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Paul T. Corrigan

Southeastern University - Lakeland

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Messy Thresholds

Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept by TIMOTHY CLARK

Bloomsbury, 2015 \$29.95

Reviewed by **PAUL T. CORRIGAN**

Timothy Clark defines the Anthropocene as “the epoch at which . . . human impacts on the planet’s basic ecological systems have passed a dangerous, if imponderable, threshold” (x). We have already heard much about this threshold’s dangers: rising temperatures, rising sea levels, and worse. In *Ecocriticism on the Edge* Clark probes the threshold’s imponderability, its messiness and multiplicity. However, although thresholds are the book’s pivotal concept, Clark does little to reflect directly on thresholds as thresholds. Strikingly, he entirely overlooks the established meaning of a “threshold concept.” This gap does not undermine the book. But neither is it insignificant. A more sustained consideration of thresholds—and of threshold concepts specifically—will make clearer the import of Clark’s contribution to our thinking about life on this planet in these liminal times.

The *OED*’s first definition for *threshold* refers to the board or stone one crosses when entering—or leaving—a house. When we use “threshold” figuratively to talk about the environment, we retain from that literal image a sense of a threshold as a place between places. When leaving a house, we do not pass instantly from indoors to outdoors but linger for a moment in a doorway. Not a mathematically precise point or line, a threshold has depth and width. Environmental thresholds, Clark notes,

likewise do not consist of any single “empirically perceptible ‘point’” (93). Environmental thresholds are blurry, messy—so much so, in fact, that the image of a household threshold in some ways serves better as foil than analogy. With a house, we have just one threshold and we know just where it is (at the front door). We pass the threshold of a house when we consciously decide to and can generally turn around and cross it again to go back inside. Finally, the threshold in a house is smoothed down, so we don’t trip over it. Environmental thresholds differ on all of these counts. Environmental thresholds are neither singular nor predictable. They are “uncertain and multiple, arising with the cumulative effect of many marginal and dispersed decisions” (85). Once we cross, we cannot go back. And we will almost certainly stumble as we pass through.

Clark declares the Anthropocene “a blurred and messy threshold” (86). In fact, the Anthropocene emerges as a metathreshold: a threshold of thresholds. Without naming or directly distinguishing between them, Clark invokes at least seven different types of thresholds within the Anthropocene. Of these, *scalar* thresholds receive the most attention. We humans perceive and think about the world in ways largely “bound to the ‘normal’ scale of embodied experience on the Earth’s surface” (36). We go through life in our human bodies one day at a time, look around from five or six feet off the ground, live decades. In contrast, the Anthropocene unfolds on a global, geological scale. Clark writes, “at a certain, indeterminate threshold, numerous human actions, insignificant in themselves . . . come together to form a new, imponderable physical event, altering the basic ecological cycles of the planet” (72). We can observe

and experience a person driving to work over several years. But that's not where the Anthropocene takes place. It takes place in the actions (including driving) of billions of people over centuries, adding up to a totality we cannot wrap our minds around. Changing scale changes everything. Clark urges us to think "at several scales at once" (108).

Inescapably interwoven with scalar thresholds are *physical, cognitive, ethical, aesthetic, and ontological* thresholds. Physical thresholds are already widely associated with the Anthropocene. They include planetary changes such as global warming, biodiversity loss, and ocean acidification that "could have disastrous consequences for humanity" (Rockström et al. 472). These physical thresholds serve largely as a backdrop for Clark's discussion, directly addressed only on occasion (e.g., "the melting threshold of arctic tundra" [10]) but always implicit as a motivating concern. Cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic thresholds involve our ability to respond to the Anthropocene—or, more accurately, the limits of our ability to respond. We've lived our whole lives at the human scale. Human scale delimits our thought, art, ethics, and sense of who we are. But for Clark, "the Anthropocene represents . . . a threshold across which things become more complicated" (110). This change "render[s] obsolete . . . the kinds of thinking almost all people try to live by" (9). Similarly, the Anthropocene also troubles the idea of doing the right thing. At certain scales, what's always been "normal or insignificant" can become "destructive, simply by virtue of human numbers and power" (61). Partially because what's good for those living now could kill those living later, we may simply run out of ethical options (12, 80). Likewise, literature and

other arts run into limits as well, perhaps even the very "limits of the human psyche and imagination" (176). The arts cannot adequately engage the planet's changes if they deal only with images and narratives of human scale. But the arts may be transformed in the Anthropocene. Finally, we also face an ontological threshold where it is no "longer sufficient to talk about 'human nature' at all as a given" (60). Clark describes the Anthropocene as "a threshold at which humanity becomes" something different than it has been (60). Specifically, he writes, "the human *en mass*" emerges "as a new kind of thing, a Leviathan more like a geological force than a reflective being" (147). In addition to everything else, the Anthropocene represents a threshold for the meaning of humanity itself.

In light of these multiple, messy thresholds of the Anthropocene, what does it mean for the Anthropocene to be a "threshold concept"? Clark uses this very term in his title and at least twice in the text of the book (15, 151), declining to define it and overlooking its already established meaning. Jan H. F. Meyer and Ray Land write: "A threshold concept can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding . . . without which the learner cannot progress" (3). They further explain, these pedagogical thresholds tend to be "troublesome"—difficult to come to terms with—and "transformative"—changing the way we see, think, and act (7-8). Threshold concepts are not *about* thresholds; they *are* thresholds, thresholds of learning. Clark's picture of the Anthropocene is necessary, troublesome, and transformative in precisely the way Meyer and Land describe. We may have difficulty coming to terms

with the Anthropocene, but unless we do we cannot move forward in our thinking, and once we do we cannot go back. It is as a threshold concept that the Anthropocene represents not just threat but promise. If we only see the Anthropocene as a confluence of scalar, physical, cognitive, ethical, aesthetic, and ontological thresholds, it may well overwhelm us (Clark writes of “paralysis”). But if we see the Anthropocene as a threshold of learning as well, then it can push us toward deeper understandings (“new insights” [xi]) of our changing planet and our changing selves.

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PAUL T. CORRIGAN is an associate professor of English at Southeastern University. He lives in the Peace River Watershed, where he walks to work. paultcorrigan.com