ECOCRITICISM ON THE EDGE: THE ANTHROPOCENE AS A THRESHOLD CONCEPT BY TIMOTHY CLARK

Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept, Timothy Clark. London, New York: Bloomsbury 2015. £21.99. ISBN: 9781472505736

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Timothy Clark's argument for reading the Anthropocene as a threshold concept will resonate with those readers who, in 2017, are more convinced than ever that we stand on the edge of a new era in the history of anthropogenic climate change. This timely – even prescient – book touches on the complex ethics of critical and literary responses to this ever-changing crisis, asking what role literary ecocriticism has to play in making the Anthropocene in all its terrifying unknowability 'intellectually liberating' rather than a source of paralysis or despair (xi). The answer will be an uncomfortable one for many already working in the field, but is likely to be welcomed by those who are not convinced of the value of existing approaches.

Ecocriticism on the Edge argues that the key, and urgent, role of ecocriticism is not to foster vague 'awareness-raising', promote self-congratulatory nature writing or reframe canonical texts. Instead, it suggests, ecocritics must address the imaginative failure involved in denying anthropogenic climate change, grasp 'the irreversible break in consciousness and understanding' (62) which the Anthropocene represents, and seize the opportunity to rethink and reframe the scale of human experience. Using various vivid examples – the uncanny experience of seeing the 'whole Earth image' in photographs, the impossibility of comprehending the global network of commerce and exchange which underpins even one's breakfast – Clark illustrates the inadequacy of normal human modes of thinking for comprehending highly complex systems such as those which produce and respond to changes in the climate. He examines existing definitions of the Anthropocene and underlines the need to understand it as a 'threshold concept' which entails a deep shift in thinking, emphasising that the emergence of mankind as an ecological force necessitates more than a mere development of existing approaches, which he characterises as unhelpfully simplistic and prone to exaggerating the importance of cultural representations as a form of activism

That Clark's book is evidently intended, at least in part, as a provocation to further research and a statement of intent goes some way towards neutralising what might be seen as its weaknesses. The range of literary texts analysed is somewhat disappointing: analyses are focused mainly on works of Anglo-American works of 'Anthropocene art' – including Raymond Carver, Ben Okri, Gary Snyder, Henry Lawson and John Keats – which engage more or less explicitly with questions of nature and environment, rather than asking what works not typically read through the prism of ecocriticism might look like when read on a radically different scale. By way of conclusion, *Ecocriticism on the Edge* reflexively examines engagements with the Anthropocene not only in criticism but also in recent literary works, asking ominously whether the newly established need to read (and write) at a scale which exceeds the human poses a challenge to the limits of imagination and representation. However, Clark does not acknowledge the important role of comparative readings for reframing and rethinking questions of scale in the context of what is undoubtedly an important critical threshold. He highlights the need to engage with a broader range of texts (63), but in practice only does so on very few occasions. Readers convinced of the value of the new ecocriticism Clark proposes will hope to see more detailed and extended works in this vein which offer a wider perspective on what constitutes 'Anthropocene Art'.

Perhaps more troubling is Clark's assessment of the relationship between the new mode of reading he proposes and other, more familiar, politically radical approaches. He is

strident in condemning ‘received or mainstream modes of reading and criticism, even when socially “progressive” in some respects’ as ‘effectively implicit forms of denial’ (xi), and suggests that ‘to critique capital may remain supremely important, but is also insufficient’ (3). This argument is predicated on two rather superficial observations: firstly, that ‘socialist systems of government have also had appalling environmental records’ and that ‘processes culminating in the Anthropocene predate the advent of capitalism’ (3). Elsewhere, he takes to task those who naïvely assume that the numerous forms of struggle which are sometimes seen as part of a broad movement for global social justice never come into conflict with one another, or are even by their very nature mutually supportive and compatible (110-1). An environmentally destructive action such as road-building may provide tangible benefits to socially marginalised communities; an improvement in gender equality, such as giving women control over their reproductive health, may lead to (arguably) damaging environmental consequences such as population growth. This line of thinking also informs his discussions of postcolonial criticism and politics. His position is understandable in the context of arguments about the irreducible complexity of planetary systems, but not all readers will be convinced, and one can easily imagine a persuasive counter-argument to Clark’s position which draws more systematically on political theory.

However, its willingness to critique established modes of thinking is one of this book’s great strengths. Even such venerable figures as Judith Butler are not safe: she is censured for espousing a vague notion of ‘what makes us human’ which Clark dismisses ‘species narcissism’ (152). Other reviewers (Bracke, 2016) have taken the view that Clark fails to deliver an alternative to the numerous approaches he rejects, a view which may be justified by the relative superficiality and narrow focus of his close readings, but to do so overlooks the important point that Clark leaves ample room for pessimism throughout. It is not clear whether he believes that an alternative, either in terms of critical approaches or literary representations, is really viable. Instead, where this book really excels is as a diagnosis of various problems which is at once precise, resonant and often uncannily vivid. The chapter on Anthropocene disorder is a case in point: anyone with even a passing interest in this topic will be familiar with the dizzying complexity of decisions about whether ‘to turn a light on, to buy a particular kind of pineapple, to fly to a conference’ (141).

Overall, this is forceful, provocative and important book which does not shy away from identifying some of the undeniable failings of contemporary ecocritical approaches. Comparatists may be disappointed by the relatively narrow focus of its close readings; feminist and postcolonial scholars will undoubtedly take exception to some of its arguments; and the mainstream of contemporary ecocriticism is unlikely to abandon its core practices and modes of thinking overnight; but all are likely to acknowledge that Clark’s book makes a powerful case for a new ecocriticism which is alert to the complexity of the Anthropocene and realistic about the role cultural representations and critical approaches can play within it.