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Timothy Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism* (Cambridge and New York: The Cambridge University Press, 2019), 186 pp.

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Timothy Clark is, without doubt, one of the imminent voices of current ecocritical research. He has written one of the major introductions to ecocriticism (2010). His theoretical work on scalar reading as an analytical practice (“Scale”) and *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (2015) connect not only the topics and theories of ecocriticism but move toward a type of “unified theory” of literary and, to some extent, cultural research on human-nature-relationships. All the while probing and questioning the assumptions that put “Ecocriticism on the Edge” (2015).

It is no surprise, then, that Clark is the author of Cambridge University Press’s most recent foray into the study of literature, culture, and the environment *The Value of Ecocriticism* (2019). The structure of the book is geared towards more recent and, in part, hotly debated areas of ecocriticism. In six chapters—“The ‘Anthropocene’? Nature and Complexity” (17–37), “Scalar Literacy” (38–56), “Ecopoetry” (57–77), “The Challenge for Prose Narrative” (78–110), “‘Postcolonial Ecocriticism’...and Beyond?”—Clark leads through topical and theoretical challenges in order to assess how, and in which fields, ecocriticism contributes to a “reconsideration of society’s basic values, constitution and purposes” (15). Clark moderates the excitement around the Anthropocene as a new geological epoch. Not only is the search for “an unambiguously identifiable boundary marker” (17) far from over, it stands to reason whether the concept matters in geology. Clark’s “prudent” recommendation is, to admit the Anthropocene as a “pseudo-geological concept” (21) and accept it as an interdisciplinary translation “clearly filling a need in the environmental humanities, whatever its status for geologists” (21). As a “counter-term for modernity” (25), the term promises to complicate seemingly self-evident notions of nature and to re-open the discussion of how to approach the study of and the environments themselves. In other words: The Anthropocene could be useful to denaturalize “nature”. Thus, Clark concludes this chapter, “Ecocriticism’s goal can provisionally be described as that of some state of human freedom and flourishing in which non-human life is fully recognised, no longer violently exploited nor its resources abused or exhausted.” (37)

Continuing from this point, Clark investigates “scalar literacy” (38) as an approach to navigate the vastly conflicting and unfamiliar (for literary studies, at least) scales of the current environmental crises. This chapter is in many ways the strongest, as it follows the

development of “scale critique” (42), offers readings deploying scale (43), and relates scale to the issues of complexity discussed in the previous chapters. Clearly, this is the area of Clark’s expertise.

The chapter on “Ecopoetry” seems, in comparison to the stronger previous chapters, to be less well-grounded. Not only could it be more closely related to the following part on “The Challenge for Prose Narrative”, but it seems in some respects not to live up to Clark’s own standards of scrutiny. What it somewhat lacks is a clear distinction between Ecopoetry and Ecopoiesis which would present itself more clearly if the research perspective took a more comparatist angle. Ecopoiesis, for example, reaches far beyond poetry in the works of Frederike Middelhoff, Sebastian Schönbeck, and Roland Borgards (2019), who, in their recent volume, refer to a lot of works that find no mention in Clark’s overview. Focusing on poetry in a formal manner would not be a problem were it not for the terminological vagueness and the fact that this is something Clark is usually very thorough with and critical of. This extends, unfortunately to the citation of Heather (sic!¹) Sullivan’s “dark pastoral” in the beginning of the chapter. As part of a list of concepts referring to “pastoral”, this leads to a question that undermines in many ways what is following: “Why all these new coinages, as if what we assume poetry *is* must change?” (57). How, I wonder, do coinages like dark/toxic/post-pastoral ask for what “poetry *is*” to change? These are concepts that describe specific types and forms of the pastoral as a mode or genre (that not even necessarily means “poetry”) i.e. they are rather observing than asking for change. This discussion is taken up by the next chapter which summarizes and puts into perspective discussions on narrative theory, the novel form, genre fiction, and challenges for realism. Clark concludes, taking up cues from his chapter (and research) on scale, that “the challenge of representing the Anthropocene in aesthetic form is not one that admits easy conclusions” (110).

In his final chapters on “Material Ecocriticism” and “Postcolonial Ecocriticism...and Beyond?” Clark deals with strands of ecocritical research that focus not so much on science or literary theory but, with a stronger political agenda, try to reshape the representation of humans and non-humans in literary texts and, just as importantly, in literary scholarship and criticism. Clark’s critique of material ecocriticism – which is a much more diverse field than is acknowledged here – borders on condescension when he writes that “it would be unfair, however, to end a survey of material ecocriticism only by underlining its problematic domination by Western academic politics” (132). “At its best” Clark graciously admits “in works by Alaimo, Phillips, Higgins, and others, it has broadened the scope of critical readings in ways that break strongly from the traditional anthropocentrism of literary criticism” (133). Following the previous chapters (and preceding another harsh criticism of Alaimo), it is difficult to read this *not* as condescending since, what Clark admits as an accomplishment of material ecocriticism, seems to have already been achieved by other favored means (scalar literacy among others).

¹ In the text she is referred to as “Helen”.

This is not to say that there is not immense value in scrutiny and intense criticism—however, *The Value of Ecocriticism* lacks the possibility of an answer, and thus, what appears to be imbalanced attention results, indeed, in unfair or even ungrounded judgement. Again, it is not necessarily Clark’s intention, or even due to an overtly polemic stance (which the reviewer cannot detect in the book), rather it is a result of the structure of the series. The title (and series) *The Value of...* produce a precarious balance between overview and evaluation that is unfortunately not always successfully maintained throughout the book. The author’s research interests not only take precedence but are presented more thoroughly and with more attention to detail. Instead of openly criticizing, the book mostly weighs its topics implicitly and, thus, tends to an imbalance regarding its perspective. As a single-authored publication, this might not even be feasible. Instead, it might be more useful to have a diverse field like ecocriticism be valued by an equally diverse range of authors and perspectives. In this manner, the task the book sets out for itself seems to have been taken up too lightly, thereby undervaluing an entire research field.

Works Cited

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