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## Review

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## REVIEW

# Review of Sam Solnick, *Poetry and the Anthropocene: Ecology, Biology and Technology in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*

Sam Solnick, *Poetry and the Anthropocene: Ecology, Biology and Technology in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, Oxon: Routledge, £27.99, 2017, ISBN: 978-1-138-94168-7

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A review of Sam Solnick's *Poetry and the Anthropocene* (2016).

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**Keywords:** Poetry; Anthropocene; Literature; Solnick; Ecopoetics;

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This book thankfully ties down the scales from the enormity of its title. It takes three canonical British and Northern Irish poets—Ted Hughes, Derek Mahon and Jeremy Prynne—to think through ways of reading and interacting with the Anthropocene. Sam Solnick's close textual analysis is sharp and insightful throughout.

Across four sizable chapters (alongside an introduction and conclusion), Solnick brings the reader up to speed on the rapidly expanding, and diversifying, concept(s) of the Anthropocene and the related importance of ecopoetics. The first chapter sets out his key theoretical concerns and interventions, while each subsequent chapter analyses a single poet to tackle a different problematic. This provides distinctive and important studies of Hughes', Mahon's and Prynne's literary, political and philosophical engagement with ecology and the Anthropocene.

At the heart of this book is a clarion call for readers to approach poetry differently. Poetry can no longer 'sing the song of the earth' (15). Casting a reflection of the world is impossible because poems themselves are caught up in what Solnick,

through Mahon, calls a 'chaos of complex systems' (3). Instead, the act of reading a poem can model a process whereby 'a system's . . . observation of its own, or others systems', ways of observing, may impact on the future behaviour of that system' (205). Interestingly, Solnick's disavowal of poetry-as-reflection resonates, though in an entirely different context, with the Warwick Research Group's recent proclamations in *Literature and Uneven Development* (2015). The notion that reflection theory is no longer sufficient to discuss literature (world-literature in particular) underpins their recent work. Warwick Research Group define instead a literature that registers the world system, but does not necessarily involve criticality. For Solnick, however, criticality is imbued in poetic forms that engender different ways of reading. Such convergence across divergent literary studies should tell us that we are on to something in thinking outside of the base-superstructure model.

This poetry of process often requires a specific *method* of reading, which is made most clear in Solnick's discussion of Prynne's 'figure of reverse transcription', where 'reading poetry is not a matter of reassembling the poet's thoughts' because the materiality of the signifier itself can interfere with such a process (167). It is through 'slow (re-)readings with an attentiveness... to the periphery of our conceptual vision' that this process is both realised by, and acts upon, the reader (158). The wonderful flourish of *Poetry and the Anthropocene* is that the book itself benefits from such slow re-readings, as generative connections blossom backwards and forwards through the chapters. It is a pleasure to 'think through', as it were.

Solnick suggests that reading and writing poetry can cut through the complex and uneven networks that comprise the Anthropocene—a time, he puts it, when 'the solidity of "Nature" has dissolved into interlinked assemblages of biological systems and inorganic materials currently shaped on a global scale by the emergence of human technology' (10). He challenges the 'notions of bounded harmony' of the imagined figure of the globe by focusing his theoretical inquiry on both the posthuman subject and the Anthropocene's changing environments in which this subject is entangled (204).

In the first chapter, 'Evolving systems of (eco)poetry', Solnick sets the theoretical foundations for his wide-reaching study. Of particular importance is the concept of

the *anthropos kainos*, the posthuman subject that is both physically (through, for example, mutagens and biotechnologies) and mentally (through inherited concepts and communicative systems) bound up in the chaos of complex systems. He deftly moves through his literary and critical interventions while providing a potted history of ecologically oriented poetry. This comes on the heels of an introduction that forges a link between poetry and science that endures for the rest of the book. Solnick neatly sets his work aside from his contemporaries, most notably Tom Bristow's 2015 *The Anthropocene Lyric*. He does an excellent job of building upon this scholarship by emphasising the limits, as well as the insights, of Bristow's geocriticism. By and large, this chapter prepares the reader for drawing connections with, and through, the close textual analyses that are to come in the subsequent three.

The second chapter works through Ted Hughes' writing, from poetry to critique to letters, discussing the relationship between humans, technology and evolution. Solnick's close textual analysis is a joyously detailed and well-researched reclamation of Hughes from earlier critics that demonstrates an anthropogenic depth to the poetry. While I do not wish to shift the focus from this good scholarship, I was struck that this chapter manages to avoid at least mentioning Hughes' alleged domestic violence, particularly because the chapter includes analysis of matricide and sexuality in *Crow*, as well as quotation of Hughes' philosophical consideration of evolutionary animal instincts (87). These things should *not* be made invisible, nor would they eschew critical discussion of his work. The most intriguing part of this chapter, especially with relation to the book of the whole, is the discussion of Hughes' idea of myth as a technology of understanding. This resonates with the notion that poetry engenders different ways of reading (as process), and with later discussions of information theory.

Derek Mahon's ironic and, at times, downright cynical tone is repurposed by Solnick in the third chapter as a 'germinal irony'. This chapter is equal parts interesting and frustrating, but it is only frustrating because it deals so much with the paralysing nature of our contemporary political moment. Solnick, succinctly and eloquently, explains that irony 'provides one tactic for challenging and uncovering

the artificial solutions of supposedly authentic politics' but also risks abnegating individual responsibility by distancing 'the individual from corporate structures, hyper-information and carbon emissions' (126). Mahon's poetry is characterised by this double-bind and by its own complicity. Solnick argues, though, that this can be germinal rather than paralysing because Mahon's writing seeks out sites of resistance by asking—or forcing—readers to confront what is implicated in the chaos of complex systems that characterise the fraught politics of the Anthropocene, from climate change to corporate power.

The final chapter on Prynne draws the book together with its discussions of genetics (notably reverse transcription) and information theory. There is a sustained discussion on the 'causality and temporality of the production of meaning when reading' that elucidates Solnick's earlier readings of poetry and politics. While contemporary capitalism forms a large part of the Mahon chapter, it is here that Solnick ties it—albeit not in great detail—to imperialism, and explains Prynne's resistant poetic style as a response to late capitalism. Prynne is interested in the 'noise' that information theory seeks to do away with. That is, the detritus and junk in language, in genetics and in culture. There are echoes of Hughes' thoughts on myth as a technology of understanding which functions in opposition to the hyper-efficiency of information theory. Toward the end of this chapter, Mao Zedong's 'On Contradiction' turns up rather suddenly for an elucidating and original discussion of Prynne's engagement with the natural sciences, with resistant materials both physical and mental, and the contradictory nature of all things. This section is a little short, but a wonderful springboard for thinking about the book as a whole.

Mao's late appearance exemplifies one of the few jarring things about *Poetry and the Anthropocene*. Capitalism keeps turning up as Solnick discusses the Anthropocene, but the political thrust of the book remains, for me, too often subtextual. There are spectres of Marx everywhere, and consistent engagement with Adorno, but Solnick only really discusses the limits of individual human agency. For Hughes, by way of example, everything is part of a 'strange engine' that works upon, rather than because

of, individual agency (198). Through Jane Bennett, Solnick posits that culture is 'not of our own making, infused as it is by biological, geological and climactic forces' (200). Simultaneously, though, systems are imbued with agency—the 'economic system' is described as acting on its own: it can 'see' things (202).

Given Jason Moore's recent work on the Capitalocene which Solnick *does* briefly reference on page 6 of his introduction, it seems important to entwine these subjects explicitly. There are individual agents that, through capital in particular, do exert enormous influence on the world. There is a risk of eroding toxic individual human agency when we focus too much on the chaotic functionality of networks. This is compounded when Solnick ends his book paraphrasing Marx's eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, stating that 'readers have looked to poetry primarily to understand how one might dwell in the world; the point, however, is to change (with) it' (211). This is undoubtedly a sentiment I echo, but here, at the end of the book, I remain unsure exactly what this entails.

Does a processional poetry that at once demands and engenders alternative ways of reading have any kind of revolutionary potential? Problems of accessibility and proliferation abound, but this is an issue for any politically motivated work of literary studies in the contemporary, and one that we must struggle with. Rather than a critique of *Poetry and the Anthropocene*, this simply reiterates how, just like the poetry it analyses, Solnick's book is a conduit for thought. Poetry, itself cultural detritus, is, by virtue of its frequent outsider status under late capitalism, arguably our most radical and thought-provoking form. Our Anthropocene anxieties are, however, only getting worse. Given Trump's recent withdrawal from the Paris accords, our time for thought alone is running out.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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