

Steve Tedeschi
University of Alabama

Intention in the Air

I was only distantly acquainted with the concept of the Anthropocene before doing the reading for the Symposium. The readings revealed to me that the concept has been part of the atmosphere of academia for nearly a decade now. I am in the position of discovering for myself what others have known for a long time. Perhaps my thoughts on the utility of the Anthropocene concept to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary studies might indicate to experts how amateurs speculate about what they have already thought through.

Though the concept of the Anthropocene has much to offer to students of literature—including ways to justify the study of new themes and new corpuses and ways to define the stakes of inquiry—it appears to this point not to have inspired new critical methods. The editors of *Anthropocene Reading* write that they challenged their contributors “to consider how the Anthropocene might require us to read differently” (12). As the essays came in, however, they found that “Something different, and deeply illuminating happened instead” (13): the scholars practiced a variety of current but inconsistent critical methods. The editors gamely cast this as a revelation that the Anthropocene requires of humanists a “multiplicity of approaches” and an “acceptance of inconsistency” and “belief in complexity” (13). But I hear a muffled frustration in their remarks that the contributors did not take up the invitation to think more intensively about theory and method. The essays we read for the Symposium practice familiar blends of historicism and formalism. Instead of leading to new methods, the Anthropocene offers our critics new ensembles of topics, forms, and perspectives. Some scholars study the genealogy of representations or conceptions of categories central to the Anthropocene. We have seen histories of representations of climate, weather, oceans, social geography, agriculture, geology, and so forth. Others scholars analyze and critique historical scientific discourses. Noah Heringman’s chapter on the elements of romance in Enlightenment and Romantic geology is a brilliant example. Analyzing the formal perspectives required by the Anthropocene—say, a sense of the future anterior (what will have been) or of the incommensurability of different scales—does not require a new method. Emily Rohrbach’s *Modernity’s Mist* (2015), Jonathan Sachs’s *Poetics of Decline* (2018), and Jonathan Crimmins’s *Romantic Historicism to Come* (2018) all discuss the future anterior in Romantic-period literature. This is all to say that one use of the Anthropocene to students of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature is to provide new topics and formal assemblages for us to analyze in old ways. And it allows us to define the stakes of our work in a new way. We can say that our genealogical and formal work can inform how we understand the emergence and construction of the way of thinking entailed by the concept of the Anthropocene.

I confess that I find it difficult to imagine how “the Anthropocene might require us to read differently” (12). I struggle in part because the concept and its effects are atmospheric in the sense of being both vague and pervasive. It is difficult to distinguish the influence and utility of the concept of the Anthropocene from that of ecocriticism, new materialism, object-oriented ontology, systems theory, or any of the other precipitates of our intellectual climate. And I struggle in part because the concept and its cousins do indeed seem to challenge us to read in a radically different way. Each of these methods seems to blur or redefine the distinctions between the living and non-living, the conscious and the non-conscious, and the intentional and nonintentional. In “Against Theory,” Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels famously argue for the identity of meaning and intention. They support their case by supposing a walker on the

beach to come across “a curious sequence of squiggles in the sand” (727) that happen to spell out a Wordsworth poem. In this case, they argue, the squiggles that appear like words are the product of no intention and mean nothing. But the editors of *Anthropocene Reading* are drawn to what once would have been considered a fallacy: since literature and geology require similar reading practices, writing and geological records may be similar semiotic objects. The new materialists seem drawn to similar possibilities. Amanda Jo Goldstein argues in *Sweet Science* (2017) that certain literary authors consider matter itself as figurative, and she gave a paper at NASSR in August 2019 on “semiotic naturalism.” Squiggles on the beach are inscriptions and indices of natural processes and systems, and these processes and systems have laws and probabilities sufficiently regular for sentient observers to draw valid inferences. They are signs of those processes. But do these signs bear an intention and meaning? Perhaps the renewed interest among Romanticists in Spinoza derives from an attempt to rethink Althusser’s notion of structural causality (in which an absent abstraction, such as the social totality or God, manifests and produces effects in its material constituents). Are ecocritics, systems theorists, and cognitive scientists searching for a way to theorize the intention of a system? If so, such a theory could draw equally from Coleridge’s arguments with the materialists, E. O. Wilson’s entomology, and Marx’s critique of capitalism.

The concept of the Anthropocene also warns that how we confront the ongoing ecological crisis is a forced choice: despite all the qualifications of our authors, humans henceforth must choose what kind of influence they will have on the planet’s biogeochemistry. Sandra Macpherson honestly owns the posthumanist position: “About the end of our species I say: fine. . . . We are the bad objects” (402). The Anthropocene does not seem like the right time for such edgy nihilism. We know or are figuring out what needs to be done to make the Anthropocene less uncongenial to human (and much other) life. Critics and teachers of literature can do their part by doing what they have been doing: historicizing concepts, critiquing ideologies, and affirming certain values and disciplines of thinking. The discipline has been working on the problem with a distributed, systemic intention. Over the summer *The New York Times* ran an article that argued that the most efficient way to use money to mitigate climate change is through political contributions: the problem requires collective, systemic changes more than it requires one-time offsets. In that sense, critique marches shoulder to shoulder with ecocriticism. And if, as Joseph North argues in *Literary Criticism* (2017), radical academic literary criticism has been defanged politically by its reluctance to define values in present culture, perhaps the Anthropocene reminds us of our duty to speak and write in a broadly intelligible ways in open forums to our students and fellow humans. As literary scholars, we might be able to help formulate, amplify, and disseminate the message of what is to be done.