematic: there must be a more appropriate and suitable way to gather up a selection of Clark's word and image than this.

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