

Anthropocene, not Anthropocentric:
Towards an Ecological Re-reading of Eighteenth-Century Poetry

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The future of eighteenth-century studies imagined in this paper is a future we very well may not have: the climate is not propitious, and catastrophe looms ahead like the iceberg awaiting *Titanic*, even as we seem unable or unwilling to respond. I refer simultaneously, of course, to our perilous ecological situation in the world at large and to our equally perilous condition within the liberal arts (for the moment, we are still embedded (like a tick or journalist) in the neoliberal or corporate university). In response to both these dire predicaments, I advocate a conscious turn to New Materialist philosophies and their engagement with ecological (rather than environmental) thought, as a way to re-think our relation to the past. I want us to re-read eighteenth century poetry in the generation after Newton in a mode that deliberately resists the overt anthropocentric, humanist agenda that so often serves as “doctrine” (in Irvin Ehrenpreis’s phrase). Instead, reading against the grain of that agenda, I want to suggest we can recover in these texts anticipations of contemporary ecological thought as we seek to engage the world more productively after Humanism.

The following exercise in prophetic provocation will proceed in stages, none of them definitive, but each building on the shaky foundation asserted in preceding ones. In the last stage, I will gesture tentatively toward some of the particular interpretive claims that might be advanced in a re-reading of Pope’s *An Essay on Man*. Those gestures will emerge from a more general framing of how I imagine one might mobilize New Materialist philosophy to re-read Eighteenth-Century poetry in a deliberately contrarian—yet constructive—way, reading against the grain of a poem’s overt doctrine to recover insights more pertinent to current readers than to their dead author. This framing and the case I will put forward in favor of it emerge, in turn, from a direct consideration of how not only contemporary culture but also our relation to the past needs to be reconfigured in an explicitly post-humanist, ecological, non-anthropocentric context. Such consideration should prompt us to re-imagine reading strategies in ways that may still find value in traditional practices, by deploying them differently. That phase of my essay itself emerges as a possible consequence of a prior consideration of our current moment in the academy, and an assessment of what is changing and what is likely to continue changing ever more rapidly in our own institutional ecology in (especially public) higher education.

The preceding paragraph was deliberately and somewhat perversely written in a reverse order, beginning with where I will end in order to trace back to where I will begin. Partly that was done for my own organizational clarity, to help me better track how I want to get to where I want to go. And partly it was done to disrupt and interrupt our usual expectations of how arguments will unfold—as though of necessity—leading forward to a certain conclusion; I am not certain of any future at all, even the critical future that I am so hesitantly trying to forecast. But also partly it was done because the reading practice I want to advocate here is not one of critique in which a new and improved practice will replace an old and ineffective practice, but instead one of deliberate (and I hope productive) disagreement with what we think we have learned, working backwards to reconsider our victories as perhaps concealing alternatives that need to be completely reconsidered. When I take this practice into the classroom, that is the hook that I hope will awaken fresh interest in dead authors. Having done that exercise, let me here offer a more direct roadmap that I hope the next several pages will follow: consider the institutional ecology that is

changing and the new pressures this will put on us in the humanities generally, and in eighteenth-century literary studies in particular; consider how this specific set of ecological constraints underlines how important it is for us to turn away from an anthropocentric humanism toward a more ecological posthumanist mode of understanding our relation to the past as well as to the present; consider further how one response might be the development of explicitly posthumanist reading practices that deconstruct the notion that the familiar works of the traditional literary canon are fully characterized by the cultural hegemony that often turned to those works for ideological support; and finally propose some general interpretive claims, one of which at least might be hesitantly and provisionally illustrated.