

Timothy CLARK, *The Value of Ecocriticism*, Cambridge University Press, 2019, ISBN 9781316155073, pp. 194

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During the past decade, the field of ecocriticism underwent an extensive expansion of its boundaries, with numerous critics promoting the prosperity of an environmental awareness by taking heed of the plurality cultivated by the subject. Timothy Clark's *The Value of Ecocriticism* stands to bring about and, at the same time, reaffirm recent explorations on the necessity of adopting a mode of thinking that allows for a reconsideration of humanity's treatment of nature. As such, Clark intends to illustrate how an investigation of "society's basic values, constitution and purposes" (15) needs to be internalised on various levels and executed within the ever-evolving context of a constant global predisposition to make a turn for the worst.

Divided into six chapters (1. The 'Anthropocene'? Nature and Complexity; 2. Scalar Literacy; 3. Ecopoetry; 4. The Challenge for Prose Narrative; 5. Material Ecocriticism; 6. 'Postcolonial Ecocriticism'... and Beyond?) and preceded by an Introduction, the book tackles four main areas of interest. First, Clark is devoted to assert the temporal and geological position of the current global situation by establishing the boundaries of the Anthropocene and building a case for its instauration as a new epoch that is "clearly filling a need in the environmental humanities" (21). Secondly, the author turns towards the written art forms in an attempt to chart, within the Anglophone writing, the range of environmental issues that are debated in poetry or the novel. Next, Clark intends to discuss the impact that the natural world actively ordains on our everyday lives by addressing material ecocriticism. Lastly, moving somewhat away from the Anglophone roots, the last chapter delves into the iterations of environmental disputes that are not only becoming universal, but they also intend to recognise the alertness of a postcolonial ecological ethos.

By asking if it is "too late for environmental criticism" (11), Clark begins to connect the dots between the pluralistic allure of ecocriticism. In doing so, he steps away from earlier perspectives related to 'nature writing' and accepts the necessity of

creating a new vocabulary for discussions about the environment. Borrowing from Glenn Albrecht and Robert Macfarlane, terms like ‘solastalgia’, ‘apex-guilt’ or ‘shadowtime’ seem to operate in a way that makes justice for the newly encountered distresses that are hovering above us all (12). It is here where Clark declares that “[we] exist in an ongoing biodiversity crisis” (12) and thus, the thin lines that usually separated the human/animal dichotomy are beginning to blur. With posthumanism being a central model for the rethinking of inter- and intra-relationships between humanity and the natural world, Clark notices the necessity of an anti-anthropocentric milieu in which human exceptionalism has everything to lose. Just as is the case with the out-dated vocabulary, the crumbling of the rationalist justification of species supremacism is celebrated here in its entirety.

Clark is adamant in making the Anthropocene the epoch of observable transitions towards the better in environmental debates. In moving away from the Holocene, it seems that the most daring prospect is the transitioning process itself. The author is prudent in distancing himself from a purely geological representation of the Anthropocene as the implications that it generates also seem to not be fully in humanity’s hands. While the fact that human activity represents one the most impactful ways of tampering with the Earth still holds true, it is clear that “long after the disappearance of humanity itself” (20), our planet would continue to be altered by forces outside the anthropogenic factors. Probably the most concise point of view for Clark (and certainly many other ecocritics) is the following:

Ecocritics certainly tend to read the Anthropocene this way, as the becoming ever more visible of the environmental violence and social injustice that underlie ‘modernity’. It is a view that, for all its stress on non-human agency and references to ‘geological’ timescales, is using the term ‘Anthropocene’ primarily as a revisionist *historical*, and not a geological, concept. The salient point is that this is a concept of history which does not deny or marginalise non-human agency (24).

Such an understanding of the Anthropocene is rooted in a progressive approach towards a sort of political criticism. Therefore, for Clark, the ‘Anthropocene’ creates an impetus for the highly uncertain influence that it tries to accommodate. He compares the turn to the Anthropocene to the transition from modernity to postmodernity, when the ambiguity of what the name of the epoch implies is exactly what needs to be celebrated. At this point, Clark identifies the necessity of (re)defining

what 'Nature' represents. As it stands, the term "functions deceptively as the essentially political notion of a condition supposedly prior to human politics" (33) and from here he resolves to withdraw from such idealistic overtones of past injustices towards the natural world.

In the second chapter, Clark brings forth an essential discussion about scale. Both in time and in space, scale represents one of the internalised effects in environmental debates. The threat of thinking on the wrong scale is always seen to be looming, as the need of discussing ecological matters on an appropriate scope is key to their fair representation. Drawing from Tomashow, Clark discusses the possibility of adopting a "biosphere perception" (43), through which the plurality of both local and global events can be associated. There is a need of engaging in what the author calls "scalar translation":

That is, as with Thomashow's exercises, to transpose into a representation on the human scale events and processes that exceed or escape the usual geographical and temporal limits of how we think, or feel involved (for instance, when geologists observe that human history, on the geological scale, is 'only an eye blink', they are performing such a scalar translation by anthropomorphising the geological scale itself) (49).

Thus, the task of ecocritics becomes one of creating ways in which local and particular concerns regarding environmental wrong-doings allude to broader and more complex implications on a bigger scale, with special care offered to the preservation of a sense of immediacy that does not exceed individual capacities for correction.

Starting with *ecopoetry*, Clark begins to demonstrate the applicability of ecocriticism within the narrative forms. Breaking away from traditional denominations for the type of poetry that revolved around nature, Clark sees *ecopoetry* as a protest. (57) Not only does new poetry constantly touch base with environmental affairs, but it is argued that older poetry can now be re-read with the preconception that the natural world has been inadvertently disturbed by human factors. The enticement brought by poetry comes mainly from its ability to portray numerous "levels of meaning" (60), while at the same time, through the "figurative nature of ecocentrism" (60), it allows for a mediated approach to the natural world. At the same time, new modes of reading are generated by moving away from anthropocentrism and making way for a biocentric poetry, which allows for the placement of attention unto the non-human. Clark looks at Alice Oswald's 2002 poem 'Dart' in order to

exemplify the structural ‘anomalies’ that environmental poetry brings to surface. Moreover, Anthropocene poetry is seen to make the speaker of these poems part of the entire assemblage, while also being “made to carry its impossible weight.” (73) The author also intends to defend this “new” kind of poetry that passes as environmental activism through a warning about its accessibility. The apparent opaqueness of ecopoetry can be countered by being attentive to aesthetics and bringing to surface “the chastening, post-human dislocations of what might be termed an Anthropocene sensibility” (76).

Taking the leap from poetry to prose, Clark manages to build a case for the suitability of the novel to discuss environmental concerns. He argues that:

The novel as a form can seem ideally placed to engage the very mixed up nature of the Anthropocene, its blend of fact and value, politics and climatology, emotional denial and habit, the interplay of global and local scales (79).

Thus, the space of the narrative prose allows for a sort of engagement with ecological matters on various levels. Seemingly, the most appealing asset of the novel is the presence of characters to whom we can relate and therefore engage with the same sensibilities that they present. Circling back to the questions of vocabulary raised by Macfarlane, Clark looks at narratives that include non-human animals and how their reality is portrayed in literature. While the risk of anthromorphising non-human animals is constantly present, the author employs Adam Trexler’s effort of illustrating, through a survey of fiction, how non-human agency should be celebrated as “formally constructive entities in fiction” (91). In discussing the conventions of characterisation, Clark observes that:

Given that the novel as a genre tends overwhelmingly to focus on stories of individual growth or dramas of consciousness, crises of identity or of relationship, etc., questions must arise on the limits of what may seem the form’s built-in individualistic stance, its reinforcing the privilege of the immediate human scale as the main and even exclusive reality (103).

Subsequently, Clark takes a look at Don DeLillo’s *Point Omega*, mediated by Pieter Vermeulen’s criticism. It is through this narrative that an example of partition from the aforementioned exclusivism is to be found. The structure of temporality found in

this novel pushes the boundaries of meaning-reception and time construction on another scale, which gives way to the formulation of a narrative that decentralises human experience. Clark concludes with the observation that discussions about the environment within prose narratives give way to “a continual probing of the inherited nature and limits of the novel as a form, the need for a newly urgent inventiveness” (110).

In the fifth chapter, the focus turns towards material ecocriticism, through which non-human agency comes to be valued in its plurality of forms. By breaking away with the idea that the natural and material world is a mere resource for humanity’s profit, material ecocriticism manages to underline the significance of all entities and their potentiality. The manner in which the “elusive agential nature of matter” (116) is proven to *act* and intervene in networks of relationality gives way to the construction of new narratives of inter- and intra-relationships between humanity and the natural world. All sides of this spectrum are now engaged in “intra-action,” of which it is said to be the forerunner of all entities. In this sense, Clark recognizes the sequential aspect of such relationships and agrees with Timothy Morton on what “storied matter” (127) implies: “The universe, in this sense, would be a cornucopia of ‘narratives’, most of them non- human” (127). However, Clark does not stop here. He intends to build out of material ecocriticism a tool for the recognition of anthropocentric tendencies through the reconceptualization of materiality. However, one criticism that can be brought here is the risk of anthropomorphising matter and thus, forcing it to possibly possess human agency.

In his last chapter, Clark theorises upon the construction or emergence of a world literature that continuously raises questions of environmental relevance. The overtly global stance of ecocriticism is seeking a communication method that takes heed of the “irreducible plurality” (146) of traditional and local events, and that at the same time manages to preserve a proactive approach towards finding solutions, as “[e]nvironmental disputes are not academic debates, nor simply matters of cultural recognition.” (146). Moreover, we are also made aware of the status of the Anthropocene as a commonly post-colonial space, where past injustices are taken into consideration and discussed in terms of consequences for traumatic experiences, and newly developed forms of colonialism are being constantly surveyed.

What is furthermore expressed by the need of a new world literature is the conception of a new mode of reading that is aware of the relationality that takes place

within certain contexts. In enunciating the potential of ecocriticism to develop such a “world-literary criticism” (156), Clark maintains that questions of scale are always to be kept in mind. While ecocriticism possesses the power to discuss and raise awareness about environmental crises, it could also lose its weight in the face of wrongly assessed circumstances.

From advocating for the necessity of keeping an appropriate geological and temporal frame, to discussing questions of pertinent scale management throughout literary art forms, Clark manages to elaborate a decisive manner of approaching ecocriticism. Be it through our way of reading, through activism or by addressing environmental concerns with a transparent eye for the agency of the material world, the value of ecocriticism delineated by Clark is brought to fruition in his meticulous attempt.