Art and Ecology in Thomas A. Clark's Poetry

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Abstract: Through his walks and encounters with the landscape and the weather, The Scottish poet Thomar A. Clark meditates on the ways in which art gives form to our active, perceptual engagement with the world. This article sets out to examine some of these themes and concerns in the poetry of Thomas A. Clark in the light of Tim Ingold's anthropological explorations of the relationship between perception, creativity and embodied skill. Particular attention will be given to Ingold's concept of "sentient ecology" as the kind of knowledge based on intuition and responsiveness, consisting in the skills, sensitivities and orientations developed through long experience of conducting one's life in a particular environment. It will be argued that Clark's poetry, through an emphasis on the skilled, everyday practice of walking, contributes to a symbiosis between art and ecology and challenges thereby the hierarchical ranking of humanity over nature that has dominated the Western imagination.
Key words: ecology environmental perception poetry walking
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标题:托马斯·克拉克诗歌中的艺术与生态
内容提要:当漫步于自然世界,感受风景和气候的时候,苏格兰诗人托马斯·克拉克思考的是艺术—尤其是诗歌—如何赋形予人对世界的感知。本文以提姆·英戈尔德对感知、创造、具象化技巧之间关系的人类学研究为理论基础,探讨了克拉克作品中有关生态与艺术的主题。本文尤其关注提姆·英戈尔德以直觉和敏感反应为基础的的感知生态学,包括技能、对环境做出反应的敏感性和对环境的适应性,而这些是由一个人在某个特定环境中长期生活的经验发展而来的。本文试图证明克拉克的诗歌由于重视漫步这一有律动的日常行为,构建了艺术与生态共生互利关系,因此是对长期统治西方思想的人类凌驾于自然之上的秩序的挑战。
关键词:生态系统 环境感知 诗歌 漫步
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> Perception is not a representation, constitutive of things out of sense data; it is respect for things and respect for our environment. . . .

> When we go out for a walk, our look is not continually interested, surveying the environment for landmarks and objectives . . . . Walking through the forest in autumn, our look does not grasp on to and circumscribe patterns, but dances through the spangled patches of light and shadow. . . . The perception of things, the apprehension of their forms, is not an appropriation of them, but an expropriation of our forces into them, and ends in enjoyment.

Alphonso Lingis, The Imperative

This article is an invitation to a short walk around the perceptual landscape of Thomas A. Clark's poetry—along some of its main themes and concerns. Clark is a contemporary Scottish poet whose work constitutes a meditation on the creative role of the mind and the movement of the body in the perception of the environment. Through his walks and encounters with the landscape and the weather, he rethinks and revitalises the ways in which art partakes of and shapes our active, perceptual engagement with the world.

Re-vitalisation becomes indeed a keyword here, for Clark acknowledges his belonging to a long tradition of landscape literature, and, in particular, to a genre of writing that has constituted a major tradition in the English-speaking world since Romanticism: the literature of walking. This tradition draws, no doubt, from ancient practices, such as those of peripatetic philosophers, of poets composing afoot, of pilgrims and practitioners of Buddhist walking meditation. However, in the West, it was in the Romantic era that walking emerged as a set of reflexive conventions, aesthetic imperatives and practical endeavours which produced a distinctive relationship between the body and the landscape, through the cultivation of new forms of subjectivity and ideas about landscape appreciation. [①] Before moving on to Clark, we must thus briefly tour the Romantic walking tradition and its discontents.

Indeed, the solitary Romantic walker, epitomised by the English poet William Wordsworth and, in landscape painting, by Caspar David Friedrich's famous "Wanderer above a Sea of Fog" (1817), has provided the aesthetic and intellectual underpinning of much of landscape poetry, art, history, and even archaeology up to the present day, especially in Britain. [②] Much has been written about the history of Romantic walking in the landscape and the ways in which it entails a new environmental sensibility. [③] Yet, authors have also drawn attention to the problematic moralising and aesthetic conventions that became attached to walking in the Romantic mode. Thus, for example, Rebecca Solnit, in her book *Wanderlust*, shows how in writers like William Hazlitt and Thoreau walking is consistently portrayed as virtuous and redemptive, and its practice permeated by rules and conventions, by must- and should dos concerning the proper ways to walk and be free. Solnit also points out that all too often these writers lose sight of the tread of the walk itself, of the actions of the walking body and the rhythms of walking in the walk, and focus instead on the walker's encounters with other people, on scenic views and the discovery of places *during* the walk (118 – 32).

This emphasis on scenic views and the conventional literary and visual images that became attached to them have largely determined the patterns of modern landscape appreciation, not only in the West but also in the East, as Yuriko Saito has demonstrated in her comparative study of scenic national landscapes in Japan and in the United States. Saito argues that the celebration of selected scenic landscapes has led to a devaluation of local, lived, everyday landscapes, which, because considered un-scenic and therefore uninteresting, became neglected in both our aesthetic and ecological consciousness. Much in the same vein, Yi-Fu Tuan, in his book significantly entitled *Escapism*, shows how this privileging of the spectacular in landscape appreciation is rooted in a gaze from above that surveys across things and stresses thereby human separateness from the world: ④

> Only from a certain distance can an overall structure be discerned and a unique type of relationship, emotional yet cool, be established between a human individual and reality. But from a distance, harmonies of life and environment are not all that a viewer sees. He or she also sees discontinuities and isolation - the world's indifference. (110)

Reverting to Thomas A. Clark, his poetry provides fertile ground for the consideration of all these issues. Clark is no doubt indebted to Wordsworth and to the Romantic tradition, but he is also particularly concerned with grounding the romanticized walk so as to avoid its pitfalls and to forge a closer engagement with the environment that is distinct from "Nature" held as a view or as a spectacle to the detached observer. When asked, in an interview conducted by the poet and artist Alec Finlay, about the reasons why the practice of walking had become a vital aspect of his poetry, Clark replied:

> [Walking] gives me a time in parenthesis, a contemplative time, when contemporary pressures are kept outside the brackets . . . so that there can be concentration on a few primary concerns. . . . You walk out of your usual context, into a more open relation with things. Hopefully, you arrive at a clarity, an immediacy of perception, and you lend attention to that, stay with whatever is happening, internally as well as externally, instead of being displaced into the past or future, instead of being caught up in an attitude. . . . You come closer to things, to natural objects and their particular ways of being, as well as with your own adequacy or inadequacy in dealing with time and identity in the absence of all little entertainments, the imaginary conversations we conduct with ourselves. ("Interview: Standing Still and Walking" n. p.)

It is worth paying close attention to "In Praise of Walking," the text in which Clark more fully explores his aesthetics of walking in the landscape and his ecology of perception. The text is a prose poem organised in the form of aphorisms. A few examples:

> Walking is the human way of getting about.
>
> There are things we will never see, unless we walk to them.
>
> Convictions, directions, opinions, are of less importance than sensible shoes.
>
> Walking is not so much romantic as reasonable. (*Distance and Proximity* 15 – 19)

These aphorisms might be read as part of the moralising, sermonising tendency pointed out before. I shall argue, nevertheless, that there is much more to them than just moralising. A closer look at the shape and self-sufficiency of the evenly spaced sentences on the page and the ways in which they invite us to read them bring to mind, not so much the familiar analogy between the rhythms of walking and of writing, but the creative, improvisational ways in which we relate to time and place, to movement and stillness, when we walk. It is as if each sentence were a place you visit. You may arrive there along one or several paths (because they do not require to be read in any particular order) and linger for a while before moving on, perhaps to circle around and return some time later. Each time you revisit it, the place—the sentence—is a little different, enriched by the memories and experience of your previous stay. You may lead other companions along the same pathways, though, again, as each brings along the particularities of their own previous experience, it will not be quite the same for one walker as for anyone else. [5]

Despite their seemingly aphoristic structure, Clark's poems are not walks into the world of common sense, but rather walks into a world *offered* by the senses. His is therefore a phenomenological view of the world that envisages to capture it in its immediacy to the senses, to educate our perception and open our eyes to other possibilities of being and knowing. As he phrases it in another text, "Jouissance," "the first of all pleasures is that things exist in and for themselves" (*Distance and Proximity* 41). And herein lies one of the central aspects of Clark's secular poetics of the discrete and the concrete, an aspect that may open it to the criticism that it excludes or evades the social, religious and political forces of reality and amounts therefore to a form of pastoral retreat. This is not so, however, in my reading, for I find that Clark's distancing from—or bracketing of—these forces aims to deliberately mark out an area of philosophical, phenomenological enquiry. He takes things out of circulation, as it were, so that he can focus on the essential process by which we know and perceive the world as we move in it, from place to place.

"Early one morning, any morning, we can set out, with the least possible baggage, and discover the world:" thus goes the opening sentence of "In Praise of Walking" (*Distance and Proximity* 15). This "baggage," as the poet himself acknowledges, is no less than the whole of the Western modern inheritance ("Interview: Standing Still and Walking" n. p.). As the critic Clive Bush cogently puts it, Clark "sets out the power of the 'foot' (from poetics to politics) against a world whose hysteria is manifest in its need to rule out the unpredictable" (52)—against a discredited tradition that has led to a devaluation and exploitation of the natural world and to a divorce of thought and feeling, mind and body, with its over-emphasis on Reason,

Truth, Progress and God.

Clark displaces the discourses of religious and capitalist views of nature— the one describing God and Truth everywhere; the other seeking profit and feeding on desire (while *consuming*, destroying it at the same time)—in order to restore the actual problematics of the human experience upon which these discourses are parasitical (Bush 79). His lack of obsession with the self restores a healthy sense of the outward world, and points instead to an ability to see the self as a presence only among other presences. The great chain of being, which in the Western imagination has been dominated by the hierarchical ranking of the human self over nature, is thereby de-hierarchised.

Worth of note in this respect is one of Clark's most emblematic walking poems:

> as I walked out early
> into the order of things
> the world was up before me
> as I stepped out bravely
> the very camber of the road
> turned me to its purpose
> it was on a morning early
> I put design behind me
> hear us and deliver us
> to the hazard of the road
> in all the anonymous places
> where the couch grass grows
> watch over us and keep us
> to the temper of the road (*Sixteen Sonnets* n. p.)

Walking is here a response to a movement of desire that seeks not so much to transform the world as to reveal it. The poet is not so much a creator himself but joins the process of creation, the already existing, and becomes thereby part and parcel of the becoming of the world, of its continuous life processes:

> This poem constitutes, in a sense, an *ars poetica* within Clark's oeuvre, in that it epitomises what I shall call his *ecological* poetics and his poetic ecology. Poetic art is envisaged as a path to knowledge, as a way of knowing how we inhabit and make our way through the world. Such knowledge is gained by walking in it, attending to it, being ever alert to the signs by which it is revealed. As Clark phrases it, "Daily walking, in all weathers, in every season, becomes a sort of ground or continuum upon which the least emphatic occurrences are registered clearly" (*Distance and Proximity* 20).

As mentioned earlier, the weather is a fundamental dimension in this poem – and, for that matter, in Clark's perceptual landscape as a whole, for our experience of the weather crucially affects not only our activities, moods and motivations, but al-

so the very way in which we perceive the landscape. The weather, however, does not appear as an object of perception: it is the very medium of perception. As the anthropologist Tim Ingold shows in his study of visual perception, the weather "is not what we have a perception of; it is rather what we perceive in. The weather is an experience of light: to see *in* the light is to see *in* the weather" ("The Eye of the Storm" 102).

Walking in the weather invites a state of attention that is "neither thought, nor logic, nor reverie, but a poised, relaxed yet disciplined way of attending things accompanied by the enormous patience of alert waiting. It is neither biological nor mental" (Bush 75). The following aphorisms vividly illustrate this embodied state of attention:

> After rain, the trees seem to breathe more easily, to declare their own shapes more clearly, to be committed even more to the vertical. ("Jouissance," *Distance and Proximity* 42)

> Storm clouds, rain, hail, when we have survived these we seem to have taken some of the solidity of rocks and trees. (Clark, "In Praise of Walking," *Distance and Proximity* 20)

But seeing and hearing in the weather is also a matter of learning, of acquiring the skills for direct perceptual engagement with the environment and its constituents, human and non-human, animate and inanimate. And it is at this juncture that art and ecology converge in Clark. Of particular interest in this respect is the concept of "sentient ecology" that Tim Ingold develops in *The Perception of the Environment* within the context of his studies of the animal paintings, drawings and carvings of our hunter-gatherer forbears.

Ingold contends that conceiving these depictions as representational or "symbolic" art is to project our modern, Western sensibility into them:

> Neither in their painting nor in their carving do people seek to reconstruct the material world they know, through their mundane subsistence pursuits of hunting and gathering, on a higher plane of cultural or symbolic meaning. Whether their primary concern be with the land or its non-human inhabitants, their purpose is not to represent but to reveal, to penetrate beneath the surface of things so as to reach deeper levels of knowledge and understanding. It is at these levels that meaning is to be found. (130) [6]

The depictions stemmed, instead, from people's close and intimate knowledge of the landscape and its plant and animal inhabitants, on whose continuity or regeneration their life depended. For Ingold, "sentient ecology" is precisely this knowledge that people have of the environment and which is based on intuition and responsiveness, consisting in the embodied skills, sensitivities and orientations that develop through the long experience of conducting one's life in a particular environment, a-

long its paths of movement and perception (*The Perception of the Environment* 25). A knowledge that is acquired and transmitted, in sum, through what he calls a "sensory education" or "the education of attention" (*The Perception of the Environment* 9 – 10). ⑦

This non-representational view of art, as well as its underlying relation with the environment, have been an important source of inspiration for those artists who, like Thomas A. Clark, seek a relationship with the environment unmediated by dense representation and contextualization. And here Clark is particularly indebted to another innovative landscape tradition that opened up in the 1960s with the advent of Land Art: walking as art. ⑧ In Britain, Richard Long and Hamish Fulton have been the contemporary artists most dedicated to exploring walking as an artistic medium and as an alternative to the "traditional" relation to landscape through representation.

Richard Long's works document his solitary walks across the English countryside and consist mainly of straight and ephemeral lines he maps across the landscape by pacing up and down in a field until a line appears in the grass, or by displacing small stones or twigs along arbitrarily selected stretches of ground. Some of his works consist of plain text describing in concise, simple words the route of a walk or the very process of making the work.

Clark has in common with Long this fascination with lines and paths as the quintessential human way of relating with the environment through bodily movement. "As walking, talking and gesticulating creatures, human beings generate lines wherever they go," Tim Ingold shows in his recent study of the anthropology of the line (*Lines* 1). By slightly dislocating the Heideggerian emphasis on "dwelling," Ingold cogently argues that we inhabit the world not so much by dwelling as *along* paths. In the same vein, Clark writes: "Always, everywhere, people have walked, veining the world with paths, visible and invisible, symmetrical and meandering," adding that "the line of a walk is articulate in itself, a kind of statement" ("In Praise of Walking," *Distance and Proximity* 15, 19).

Hamish Fulton's work too results from his walks in the landscape. He emphasises a more spiritual and emotional side to his walking, focusing often on sacred sites, pilgrimage routes and ancient forests. Unlike Long, Fulton leaves no marks in the land, but documents, or rather, *evokes* his walks through the combined medium of texts, photographs and large-scale installations. Yet, these media always seem to stress that the artist is merely signalling an absence: the landscape is not in the art gallery. The walk itself is the essential aspect of the work, which is based on the maxim: "no walk, no work." According to Fulton, the walks are recorded "out of respect for their existence" (qtd. in Kastner and Wallis 242 – 43).

Clark shares with Fulton a view of the lifeworld as a process of flows and moving transformations, in which movement is only apparently the opposite of stillness. As Clark puts it, "walking is a mobile form of waiting," in a world where, to quote Fulton, "everything is changing. One thing leads to another:"

> Staying in one place and "travelling" are of equal importance. Far away and long ago. (No meaning in distant places, conversations of the here and

> now.) In the valley, dreaming of the hill. On the hill, wishing for the valley. Lying, sitting, standing, walking. (Walking, standing, sitting, lying.)…. The designed city exists in relation to its opposite, the landscape. Natural, but less wild. Interrelated borderline. Yin and Yang. Mountain high, river deep. Nothing stays the same. (qtd. in Kastner and Wallis 242)

In common with Fulton, for Clark too it is the bodily involvement of walking that creates a receptiveness to the landscape—and, indeed, Clark could say, with Fulton, "I walk on the land to be woven into nature" (qtd. in Kastner and Wallis 242).[9] The metaphor of weaving assumes great importance in Clark and it reveals his distinctive way of perceiving the landscape. Clark's mode of apprehension is not that of the painter, who, positioning himself at a given location and using only the singular perspective of one eye, renders the walker as an object occupying a fixed location frozen in an abstract, flat, Newtonian space. This is the scenic conception of landscape to which I alluded before. By contrast, Clark's walker, to use Kenneth Olwig's phrasing:

> experiences the material depth of the proximate environment through binocular vision and through the effect of motion parallax created by the blurring of near objects in contrast to those further away. The touched, smelled and heard proximate material world is thereby *woven* into the walker's sensory field, leading him to experience the landscape as a topological realm of contiguous places. (Olwig 84; *emphasis added*)

Hence, for Clark the landscape is not a scenic surface, but a *woven* material created through the merging of body and senses that occurs in the practice of walking.

This understanding of the landscape is radically different from the traditional Western understanding of the natural environment as a resistance to be overcome, as a physically given, material substance that has first to be "humanised" by imposing upon it forms stemming from the imagination before it can be inhabited. For Clark, the real-world landscape is not alien, but is there to be picked up by those willing and able to respond to its "directives," to use Alphonso Lingis's felicitous formulation in *The Imperative*.

As mentioned above, Clark belongs no doubt with those artists who envisage a relationship with the environment unmediated by dense representation and contextualisation. Yet, unlike in Long and in Fulton, whose art medium varies, in Clark the medium remains constant: it is words. He has thus to accommodate language and tackle its persistent rhetoricity and opacity. If the landscape is for Clark a woven tapestry, he is well aware that seeing the text as such is to treat the metaphor in a much looser, rhetorical sense. Drawing an analogy between walking, writing and weaving is certainly tempting, but this wish is often thwarted by the author's own perception that writing consists of sentences and by its appearance on the page in the form of the discrete letters and evenly spaced words of typescript.[10]

It is in his "forest poems" that Clark more closely scrutinises this disjunction or

distance between poetry as writing / rhetoric and the environment, as well as the fears and anxieties that might arise therein. The forest is a place of silence, of shadow, where all forms, all contours blur. In Roger Deakin's words, "it is where you travel to find yourself, often, paradoxically, by getting lost"—and, I shall add, by facing fear (X). Where walking takes the body forward, fear draws it back into hesitation and stillness. The forest is thus the place where knowing (the way) and fearing (to get lost), confidence and hesitancy, certainty and uncertainty, distance and proximity, decisively confront each other:[11]

> If we wish to investigate the forest, in all its depths and ramifications, we must first substract all those qualities, such as quiet, autonomy or peace, we have attributed to it.
>
> It is not the forest we eventually discover but our own strategies of evasion.
>
> All the verbs of the forest are intransitive.
>
> On the outer edges of silence, wild flowers and rhetoric flourish.
>
> When you walk in the forest, do you bring nothing with you but your own contingency, or do you carry a gun?
>
> Many common words are darker than forests. (Clark, *Twenty Four Sentences About the Forest* n. p.)

I find, however, that Clark's poetic language, the delight he takes in its playful movement between transparency and opacity / rhetoricity, in no way hinders or deconstructs his ecological view of the environment. On the contrary, both language and the environment ultimately converge in the sense that they reveal themselves as something constructed while at the same time remaining something inherited, given, unchosen, only to change and bear new, unexpected meanings and paths in utterance—when walked "out into." Art, poetry, walking and ecology appear thereby interwoven in a dynamic relationship, for they all partake of the same movement of perception, desire, creativity, embodied skill and knowledge of the living world. This movement does not exclude uncertainty and the possibility of losing one's way (and one's life), for, as Ingold argues, the living world is never quite the same from one moment to the next, and its routes—the very threads from it is woven—are not determined in advance, but have continually to be worked out anew, in a permanent movement between weaving and unravelling, light and shadow (*The Perception of the Environment* 242).

I would thus like to end this article on an uncertain yet hopeful note – one that celebrates the living world's endless potential for generating symbiosis, in all its precariousness and contingency:

what the day weaves
the night unravels
here in the forest
all roads run wrong
what the weaver knows
the forest soon undoes
all roads lose themselves
in the warp and woof
somewhere in the poem
a stag should enter
but the stag is lost at
a crossroad of sunbeams
what the poem weaves
the forest will unravel (Clark, *Sixteen Sonnets* n. p.)

【Notes】

①For an overview, see Edensor 83 – 88 and Solnit 104 – 117.

②For a recent debate on this pervasive influence, particularly within the context of British landscape archaeology, see Johnson 18 – 69.

③Jonathan Bate's work on Wordsworth is a good case in point: *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991); and *The Song of the Earth* (2000).

④On the numerous problematic implications of this privileging of the scenic in landscape appreciation, see also Berleant 85 – 111; and Berque 83 – 96.

⑤I am indebted to the thought-provoking analogy between the creativity of social life and the pedestrian wayfarer suggested by Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam in their introduction to the book *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation* 8.

⑥It is well worth reading the whole chapter, entitled "Totemism, animism and the depiction of animals" (Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment* 111 – 31).

⑦The second term, "education of attention," is widely used by Ingold in his essay "From the transmission of representations to the education of attention" (1999), an unpublished paper kindly provided by the author.

⑧A comprehensive account of this tradition can be found in Kastner and Wallis 11 – 43.

⑨This is also closely reminiscent of Alphonso Lingis's ecophenomenology. His book *The Imperative* sets out to show "how the movements of perception—both the perception which is scientific observation, and the continual perception which is the scientist's, and our, life—are neither reactions and adjustments nor intentional and teleological acts, but responses. If perception is not a succession of mechanical determinisms, our perception exercises freedom because it obeys directives it finds in the environment".

⑩ Another common analogy is that between walking, reading and narrative writing. For example, in *Wanderlust* Rebecca Solnit remarks:

To write is to carve a new path through the terrain of the imagination, or to point out new features on a familiar route. To read is to travel through that terrain with the author as a guide. . . . I have often wished that my sentences could be written out as a single line running into the distance so that it would be clear that a sentence is likewise a road and reading is travelling(72).

I am indebted to Ingold's insights and comments in this respect (*Lines* 9).

⑪ For an exploration of these topics, it is well worth reading Lye Tuck-Po's "Before a Step Too

Far: Walking with Batek Hunter-Gatherers in the Forests of Pahang, Malaysia," Ingold and Vergunst 21 – 34.

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