

## **ECOCRITICISM ON THE EDGE. THE ANTHROPOCENE AS A THRESHOLD CONCEPT**

Timothy Clark

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(by Felicity Hand. Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)

felicity.hand@uab.cat

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143

The emergence of ecocritical theory, an area of cultural investigation that first saw the light in the 1990s, may be attributed to the rise of environmental awareness. Like other relatively new disciplines such as postcolonial theory, ecocriticism can often become opaque and excessively convoluted, which leads to a counterproductive situation. A discipline that demands an active participation in environmental policies on the part of scholars, students and the general public may actually scare off potential sympathisers. Any theory that is founded on a desire to create awareness should not become indifferent or oblivious to what we understand as the 'real world'. An excess of theoretical jargon can work against any idyllic notion of changing the world for the better. Timothy Clark's study *Ecocriticism on the Edge. The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* is relatively reader-friendly although it deals with concepts that need determination to grasp and internalize. It contains nine chapters, plus concluding remarks, a complete bibliography and an index. Each chapter features a subsection, in smaller font, which defines in more detail one of the specific concepts that the author has discussed in the chapter. Chapter 1 "The Anthropocene — Questions of Definition attempts to clarify the concept of the Anthropocene as the "newly recognized agent of humanity as a geological force [which] is something indiscernible in any of the individuals or even large groups of which it is composed" (15). The human impact on the entire biosphere has "achieved an unprecedented and arguably dangerous intensity" (15) with the

result that scientists and the general public have been far too slow to recognize the complexity and challenges involved.

Clark warns us that ecocriticism entails a close reexamination of what it actually means to be human in the first place, a being that is “inherently parasitic and polluting” (153). This becomes a constant call of attention throughout the book. Clark spends a great deal of textual space in highlighting what he considers to be deficient ecocriticism. He does not mince his words, as he often refers to the current work in ecocritical studies as “vulnerable to delusions” (21).

Chapter 2 “Imaging and Imagining the Whole Earth: the Terrestrial as Norm” —and chapters 4 and 5 later on— calls for thinking on scales of space and time much larger than is the customary practice. Clark argues that we cannot continue to regard the Earth as an entity one can understand as a whole as we are permanently inside it and therefore are incapable of perceiving it from elsewhere. He asks how far human perception is bound to a normalized scale of embodied experience on the Earth. We live our lives without a real internalized sense of the Earth as a planet. Clark analyzes various texts, including some canonical works such as Keats’ “Ode to Autumn”, from the standpoint of the new beginning, the threshold, that the Anthropocene represents for the world and for humanity in general. In chapter 3 “Emergent Unreadability: Rereading a Lyric by Gary Snyder” the main issue that Clark takes up is how to continue to write literary criticism without this being an absurd exercise when we are on the road to wiping our species off the face of the earth. He argues that mainstream literary critics do not seem to take the Anthropocene and its challenges seriously enough, limiting themselves to playing the role of the cultural historian. In fact, his arguments are valid for any critique of most literary texts, regardless of whether they are contemporary or not. He claims that what most people would consider human advances —liberal values of individualism and personal freedom— are inextricably linked to environmentally destructive impacts such as increased consumption and the expansion of the use of resources and *Ecocriticism on the Edge* calls attention to the price modern humans have had to pay for them. One only needs to remember that the USA alone, with less than 5% of the global population, uses about a quarter of the world’s fossil fuel resources —burning up nearly 25% of the coal, 26% of the oil, and 27% of the world’s natural gas (Worldwatch Institute 2016).

Chapter 4 “Scale Framing” deals with what Clark calls “scale effects”, that is how numerous insignificant human actions, such as heating a house or flying in an aeroplane, “come together to form a new, imponderable physical event, altering the basic ecological cycles of the planet” (72). Overpopulation together with endemic poverty is singled out as another of the more pressing issues that affect our planet but, as Clark argues, any appeal to more economic development in

order to spread wealth more evenly around the world ignores “the moral claim to life of other species and assume[s] a total human entitlement to the planet” (81). The author draws on the work of various scholars from disciplines as varied as environmental studies, philosophy, sociology, political science, geography and economics, all of which inform current ecocritical work. Curiously, Clark obliquely accuses many ecocritics of discussing issues that are beyond their scope, while his own study bases many of its principal arguments on forms of expertise that have little to do with English, which is, of course, his own speciality.

In chapter 5 “Scale Framing: a Reading”, he contends that a story like Raymond Carver’s “Elephant” should be placed in a much larger time frame, as any narrower reading is simply evading the real issues at stake in our world today. Chapter 6 “Postcolonial Ecocriticism and De-humanizing Reading: an Australian Test Case” focuses on a short story by Henry Lawson, written in 1901. Clark bases his argument on the way critics of Australian literature, even those who include studies of race, gender and other competing human collectives, have virtually ignored non-human history. He suggests that a story like “Telling Mrs Baker” should no longer be understood as a founding text of Australian nationalism but rather as a chronicle of environmental degradation. Conventional post-colonial and ecocritical readings of this story are revealed as examples of what Clark calls “methodological nationalism” (123), as Lawson’s text needs to be read in relation to the imperialism that changed the world between 1600 and 1900. Moreover, colonization is not simply a human to human interaction as other species have been inadvertently involved in the wider project (Crosby 2004).

Chapter 7 “Anthropocene Disorder” argues that the problem with the Anthropocene is that it is never immediately visible but is in fact a kind of shorthand for a series of freak climatic events that the average person will happily identify as global warming. The disorder of the title of the chapter is the gap between what people can see and what is really happening on a global scale. One of the major demands in this chapter is for preconceptions about pleasant green nature to be buried once and for all. Clark gives exponents of material ecocriticism short shrift as he reminds us that it is the emergence of the human “a Leviathan more like a geological force than a reflective being” (147) that defies categories of ethics and politics, promulgated so passionately by ecocritics.

Chapter 8 “Denial: a Reading” and chapter 9 “The Tragedy that Climate Change is not ‘Interesting’” sum up Clark’s despair that “the human imagination [is] so depressingly enclosed [that it is] able to be captivated only by immediate images of itself” (178). In his conclusion Clark returns to the notion that “any text which simply perpetuates long-dominant assumptions about humanity and human society [...] must come to seem suspect” (195). If Clark wished to frighten readers

## Reviews

with this apocalyptic vision of the imminent future, he might as well have included other man-made phenomena which are spreading havoc all over the world and which may be regarded as further examples of what he calls “unacknowledged denial” (159).<sup>1</sup>

It is a difficult task to do justice to all the valid points that Clark raises in his work but the main issue that he returns to repeatedly is the need to rethink what ecocriticism is doing and how the challenges of the Anthropocene cannot and should not be brushed aside. His appeal is for critics to take on board new readings of texts despite the alarming consequences of an inevitable crisis in current modes of thinking about ourselves and understanding culture. If indeed, climate change is inevitable, critics need to deal with the problem by facing it head-on and by encouraging people to continue to fight for a better future. This surely is the threshold that Clark means in his subtitle.

## Notes

146

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<sup>1</sup>. I am referring to chemtrails. See Global Research News.

## Works Cited

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- “Chemtrails: The Secret War”. 2015. Global Research (22 September). <<http://www.globalresearch.ca/chemtrails-the-secret-war/5421137>>. Accessed June 7, 2016.
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