

**Book Review*****Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*****Timothy Clark****(2015, Bloomsbury Publishing)****Reviewed by****Douglas Mark Ponton****University of Catania, Italy****E-mail: dmponton@hotmail.co.uk**

Ecocriticism has been defined as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty 1996: xviii), and this book concerns its relation to ‘the Anthropocene’ and potential planetary catastrophe. The theme is a vast one, in which our generation is inescapably implicated, whether we think of international political initiatives like the Kyoto protocol, or the mundane business of differentiated rubbish collection. The environmental picture is convincingly painted by Timothy Clark, with impressive supporting detail from other fields; but, of course, it is one with which most readers will be familiar. What seems new is its systematic application to literary criticism although, as a linguist, I cannot be sure of the novelty of the author’s positions, nor offer an authoritative response to his specific take on matters of literary/cultural criticism. Clark claims, by the by, that the special circumstances of the Anthropocene impose new duties on literary critics, though he admits that most of his colleagues are indifferent to it, preferring to see themselves instead as ‘minor cultural historians’. The ivory towers, however, will indeed be trembling, if Clark is right in his view that:

The disruptions of the Anthropocene are set to be so massive as to pose anew major questions of what criticism and literary interpretation are for.

From an interdisciplinary perspective, there are points where Clark’s observations come very close to critical discourse analysis, for example:

Like the word ‘natural’, ‘human’ seems to operate in countless texts, almost with the deliberate aim of numbing thought.

He also discusses the effects of *framing* an argument, another point of contact with linguistics. However, linguistic analysis *per se* is not his main focus: methodologically, an important tool comes from Allenby and Sarewitz (2011), who propose a three-level

model for analysing a sociological phenomenon such as the impact of the automobile. At level I, this is simply seen as a transport machine. At level II, it becomes part of broader socio-economic systems and practices involving roads, driving tests, and so on. Level III is still broader, and involves the whole history of the car, its role in 20th century socio-economic revolutions, the global petro-chemical industry, mass-market consumer capitalism, and so on. Applying considerations of *scale*, interpretations can shift; for example, from a more subjective focus, at level one, to the global associations of level three. In the field of critical linguistics, these notions could be applied to understanding the ‘discourse-historical’ background (Wodak 2001) of any text, literary or otherwise, with an ecological theme. Via these mechanisms, however, Clark involves the Anthropocene in his literary criticism of texts – from any historical period – on any topic whatsoever.

The central chapters of the book mainly consist in the application of an ‘Anthropocenic’ approach to various texts; a poem by Gary Snyder, and short stories by Raymond Carver and Henry Lawson, amongst others. What predominates is not, for example, the analysis of character – which is seen as old-style, ‘romantic’ criticism – but an examination of phenomena as seen from level III. Thus, what interests him in ‘Elephant’, a modern American short story, is not the central character’s personal drama, but the social patterns implicated, and the contribution of these to the developing planetary catastrophe of our own day. The same goes for Lawson’s ‘Telling Mrs Barker’, a harrowing tale of a man’s death from alcoholism in the Australian bush, in which the personal narrative dimension is re-contextualised in terms of historical processes, involving ‘European imperialism and colonisation of much of the world’. This begins to seem, after a while, a rather reductive reading position. Clark himself concedes, in fact, that:

Almost any twentieth-century Western text with some focus on urban life, making the usual normative assumptions about lifestyle made possible by a fossil-fuel based infrastructure, must lead to the same large-scale context.

As much as I agree with Clark’s ecological positions, share many of his sentiments and predictions, and appreciate the rigour with which he supports them, I find this an uninspiring approach to literature. When Eliot writes, in *Preludes*:

A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps / And then the lighting of the lamps

Is criticism to focus only on man’s exploitation of his environment – of animals, in the first place, and of natural resources, in the second, and on the relation of the whole to unfolding planetary disaster? Clark’s analysis of the Snyder poem, for instance, ignores any considerations of the technical or aesthetic qualities involved – which might be the focus of more traditional criticism – and focuses instead on the role of fire-watching, as yet another instance of man’s misunderstanding the environmental impacts of his actions.

The author might find matter for reflection in a recent paper by Andrew Goatly, which takes a less apocalyptic approach to literary texts, but is informed by the same environmental concern (Goatly 2017). Goatly shows how poets with ecological sensibility, including Wordsworth, but also more modern poets such as Edward Thomas and Alice Oswald, use a variety of techniques to represent the non-human world as agentive. This is in contrast with traditional grammar which, arguably, helps sustain the unequal and exploitative power relations that have marked our interaction with Nature since – as Clark himself mentions – the inception of agricultural practices, over 10,000 years ago.

The task facing ecocriticism, then, would be to draw attention to – and thereby promote – language use in which a genuinely ecological perspective can be traced. The poem by Gary Snyder which Clark explores, ‘Late August at Sourdough Lookout Mountain’ might represent an interesting point of departure:

Down valley a smoke haze
Three days heat, after five days rain
Pitch glows on the fir cones
Across rocks and meadows
Swarms of new flies

Criticism highlighting such representational patterns might have a role to play, if not in preventing the ‘Venusification’ of planet Earth, at least in mitigating the state of existential trauma Clark calls ‘Anthropocene disorder’, and hopefully leading towards a more harmonious future balance between man and nature.

References

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