

## A Romanticist Contemplates Getting Rid of the Romantic Period: Rethinking Literary History in the Anthropocene

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Paul Crutzen initially proposed James Watt's patent of the steam engine in 1784 as a possible starting point for the Anthropocene, but I prefer the slightly earlier date of 1750 put forth by Dipesh Chakrabarty. The year 1750 coincides with the beginnings of the industrial and agricultural revolutions in Britain, as well as the rise of capitalism, and is thus an apt marker for the start of the global fossil fuel era. It also corresponds with the start of the so-called "Romantic Century" (1750–1850), a rubric that challenges (and blends) the traditional historical markers of the Eighteenth Century, Long Eighteenth Century, Romantic Era, Victorian Period, Nineteenth Century, Long Nineteenth Century...and so on. For me, this is one of the more exciting aspects of using a geological time scale to rethink literary history: a further eroding of the somewhat arbitrary historical-period-divisions that seemed sacred to me as a student back in the early 2000s. Collectively, the readings for this symposium make the case for getting rid of, or at least greatly de-emphasizing, the various historical demarcations that have chopped up eighteenth- and nineteenth-century studies into little bits and pieces for as long as I've been in academia. Doing so has interesting implications both for my scholarship and approach to teaching literature.

I'm currently writing a book on "early Anthropocene literature" of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but the argument that the Anthropocene begins with the Industrial Revolution has been gaining steam for close to two decades. In addition to Chakrabarty, Andreas Malm has traced our current cultural-geological moment back to the eighteenth-century rise of capitalism and its reliance on coal, and theorists Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz identify the first stage of the "Grand Narrative of the Anthropocene" as the period from the Industrial Revolution to the Second World War, when steam engines and industrialization spread worldwide. (The second stage is the Great Acceleration [1945–2000], and the final stage is the twenty-first century, when global warming finally became part of the global discourse. Davies outlines these dating debates in his book, which I find to be a really clear and accessible overview of Anthropocene studies.)

Thus, scholars have begun to reread eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts through the Anthropocene, most notably Jesse Oak Taylor in *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (2016), Tobias Menely and Jessie Oak Taylor in *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times* (2017), Wendy Parkins and Peter Adkins in *Victorian Ecology and the Anthropocene* (2018), and Chris Washington in *Romantic Revelations: Visions of Post-Apocalyptic Life and Hope in the Anthropocene* (2019). Menely and Taylor argue for an improvisational kind of literary reading that eschews methodological and theoretical consistency in favor of a "multiform, multiscalar, multitemporal" approach suitable for the Anthropocene (p. 15). Reading the Anthropocene means reading humanity's imprint on the Earth itself: just as geologists read strata to uncover deep time, Anthropocene readers decipher humans' writing on the Earth. This kind of reading requires a collage of disparate disciplinary texts: Anthropocene readers must fuse science, art, literature, and theory into what Bernd Scherer calls a "sensuous-aesthetic praxis." No single perspective or approach will suffice to produce a narrative of the Anthropocene, which "cannot necessarily be concretely observed," and which ultimately "exceed[s] narrativization" (Menely and Taylor, p. 9). Literary reading in the Anthropocene means looking at the stratigraphic and the social, the ecological and the aesthetic, and how "literary history register[s] modes of affect and experience related to thermodynamic, geological, and atmospheric processes" (p. 14). Doing so reveals a body of Anthropocene literature—something Menely and Taylor don't really define, but which Gabriel

Durbeck has as “those literary texts that reflect on the human condition in the face of fundamental human transformations of the planetary surface on a global scale.” This definition would encompass texts from Erasmus Darwin’s *Botanic Garden* to Percy Shelley’s *Queen Mab* to John Ruskin’s *Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*—and a lot in between.

Yet, most literary studies of the Anthropocene focus on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, other than a handful of scholars working in the nineteenth century. This is where some of the contributors to *Anthropocene Reading* come in, and where this symposium really comes in: What about the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries? Following geologist and Anthropocene scholar Jan Zalasiewicz, Noah Heringman makes the case that Buffon’s *Epochs of Nature* (1778) contains “the first real expression of the twenty-first-century Anthropocene concept” (p. 54). In his literary reading of eighteenth-century geology—something he’s been doing for about twenty years now—Heringman locates the first imaginings of humans as a geophysical force of nature in the eighteenth century. In that confluence of major advances in geology and industrialization, natural historians and poets increasingly conceptualized Britain’s new industrial powers as operating on the same level as natural disasters like volcanoes and earthquakes, able to modify Earth and influence the trajectory of deep time. This is that merging of human and natural history that Chakrabarty finds so significant.

So, living in the Anthropocene now means we read texts from the past in a much different way—and this is not anachronism but rather a tracing back to the origins of Anthropocenic thinking. As Thomas Ford argues in his chapter, this isn’t to say that earlier writers were totally aware of the Anthropocene, but that “Romantic artworks are legible as Anthropocene artworks at an unquestionably material level”; these works “anticipate” the Anthropocene (p. 67). While Ford holds on to the “Romantic” label, he also states that “Romanticism” and “Anthropocene” are “historical synonyms circa 1800”: “Literature says unsayable things and speaks beyond the limits of strictly human intentions,” and this is how Romantics defined “literature” around 1800 (pp. 67, 71). So, Ford continues, the literature (especially poetry) of the Romantic era speaks “otherwise unknowable elements of what the Earth system now means” (p. 71). I agree with this claim, though I think I’d be more persuaded if he chucked the “Romantic” bit altogether.

Reimagining literary history through the Anthropocene means seeing the period stretching from 1750 to the present as the same continuous period, one dominated by fossil fuel capitalism and everything that comes with that (of course, some scholars make the same argument by using the Orbis spike of 1610 as the start of the Anthropocene, replacing “fossil fuel capitalism” with “global imperialism,” a timeline that arguably lends itself better to proposed terms like the Plantationocene or Capitalocene). This is how I’m envisioning my current book project and how I’ve been structuring my upper-level courses over the past two years—and it’s making me want to reconsider my approach to literature surveys, too, which make up the bulk of my teaching at AUM, but perhaps, like grammar, students need to know the “rules” before they can break them. My book begins with eighteenth-century industrial poetry and science and stretches to John Ruskin’s 1884 lecture *The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*. It also has a brief epilogue on early-twentieth-century literature and art. Except for the introduction, where I discuss how the Anthropocene challenges traditional historical periodization, I avoid labeling works as “Augustan” or “Romantic” or “Victorian.” This approach spills over into the last two upper-level classes I’ve taught at AUM. One course was on “Post-Apocalyptic Fiction,” beginning with Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826) and ending with Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003). While I situated all of the novels we read in their respective historical moments, I didn’t do a “Romantic period” unit/overview or anything like that, though I assumed that most students had some background knowledge of historical

periodization from required survey courses. The course I'm teaching this semester is "Anthropocene Literatures," and it spans the eighteenth century to the present day. The only period-specific overview I provide was a lecture on the "Romantic Century," more-or-less an overview of the many revolutions that shaped Western Europe and America in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century (industrial, agricultural, and second scientific). The emphases, then, are on major themes and contexts that span centuries and which are vital to understanding our contemporary world.

So, at the moment, I'm finding it more useful and productive to be an "Anthropocene scholar" rather than a "Romanticist" or a "nineteenth-centuryist"—though that's certainly where I have the most experience—and this seems to be the future of English studies more generally. Many departments of English are moving away from the literature- and period-focused programs of the past to more diverse and multidisciplinary programs where faculty members "specialize" in many different areas—just take a look at some of the near-comical job posting descriptions—becoming quasi-generalists by default (e.g., teaching a majority of university core courses in writing and surveys, and/or teaching upper-level courses in literature and creative writing and professional writing, sometimes in the same academic year or even the same semester!)—and with degree programs that give equal-ish weight to literature, creative writing, professional writing, and/or sub-disciplines like film studies, digital humanities, environmental humanities, etc. The Anthropocene thus highlights a potential direction for English studies, and what many of us are already doing: studying and teaching a variety of texts (literary, scientific, political, theoretical) across multiple centuries, making direct connections between "older" texts and contemporary issues, topics, and movements, and collaborating with folks in other disciplines. So, whether or not the Anthropocene remains a central concept in the humanities, social sciences, and/or geological sciences is less important to me than what the concept suggests for new modes of understanding and teaching literature. However, it seems likely that the Anthropocene will become a formal geological epoch within the next decade, and so I think a new literary history taking this geological time scale into account will continue to shape eighteenth- and nineteenth-century studies for some time.

So: what might literary studies look like without traditional periodization?