

Apocalyptic Visions
in the Anthropocene
and the Rise
of Climate Fiction

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Edited by

Kübra Baysal

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INTRODUCTION

KÜBRA BAYSAL

The twenty-first century has seen the manifestation of the Anthropocene, which entails negative environmental phenomena such as climate change, gradual loss of biodiversity, disruption of the ecological balance, and deterioration of the Earth system¹ in line with the rise of technology, overpopulation, and the launch of the space age for the exploration of life on other planets, all of which constitute the global environmental agenda. Advanced technology has empowered humankind while destroying the nonhuman *environs*, which, since the beginning of the century, has left scientists, environmental humanities scholars, and writers concerned and has led to research and numerous papers on the subject. Simultaneously, the popularity of ‘end of the world’ scenarios, reminiscent of the *fin de siècle* in the nineteenth century, has significantly expanded in works of both science and literature since researchers and writers increasingly began to voice their concerns regarding the jeopardized future of humankind along with the destruction of the nonhuman world, and its devastation through common catastrophes, illnesses, human strife, and savagery. In this light, prominent climate change fiction novelists who have contributed to the canon, i.e., Margaret Atwood, Ursula K. le Guin, Octavia E. Butler, Doris Lessing, Jeanette Winterson, Kim Stanley Robinson, Liz Jensen, Maggie Gee, Barbara Kingsolver, Marcel Theroux, Ian McEwan, Paolo Bacigalupi, T.C. Boyle, Sarah Hall, David Mitchell, Amitav Ghosh, Saci Lloyd, Nathaniel Rich, and Adam Nevill, among many others, speculate on the great fear of humankind about their end as part of the *en-masse* annihilation of the nonhuman world.

¹ Earth system is a term referring to the “physical, chemical, and biological processes that transport and transform materials and energy and thus provide the conditions necessary for life on the planet” (see Will Steffen et al. *Global Change and the Earth System: A Planet under Pressure* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2004), 8). The term reflects the phenomenon of life in the world and is more generic than climate change itself for it includes all kinds of natural and human-induced transformations on Earth.

Giving rise to the fears of humanity, the Anthropocene has become an undeniable reality against whose impact it is imperative to take measures by all humanity in a collaborative effort. One of the most visible effects of the Anthropocene in the biosphere detected from the late eighteenth century to the 2010s is the increased release of CO₂ (carbon dioxide) by “a factor of 5.4” (1860-2014) combined with nitrous oxide produced by supersonic transports and odourless CFCs.² In other words, damage caused by humans to the biosphere is beyond measure, and it has been affecting and transforming the Earth system and its biodiversity completely. While carbon emissions rise, humanity arrives at threshold points from which there is no possibility of returning to the “homely comforts of the Holocene.”³ It is predicted with high probability that the degradation in the biosphere, or “Earth’s living tissue,”⁴ through high carbon emissions will trigger a rise in temperatures of 2 °C in the near future, which will increase the melting of the few remaining ice sheets in Greenland and the Arctic Sea and rising sea levels even more dramatically.⁵ The deterioration in the biosphere has tremendous effects not only on the Earth system and the nonhuman environment in the form of drastic transformation and extinction but also on human beings through new strains of viruses and pandemics such as Covid-19 and social, economic, and political turmoil, because humankind has always been intra-active with its surroundings and is now on the verge of the sixth extinction as “a casualty of [its] history.”⁶ In this regard, humanity in the twenty-first century faces the long-term impact of the centuries-long anthropogenic transformations on Earth and feels the urgency to take immediate action much deeper than ever.

Coined by North American activist and journalist Dan Bloom in 2007, cli-fi is the term for works that focus on anthropogenic environmental problems and their diverse effects on human beings. It can be explained with the keywords “contemporary, controversial, transmedial, transnational, didactic, generic, [and] political”.⁷ Climate change fiction, which as an

² Christian Schwägerl, *The Anthropocene: The Human Era and How It Shapes Our Planet* (London: Synergetic Press, 2014), 5, 39.

³ Brad Evans and Julian Reid, *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 3.

⁴ Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us* (London: Verso, 2016), 6.

⁵ Brad Evans and Julian Reid, 143.

⁶ Eileen Crist, “On the Poverty of Our Nomenclature” *Environmental Humanities*, 3 (2013): 137.

⁷ Julia Leyda, “The Cultural Affordances of Cli-fi,” from “The Dystopian Impulse of Contemporary Cli-Fi: The Dystopian Impulse of Contemporary Cli-Fi: Lessons

umbrella term encompasses Anthropocene fiction, is interdisciplinary and international as climate change is obviously not restricted to one field of study or to the borders of one country and deals with the environmental problems that have been growing in urgency since the twentieth century. As Johns-Putra asserts, cli-fi is a significant “literary and publishing phenomenon” and “a category of contemporary literature”, more of a topic than a genre as it can be observed in numerous genres such as “science fiction, dystopia (themselves two genres given to much cross-fertilization), fantasy, thriller, even romance, as well as fiction that is not easily identifiable with a given genre, for example, the social or psychological character studies favoured by mainstream authors such as Maggie Gee, Barbara Kingsolver, and Ian McEwan.”⁸ For this reason, since it is more popular in the novel genre, it moves beyond the conventional novel form as it lays emphasis on the impact of environmental changes on humans rather than on generic qualities such as plot, unity, or character development, and “exceeds what the form of the bourgeois novel can express.”⁹ Its focus is on depicting the factual environmental conditions in the fictive world of the novel most effectively, thereby conveying grave messages for individuals and political bodies to take action against the environmental transformations before it is too late to act. In this respect, the primary function of cli-fi is “[c]reating a connection between the reader and characters immersed in disastrous global warming, [through which] readers could immediately experience climate change as a threat to their centers of felt value.”¹⁰ The effect of environmental reality appears to be more significant when those facts ornament the general outline of the novels in which human beings tend to associate themselves with the protagonists and feel for them as they are struggling with difficulties, namely natural disasters, or worrisome environmental problems. At this point, cli-fi is the recent form of the novel genre that emerged out of the necessity to discuss environmental issues from a non-anthropocentric and posthuman perspective:

and Questions from a Joint Workshop of the IASS and the JFKI (FU Berlin)” (Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS), 2016): 12.

⁸ Adeline Johns-Putra, “Climate change in literature and literary studies: From cli-fi, climate change theater and ecopoetry to ecocriticism and climate change criticism” *WIREs Climate Change*, 2016.

⁹ McKenzie Wark, “On the Obsolescence of the Bourgeois Novel in the Anthropocene” (*Verso* “Authors’ Blog”, 2017).

¹⁰ Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: Novel in a Time of Climate Change*. (London: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 76.

Many of the traditional features of the novel, which are anthropocentric and conflict with ecological integrity, must be reinvented. To capture the particularities of place and lead to ecological enchantment, they must be creative and employ poetic nature diction [...] We find then that climate change gives rise to a new form of novel, which steadily gives rise to a new way of conceptualising the issue.¹¹

In this sense, works of climate fiction which reflect the massive impact of climate change on humankind and the nonhuman have become the key narratives of our century. Pointing out the major part that humans play in the Anthropocene, in other words, the human age, cli-fi ironically reminds the reader of the inconsequential and helpless state of humans in the face of natural disasters and devastation. In Tuhus-Dubrow's words,

climate change is unprecedented and extraordinary, forcing us to rethink our place in the world. At the same time, in looking at its causes and its repercussions, we find old themes. There have always been disasters; there has always been loss; there has always been change. The novels, as all novels must, both grapple with the particulars of their setting and use these particulars to illuminate enduring truths of the human condition.¹²

As a popular literary category of our time which has obviously descended from the apocalyptic fiction and science fiction of the past centuries, cli-fi tackles the issue of human accountability for the destruction of the Earth by making the reader question themselves in terms of their place in life whilst reading about the associable and realistic struggle for survival of the protagonists in the inhospitable conditions of their world(s). For this reason, climate narratives point out "the historical tension between the existence of catastrophic global warming and the failed obligation to act" and provide humankind with "a medium to explain, predict, implore and lament."¹³

In this spirit, through climate fiction, authors, playwrights, poets, and artists elaborate on the urgent environmental issues for humankind from their individual perspectives in the said eras, which is the focus of this volume. Picturing the emergent climate change and the natural as well as social trauma it entails, cli-fi gives voice to the pressing concerns of humanity. In this vein, with the aim of raising awareness while harbouring

¹¹ Sophia David, "Eco-Fiction: Bringing Climate Change into the Imagination" (PhD Dissertation. University of Exeter, 2016), 13-14.

¹² Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow, "Cli-Fi: Birth of a Genre" *Dissent* (2013).

¹³ Adam Trexler, 9.

hope through associable stories of the protagonists, these works depict dystopian and pre-/postapocalyptic worlds of the past, present, or future stricken by a myriad of climate change calamities. To this end, it is highly functional since it encourages the reader to face and deal with the problems of climate change in their immediate environment and inspires them to make a change in their lives through grim depictions of the undesirable conditions in the worlds portrayed. Offering diverse perspectives with each work, cli-fi provides the reader with the possibility of various emotions “from dystopian despair to glimmers of hope, from an awareness of climate change impacts on generations to come to vivid reminders of how we are destroying the many other species that share our planet.”¹⁴ Therefore, it has apparently proven its capability of luring the reader into witnessing the dramatic paradigm shifts in the anthropogenic world of our time while urging them to think and act. Empirical data shows that climate fiction exerts a more permanent impact on the reader than statistics and “scientific facts of drought, sea level rise, and species extinction” because they see the stories depicted in those works as “cautionary tales, not prophecies [...], as warnings about possible futures.”¹⁵ For this reason, climate fiction holds a key position as a literary phenomenon to awaken the reader to the unrepresented or underrepresented environmental realities of the twenty-first century through the tangible situations and associable adventures experienced by the characters.

Composed of fifteen chapters, this edited volume discusses the rise and importance of climate change fiction as part of popular literature, media, and art through a survey of the forerunners and recent representatives of the genre from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century. From Henry David Thoreau and Richard Jefferies to Amitav Ghosh and Zadie Smith, each chapter in the volume seeks to dwell on the vital role the climate change phenomenon and climate change fiction itself play in contemporary literature and art as the reflection of life. The contributors, who analyse cli-fi, media, and art works from an environmental humanist perspective, aim to discuss and represent the varied layers of the genre itself. As climate fiction bears the responsibility of conveying to humankind their intricate role in the Anthropocene and encouraging them to make a positive change in the world, this volume attempts to contribute to the field of literature, social sciences, and environmental humanities among countless others. Addressing individuals and political bodies alike and reminding them of the

¹⁴ Adeline Johns-Putra, “Cli-fi: The seven most crucial climate change novels” *Quartz*, 2019.

¹⁵ Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, “The Influence of Climate Fiction: An Empirical Survey of Readers” *Environmental Humanities*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2018): 485-486.

interconnection of human and nonhuman in the face of ongoing environmental transformations through an array of climate fiction analyses, this collection strives to call attention to the realities of our time and re-affirm the value of literature and artworks for the critical messages they deliver to humanity.

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CHAPTER ONE

A TRAGIC GLIMPSE OF THOREAU'S PROPHETIC VISION IN *WALDEN*

ONUR EKLER

Amid the moving pageant, I was smitten
Abruptly, with the view
Of a Blind Beggar, [...],
Stood propped against a wall, upon his
chest
Wearing a written paper, to explain
The story of the man, and who he was.
[...]¹

Introduction

Since the early stages of human history, Thoreau has been one of the few who have had a prophetic vision of the impending threats of industrialization. Propped against modern human history with his *Walden*, Thoreau is one of the key figures to light the wick of awareness among deluded people by the spell of mechanical power. In this context, Thoreau may resemble Wordsworth's blind beggar in his *Prelude* who removes the blinding veils from the speaker's eyes with an apocalyptic note upon his chest. That striking note makes the speaker experience a sudden rupture from the illusory world of the funfair. Unlike Thoreau's resemblance to Wordsworth's blind beggar in this respect, the power-drunk people in the newly industrial world seemed to bear no affinity with the speaker in Wordsworth's *Prelude* who unveils the illusion, albeit instantaneously:

This label seemed of the utmost we can know,
Both of ourselves and of the universe,

¹ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: Or, Growth of a Poet's Mind: an Autobiographical Poem* (D.C. Heath, 1888), vii 637-42.

And on the shape of that unmoving man,
 His steadfast face and sightless eyes, I gazed,
 As if admonished from another world.²

Too much trust in scientific rationality, primarily believed to boost human progress and welfare to unprecedented levels and also to make the world a more sustainable habitat, has long blinded people. However, humankind's insatiable desire for dominance and the urge to control everything has completely destroyed such utopic ideals of positivistic thinking at its birth. Each revolutionary intervention of science in the evolutionary functioning of the planet to better the conditions, results in catastrophic events. The devastating effects of science on the planet through sudden and immediate actions have even led to the coinage of a new term for the geological shift of our own creation: Anthropocene or it is better to call it "anthropo[sin]" since the universe is dying due to the flagrant waste of resources by the sinful acts of modern man. Most of us still refuse to see the dying universe and continue to amuse ourselves in the illusory funfair by disregarding the prophetic signs given by Thoreau-like intellectuals over the prospect of calamities on the planet as a consequence of science's impulsive actions. If Thoreau-like writers' prophetic visions in their post/apocalyptic works had been valued as much as their stylistic aspects, the term "Anthropocene" would not perhaps sound so apocalyptic now. However, as Haraway et al. argue, we ought not to be desperate at all. This tragedy "holds an odd, even schizophrenic promise; namely the promise of scientific renewal and insight."³ There is still hope to recover the unintended/intended damages caused to the planet by science as long as we continue our consciousness-raising efforts particularly in stopping self-destructive games on an already dying planet. To this end, this chapter firstly discusses the extent of the human-made impact upon nature. This impact has even reached the point of causing a geological shift. Then, the focus will shift to the discussion of Thoreau's *Walden* as a prophetic work. This chapter humbly aspires to show how Thoreau's foresight in *Walden* attempts to awaken seemingly civilized minds over the reconsideration of humans' dangerous intrusion into the natural functioning of the universe.

² William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: Or, Growth of a Poet's Mind; an Autobiographical Poem*, vii 645-49.

³ Donna Haraway, et al., "Anthropologists are talking-about the Anthropocene" *Ethnos* no. 81.3 (2016): 535.

Anthropo[sin]: The Age of the Sinful Man

A recently published article in *Nature* carried out by a group of researchers led by Dr. Milo has put forward some significant and bitter results on how human-made objects will likely outweigh all living beings on Earth. In his interview with BBC news, Milo says, "the significance is symbolic in the sense that it tells us something about the major role that humanity now plays in shaping the world and the state of the Earth around us."⁴ Though the figures seem to be symbolic, they might be interpreted as evidence of the pervasive actions of humankind on Earth. The perilous encroachment of mankind on the natural workings of the cosmos has had a significant impact on the world's biosphere to the point that our geological epoch has been called the Anthropocene, a term popularized by Eugene Stoermer and Paul Crutzen:

The term Anthropocene . . . suggests that the Earth has now left its natural geological epoch, the present interglacial state called the Holocene. Human activities have become so pervasive and profound that they rival the great forces of Nature and are pushing the Earth into planetary terra incognita.⁵

Although the term Anthropocene had been used in published articles before, it is Crutzen that made it quite popular when he interrupted his fellow scientists and told them to stop calling the geological epoch the Holocene at a meeting of the International Geosphere-Biosphere Program in Cuernavaca, Mexico. He says: We're not in the Holocene any more. We're in the . . . the . . . the . . . (searching for the right word) . . . the Anthropocene!"⁶ Crutzen asserts that the transformative acts of human societies on Earth have become a massive force since the Industrial Revolution. Therefore, the steam engine, as they put forth, symbolically represents the start of the Anthropocene.

⁴ Helen Briggs, "Human-made objects to outweigh the living things". Accessed on March, 10, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-55239668>.

⁵ Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen and John R. McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?" *Ambio*, no. 38 (2007): 614.

⁶ Angus Ian, *Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil capitalism and the crisis of the earth system* (NYU Press, 2016), 28.

Like some other humanists, Jamieson, an important scholar, believes that this term may sound the golden age of humankind.⁷ However, if we pun on the word, “cene”, it is likely to be associated with the era of the sinful man, “anthropo[sin]”. In the tragic and intentionally/unintentionally destructive actions of humans on Earth, there is no dignity, no fame but only atrocity. The shaping force of humans on the natural cycle of the ecosystem inevitably results in what Bennett, a critic, calls a paradigm shift.⁸ Now, Earth is on fire. It suffers from the negative consequences of the inconsiderate acts of humans due to their unappeasable desire to dominate, and to colonize the earth. These may include climate change, environmental pollution, the melting glaciers of the Arctic, rising sea level, extreme weather conditions, the piled-up toxic wastes on the entire planet and new pop-up viruses like Covid-19 that have transvalued almost all of the socially constructed values. Buxton and Hayes, academic fighters for environmental justice, question the reasons for not taking the matter too seriously.⁹ Instone, a scholar who has concerns for life in the Anthropocene, may possibly give the best response to this question by linking Beck’s notion of “risk society” to humankind’s disregard of the alarming cries of a dying nature as a result of the harm that it has inflicted on nature. To Beck, a significant social scientist, the insurance facilities in almost every aspect of life normalize the risk factor, so people get accustomed to living through the risks.¹⁰ Instone argues that people are at ease with their actions, denying their potentially harmful effects on nature as if everything in nature is insurable.¹¹ Therefore, Instone is right in blaming them for amnesia.

Bracke, an important researcher like Instone, refers to this amnesiac state as “cognitive dissonance”.¹² She asserts that people have a temporary consciousness of climate change. They continue to live their lives as if nothing were happening. This amnesiac attitude is not a new

⁷ Dale Jamieson, “The Anthropocene: Love it or Leave it”. In *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, edited by Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen, and Michelle Niemann (Taylor & Francis, 2017), 14.

⁸ Jill Bennett, *Living in the Anthropocene* (Hatje Cantz, 2011), 6.

⁹ Nick Buxton and Ben Hayes, “Introduction: Security for Whom in a Time of Climate Crisis?” *The Secure and the Dispossessed* (Pluto Press, 2016), 7.

¹⁰ U. Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992), 22.

¹¹ Lesley Instone, “Risking Attachment in the Anthropocene”. In *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene*, edited by Katherine Gibson, Deborah Bird Rose, and Ruth Fincher (Punctum Books, 2015), 30.

¹² Astrid Bracke, *Climate Crisis and the 21st-Century British Novel* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 3.

agenda. Despite their diametrically opposed styles, literary figures have foreshadowed these potential disasters (which we are currently experiencing) with their prescient pens in their works, but they have not been taken into account. Their works have been read as pleasurable fictions that are aesthetically styled. The apocalyptic aspect of the fiction has long been ignored or of little value. Despite the presence of horrifying events in post/apocalyptic fiction, the readers often dismiss the likelihood of these catastrophic scenarios happening. People have a tendency to easily miss things. Post-apocalyptic literature has staged numerous dystopian nightmares for the readers. One may never forget Thoreau's apocalyptic warning of the mechanical conversion of people, Mary Shelley's grotesque figure as a result of the scientific creation, and Huxley's scathing painting of the seemingly ideal nature in the cinematographic world in *Brave New World*. There are many other examples to count such as N'gugi's metaphoric comparison of the first-coming train into Nairobi with an iron snake ready to devour/colonize nature, Eliot's comparison of the capitalist world to a dog that feeds on the bodies in *Waste Land*, or Carson's apocalyptic manifesto on the use of pesticides in *Silent Spring*. Thoreau-like figures have always been present on the stage of human history with their forebodings and have shown us how to avoid the impending dangers and pitfalls through their witty metaphors if read seriously. With this purpose in mind, the following section will conduct a multilateral analysis of *Walden* in order to uncover Thoreau's long ignored apocalyptic vision.

Thoreau's Prophetic Vision in *Walden*

Thoreau's *Walden* can be read as a warning for humankind against the impending threats of the industrial society to the biosphere. The prophetic quality of his writing underpins his account of experiences that he had in a detached hut in the woods. In one of his attributions to Thoreau, Seybold describes him as a poet and prophet who "discerned the open secrets of the universe".¹³ It may not be wrong to claim that Thoreau is rewarded with prophetic vision only after blinding his public eyes. In other words, his detached and oppositional stance toward the current events in his time seems to strengthen his prophetic vision. From his early life on, his protests against social injustices enabled him to see with the eye of the heart. As W.S. Mervin mentions in his introduction to *Walden*,

¹³ Ethel Seybold, "Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics." In *Henry David Thoreau*, edited by Harold Bloom (Infobase Publishing, 2007), 20.

his refusal to pay for the diploma at Harvard, the termination of his contract for his first teaching post due to his outrage at the inequity, and his refusal to pay taxes in order to oppose war and slavery are some of the reasons that have awakened him.¹⁴

Thoreau's transcendentalist views as well as his life experiences help him move beyond the material boundaries of the existing system. As a significant critic on Thoreau, Robinson stresses the fact that both Thoreau's diverse readings including Plato's works and Hindu scriptures and his intellectual meetings with Emerson devote him to the transcendental life, which has become more significant for him as the slavery issue worsens.¹⁵ Upon a question directed at him by the secretary of a scientific circle called *The American Association for the Advancement of Science*, Thoreau calls himself "a mystic—a transcendentalist, a natural philosopher to boot".¹⁶ Thoreau's transcendental ideas help him see the intangible force that spiritually connects all the most disparate objects in nature. Similarly, Robinson observes that Thoreau's Self-awakening by his discovery of the symbiotic energy in nature reflects a new insight into the organic relationship between humans and nature in *Walden*.¹⁷ It is an undeniable fact that his transcendentalist beliefs endow him with prophetic sight. However, his vision becomes more tragic as it agonizingly exacerbates his concerns about the impending threats of industrialization and the eventual extinction of nature's life-giving resources. His worries and anxieties over the ignorance and doziness of humans in *Walden* appear to impose on him the task of raising consciousness in his fellow people.

Thoreau's transcendental view as well as his life experiences clearly distance him from the illusory and destructive life created by the rising industries. His self-liberating acts not only open his eyes but also make him a missionary to rouse others from their slumber. Thus, presenting his own account of the life he spent in the woods for two years, Thoreau attempts to hold a mirror to the wrongdoings of the inhabitants in their comfortably founded towns/cities, which would ultimately become their own prison and make them captives or "serfs of the soil":

¹⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden or, Life in the Woods and on the Duty of Civil Disobedience* (1960), 3.

¹⁵ David M. Robinson, "Living Poetry". In *Henry David Thoreau*, edited by Harold Bloom (Infobase Publishing, 2007), 128.

¹⁶ Nina Baym, "Thoreau's View of Science." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 26.2 (1965): 233.

¹⁷ Robinson, "Living Poetry", 128.

Who made them serfs of the soil? Why should they eat their sixty acres, when man is condemned to eat only his peck of dirt? Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born?¹⁸

Walden begins with Thoreau's critique of the townsmen who "labored under a mistake".¹⁹ In Marxist terms, they become self-alienated figures since they cut off their organic connections to their true nature, thus making themselves the willing prisoners of property. These self-alienated figures are, as Thoreau asserts, "frittered away with detail".²⁰ In the industrialized community, the people's preoccupation with details and their indulgence in the artificial life are the potential outcomes of the rush of life and the newly developed social relations and dynamics. The stunning pace of life rips them away from the organic ties with nature. As Thoreau points out, the people's mental and physical bondage to the new dynamics of the society within the new network of the master-slave relationship blinds them so they do not realize the "unprofaned part of the universe"²¹ right under their very nose. Thoreau finds the voluntary bondage of the townsmen in "gold or silver fetters"²² pathetic and alerts the readers about the dangerous and irreversible effect of this masochistic pleasure on nature.

Unfortunately, nature is bleeding now due to people's disregard of such ominous warnings. One of NASA's most recent images exemplifies the possible outcomes of such ignored prophetic visions.²³ It starkly shows how humans continue to wreck the ecosystem of their only habitat. The gold pits and dirt from illicit mining wash into the rivers of the Peruvian Amazon, poisoning the water and killing the different species living in the rivers. Moreover, according to some experts, the increase in deforestation has reached an alarming level due to mining for more precious metals in different parts of the world. In *Walden*, Thoreau issues some apocalyptic warnings against the possible devastation of nature, observing how his fellow countrymen are "so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life".²⁴ This bus[y]ness of life, as

¹⁸ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, edited by J. Lydon Shanley (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 5.

¹⁹ Thoreau, *Walden*, 5.

²⁰ Thoreau, *Walden*, 91.

²¹ Thoreau, *Walden*, 88.

²² Thoreau, *Walden*, 16.

²³ Brandon Specktor, "Rivers of gold rush through the Peruvian Amazon in stunning NASA photo". Accessed on March, 2, 2021.

<https://www.livescience.com/nasa-peru-amazon-gold-pits-photo.html>.

²⁴ Thoreau, *Walden*, 6.

Thoreau asserts, would possibly eventually turn humans into “a machine”.²⁵ On the 150th anniversary edition of *Walden*, Updike, in his introduction, stresses the crushing effect of the mechanical world where “the steam engine [was] the technological ultimate”.²⁶

The mechanical aspect of the industrial life is at full speed during Thoreau’s stay in Walden. He is an eyewitness to how his fellow townsmen have become the cogs in various parts of the big machine including the railroads, factories, and many other forms of the machine industry. They are trapped in this mechanical cage but seem to have no complaints at all. Thoreau refers to them as “sleepers” that have been enchanted by the mechanical industry’s artificial luxuries. One of these “sleepers” worth mentioning is John Field, an Irish immigrant. His desire to hunt for luxuries gives us the mirror image of the newly born industrial society. Thoreau thinks of him as a wasted life lost in the deep illusion. In one of their conversations, he boasts of the railroad with these words; “is not this railroad which we have built a good thing?”.²⁷ This drives Thoreau to question the huge rift between him and his fellow Concord people.

Thoreau perceives the railroad network as an irritating metaphor beyond its function. He sees it as a threshold between sacred nature and the poisonous culture industry dominated by the machine. However, people like John Field enjoy riding on the train. Even the buzzing sound is repulsive to Thoreau. For him, the railroad symbolically represents the boundaries of the rising capital industry through which an artificial life is created. The glittering luxuries of this artificiality lull people to sleep, causing them to miss out on nature’s true riches. When reading carefully, Thoreau’s apocalyptic vision is evident again in his echoing complaints about the railroad. He says, “we do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us”.²⁸ It becomes a gruelling burden that his fellow people gladly bear without protest. He rightly blames his people for slumbering since they are only concerned with their welfare for the instantaneous joys and delights. However, Thoreau’s genius can be seen in his treatment of the subject beyond its utilitarian purpose. He takes the issue seriously, seeing it as a destructive force that, in the long run, will pollute nature’s purity. Thoreau justifies the benevolent intent that lies in science and the mechanical rationality for the welfare of humanity in one or two of his discussions, and he admits enjoying it to some degree. John Hildebidle, an important

²⁵ Thoreau, *Walden*, 92.

²⁶ Thoreau, *Walden*, XVI.

²⁷ Thoreau, *Walden*, 54.

²⁸ Thoreau, *Walden*, 92.

scholar on Thoreau, also features this point in his article claiming that Thoreau may have benefited from scientific methods to achieve his transcendental tasks in nature.²⁹ However, Thoreau stresses that the seemingly superior mind adopts a one-dimensional approach no matter how innocuous it is. This unilateral strategy will have some dangerous impacts on the evolutionary functioning of nature if intentional/unintentional.

Given the impending threats of the newly introduced industrial and mechanical explorations on nature's delicate equilibrium, Thoreau's advice to his readers is quite clear: "Simplicity!" It is the way to lighten one's burden by offloading the unnecessary details of the material world. According to Thoreau, what is worse is that people become "the slave drivers" of themselves. He sees the simple life as essential to Self-redemption since it awakens their souls. This claim is supported by his removal of three pieces of limestone:

I had three pieces of limestone on my desk, but I was terrified to find that they required to be dusted daily, when the furniture of my mind was all undusted still, and threw them out the window in disgust. How, then, could I have a furnished house? I would rather sit in the open air, for no dust gathers on the grass, unless where man has broken ground.³⁰

Thoreau further argues that nature is a living organism and all living organisms are part of nature. His observation of the newly emerged forms in the muddy water near the railroad gives him some solace in the midst of his worries on dying nature. Nature's durability as a living entity against the invading force of the mechanical industry symbolically represented by the railroad keeps him from succumbing to utter desperation. Thoreau interprets nature's pushback as a second chance for mankind to rethink their reckless and destructive acts. As a result, he urges his fellow readers to break free from civilization's artificial shell, which has separated them from their real existence. In the last pages of *Walden*, his advice to his fellow citizens points towards the path to Self-exploration in nature:

Direct your eye sight inward, and you'll find
A thousand regions in your mind
Yet undiscovered. Travel them, and be
Expert in home-cosmography.³¹

²⁹ John Hildedible, "Naturalizing Eden: Science and Sainthood in Walden". In *Henry David Thoreau*, edited by Harold Bloom (Infobase Publishing, 2007), 35.

³⁰ Thoreau, *Walden*, 36.

³¹ Thoreau, *Walden*, 320.

He exhorts his fellow Concord people to look inward. He argues that they should live in harmony with nature and be “expert in home cosmography” in order to do so. Only in this manner will mankind find nobility in the savage and raw life.

Conclusion

Is it impossible to combine the hardiness of these savages with the intellectualness of the civilized man?³²

Thoreau questions the possibility of merging one’s raw nature with the true nobility of the mind not poisoned by the newly emerged dynamics accompanied by industrialization. He is well aware of the fact that industrialization imbues people with false hopes, thereby sending them drifting onto a one-dimensional path, if we talk more specifically, onto the path of self-alienation. These self-alienated figures, overwhelmed by the languor of the industrial society’s luxuries have almost lost their organic connection to their true nature where, as Thoreau asserts, one can reach the nobility of the savage life.

Contemporary readers may well justify Thoreau’s prophetic vision in *Walden* since his fears over the destruction of nature caused by humans’ greed and uncontrollable desire to dominate have become our bitter truths, the repercussions of which we have had to bear. However, we still keep disregarding such apocalyptic visions. Humans’ self-masochistic pleasure seems to be never ending. The melting glaciers, the vast amount of floating garbage in the Pacific Ocean, greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere, climate change, the increasing heat in the Earth’s crust and a slew of other catastrophic events all point to humanity’s folly. The question is, as Pope well phrases, why “[do humans] rush in where the angels fear to tread”?³³ Nature is not an eternal supplier for such avarice. Now, it is giving alarming cries with all of these disasters as a result of our dangerous games that we have been playing on our home planet. Nature gives the harsh reactions to these destructive games. For example, Covid-19 is one of them. For humanity, it might be seen as a deadly virus that destroys everything special to the human realm. However, it seems that it is an antivirus that fights against real infection in the universe: the android humans who have cut off their organic connections with the universe. Humans become the deadly, uncontrolled cancerous cells that would

³² Thoreau, *Walden*, 13.

³³ Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism* (CUP archive, 1908), line 625.

eventually destroy their own habitat. What is more pathetic is not what they become but their joyous celebration of it! Rather than healing the deep wounds they have inflicted on Earth, they, the cancerous humans, have long conceded Earth's demise and have begun a seemingly progressive attempt to terraform planets like Mars through their expansive policies. It proves how perverse they are at not restricting their destruction to this world but to spread the cancer deep into the universe. Thoreau, no doubt, prophetically draws attention to the pitfalls of humans' mechanical conversion in *Walden* and makes some serious exhortations to future generations to abstain from this disastrous course before it is too late. However, it seems that they are still unheard. What humans do is have a bitter and tragic glimpse of his prophetic cries in *Walden* since they keep watching how time has justified them one by one.

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CHAPTER TWO

PRE-HISTORIES OF CLI-FI:
THE AGENTIAL REALITY
OF RICHARD JEFFERIES'S *AFTER LONDON*

ADRIAN TAIT

Introduction

As we enter what is now widely regarded as the Anthropocene epoch, there is a growing interest in climate change fiction, or “cli-fi,”¹ and its potential to alert readers to the potential consequences of a changed climate.² Many of these fictional narratives have used the possibility of rising sea levels to dramatize the effects of climate change. As Adam Trexler notes, “[f]loods offer a rich, literary means of rendering climate change in a local place, as a tangible concrete effect.”³ Moreover, add Andrew Milner and J. R. Burgmann, the flood is a trope with “a deep history in the Western mythos.”⁴ It is not therefore surprising that, “[o]ver the last forty years,” the flood has become “the dominant literary strategy for locating climate change.”⁵

¹ Adeline Johns-Putra, “Climate change in literature and literary studies: from cli-fi, climate change theatre and ecopoetry to ecocriticism and climate change criticism,” *WIREs Clim Change* 7 (2016): 267, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/wcc.385>.

² For a discussion of that potential, see Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, “The Influence of Climate Fiction: An Empirical Survey of Readers,” *Environmental Humanities* 10, no. 2 (2018): 473-500.

³ Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 83.

⁴ Andrew Milner and J. R. Burgmann. “A Short Pre-History of Climate Fiction,” *Extrapolation* 59, no. 1 (2018): 6.

⁵ Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, 82.

As critics have also suggested, these flood narratives have a pre-history.⁶ A whole series of “deluge” novels “act as precursors” to the contemporary cli-fi flood narrative,⁷ including works such as J. G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World* (1962). “Years before the first novel about human-induced global warming,” Trexler argues, novels such as this “provided a strikingly stable archetype for subsequent [climate change] fiction.”⁸ Yet Ballard’s novel was by no means the first to describe the impact of rising sea levels on a recognisably modern, developed world, or establish the parameters for its depiction. In *After London; or Wild England*, first published in 1885, Richard Jefferies (1848-1887) described a near future in which a now fragmented and barbaric society struggles to survive the aftermath of a mysterious flood.⁹ Much of southern England is now underwater, and London itself has disappeared, lost in a poisonous swamp. In this brutish world, it is not now known what, exactly, prompted the flood, and there is only the sketchiest understanding of how a civilised and sophisticated society came undone so quickly; all that seems certain is that, in spite of its many marvels, the modern world lacked the resilience to ensure its continuance.

As this brief outline suggests, Jefferies’s remarkable novel itself provides a compelling template for depicting a climate-changed world. As I have argued elsewhere,¹⁰ many of the tropes that characterise *After London*, such as the fragility of modern society, reappear in much more recent novels such as Robert Harris’s *The Second Sleep* (2019). However, one of the most interesting aspects of the novel – its detailed account of the way that the flood overwhelms a modern city’s infrastructure – has so far been given little attention, perhaps because Jefferies’s portrayal of it can so easily be read in symbolic or mythic rather than literal terms, or because the

⁶ Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, 84-87; Milner and Burgmann, “A Short Pre-History,” 5.

⁷ Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, 86.

⁸ Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, 87.

⁹ For an excellent introduction to the novel, readers may wish to refer to Mark Frost’s recent scholarly edition of *After London*. Mark Frost, introduction to Richard Jefferies, *After London; or Wild England*, ed. Mark Frost (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), vii-lii.

¹⁰ Adrian Tait, “Environmental Crisis, Cli-fi, and the Fate of Humankind in Richard Jefferies’ *After London* and Robert Harris’ *The Second Sleep*,” *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal, Special Issue: Climate Fiction* 8, no. 2 (2021): 69-83, <https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v8i2>.

novel itself has been banished to what Amitav Ghosh has described as “the outhouses [of] science fiction and fantasy.”¹¹

Ghosh’s related point is that serious, realist fiction is simply unable to rise to the challenge of depicting the impact of climate change, such as “catastrophic aquatic events.”¹² Yet Ghosh is, Ursula Kluwick maintains, “too hasty in his dismissal of the achievements of ‘serious fiction.’”¹³ What is needed is a new way of reading attuned to some of the subtler ways in which novels like Jefferies’s have engaged with “aquatic events” and the “nonhuman agency” they embody¹⁴. What is required, in other words, are “more material interpretations”¹⁵ of “water fictions” that resist the temptation to regard their account of an agential and processual reality as simply figurative or mythological or symbolic or (after Ghosh, and his problematic dismissal of science fiction) other worldly;¹⁶ what is required is a new, materialist (or new materialist) willingness to read these novels not just as realist, but as more-than-realist, and explore the (perhaps forgotten or overlooked) socio-historical context in which they were written. As I argue in this chapter, Jefferies’s account of a sunken and swamp-bound London should be read not as some sweeping symbolic dismissal of modern society or as an otherworldly instance of speculative fiction, but as a nuanced and exacting response to contemporary anxieties about the vulnerabilities of the modern megalopolis; and as our own urbanised society itself faces the problem of a warmed and expanding ocean – and the possibility of our own, anthropogenic deluge – those anxieties are (or should be) still with us.

After London as Cli-fi

After London is divided into two, uneven parts. In the first, an unnamed scholar recounts what has happened in the years since civilisation collapsed, a collapse that has allowed a self-willed, nonhuman world to regenerate, whilst human society has itself fragmented into warring factions. In the second part, the novel’s putative hero, Felix, embarks on a journey of (self-

¹¹ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 66.

¹² Ursula Kluwick, “The global deluge: floods, diluvian imagery, and aquatic language in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*,” *Green Letters – Studies in Ecocriticism: Special Issue: Waters Rising* 24, no. 1 (2020): 67.

¹³ Kluwick, “The global deluge,” 67.

¹⁴ Kluwick, “The global deluge,” 67.

¹⁵ Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, 87.

¹⁶ Kluwick, “The global deluge,” 67; Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 72.

discovery. That quest leads him into poisonous swamp marking the location of what was once an empire's capital. Here, he encounters islands wrapped in fog, where fire flickers over the land and there are everywhere ashy reminders of a great city:

Presently a white object appeared ahead; and on coming to it, he found it was a wall, white as snow [...] He touched it, when the wall fell immediately with a crushing sound as if pulverised [...] Whether the walls had been of brick or stone or other material he could not tell; they were now like salt.¹⁷

What the purifying flood has not engulfed, fire has reduced to “a white power.”¹⁸

Almost inevitably, these remnants conjure up the Biblical story of Sodom's fall, consumed by fire, and of the fate of Lot's wife, turned to a pillar of salt when she presumes to look back on the city's destruction. The symbolism of the scene is difficult to ignore: London has suffered the same fate as its Biblical forebear, and for the same reasons: it is, to paraphrase Darko Suvin, a site of decadent wealth, luxury, and pride, richly deserving its own destruction, and Jefferies describes its obliteration with “equanimity and indeed with relief.”¹⁹ Perhaps he even does so with relish, hating the city because, as David Garnett argued, it “robbed him of his health.”²⁰ According to this reading, the surreal, nightmare-like quality of Felix's encounter with the ruined city – “[h]is brain became unsteady, and flickering things moved about him” – simply underlines its essential unreality.²¹ As John Fowles remarked in his own discussion of this haunting vision of “near-madness,” “[o]ne may argue over the physical plausibility of the world Jefferies envisages; but not, I think, over its metaphorical power.”²² What we should not do, in other words, is take these passages literally; they represent Jefferies's symbolic stand against the “bourgeois

¹⁷ Richard Jefferies, *After London*; or *Wild England*, ed. Mark Frost (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 164-5.

¹⁸ Jefferies, *After London*, 165.

¹⁹ Darko Suvin, *Victorian Science Fiction in the UK: The Discourses of Knowledge and of Power* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983), 373.

²⁰ David Garnett, introduction to Richard Jefferies, *After London and Amaryllis at the Fair* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1939), ix.

²¹ Jefferies, *After London*, 164.

²² John Fowles, introduction to Richard Jefferies, *After London, or Wild England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), xix.