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Coleridge and the Economy of Nature

THIS ESSAY SEEKS TO ASSESS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ecological thought in Coleridge's intellectual development, and to examine the relevance of this way of thinking to our understanding of his poetry and prose. Such a reading of Coleridge represents an admittedly preliminary effort toward a "literary ecocriticism," a term devised by Jonathan Bate in his pioneering study, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*.¹ The main purpose of such an approach to Coleridge will be to elucidate, and perhaps to defamiliarize, the ways in which crucial aspects of his poetic language emerge from his perceptual and affective engagement with the local environment. An ecological reading of Coleridge will enable certain aspects of his conception of poetic form and his actual poetic practice to be understood more adequately than previous critical perspectives have allowed. In particular, the synergistic relationship between an individual organism and its habitat, which was first coming to be understood in its full complexity by late eighteenth-century science, offers a fresh and suggestive model for analyzing the role of organicism in Coleridge's poetic thought.

The crucial importance of the natural world to Wordsworth and Coleridge, both as a locus of imaginative energy and as a potent source of intellectual ideas, has long been recognized by romanticists, although many scholars are reluctant to describe them as "nature poets," especially if this latter phrase is taken to imply merely the scenic description of wild natural areas. Wordsworth and Coleridge are more than just itinerant observers of scenic beauty; they deliberately chose to become dwellers in the Lake District, and the poetry that they composed in that region often adopts the persona of a speaker whose voice is inflected by the local and personal history of the place he inhabits. Such a perspective may legitimately be termed an ecological view of the natural world (even though the word

1. Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991) 11. See also *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996) xviii–xx.

“ecology,” according to the OED, did not enter the English language until 1873), since it clearly emerges from an intuitive sense of the urgent need to live in harmony with the natural world. Wordsworth and Coleridge consistently express a deep and abiding interest in the earth as the *oikos*, or dwelling-place, for all living things, including local residents who have maintained a subsistence farming community for many generations.

In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), Wordsworth justifies his preference for the language of “low and rustic life . . . because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.” Wordsworth’s advocacy of simple vernacular diction is predicated on his view that human passion *incorporates* the forms of nature. His metaphor of incorporation, or embodiment, is essentially ecological since it suggests that all language, and therefore all human consciousness, is affected by the “forms of nature” that surround it. The natural world is a home (*oikos*), a birthplace and vital habitat for language, feeling, and thought. Although Coleridge did not fully accept Wordsworth’s theory of poetic language, he certainly shared the view that linguistic form must emerge from a distinctly local set of conditions; this is the main premise of his poetic style in the conversation poems, and it is explicitly developed in his early informal prose. In a notebook passage of 1799, written shortly after his return from Germany, Coleridge affirms his conviction that the naming practices of the Lake District are related to the inhabitants’ sense of political independence and their proximity to wild natural phenomena: “In the North every Brook, every Crag, almost every Field has a name—a proof of greater Independence & a society more approaching in their Laws & Habits to Nature.”² Like Wordsworth, Coleridge was fascinated by the naming of places, and he often compiled lists of local place-names during his wanderings in the Lake District.³ Coleridge regarded this aspect of language as a key instance in which words are generated by complex interaction between the features of the landscape and the local residents. Language, most evidently in the case of place-names, is the result of an ongoing conversation between the land and the people who dwell upon it.

In the *Biographia Literaria*, this insight into the nature of language is stated in terms of organicism, an aesthetic doctrine that owes something in the detail of its formulation to the eighteenth-century scientific concept of the organism. More than Wordsworth, Coleridge was attuned to the scientific controversies of his era, and by reading such works as Erasmus Darwin’s didactic poem, *The Botanic Garden* (1789–91), and his medical treatise,

2. *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957–) 1.579. Hereafter cited as *Notebooks*.

3. See, for example, the list of local place-names in *Notebooks* 1.1207.

Zoonomia; or, the Laws of Organic Life (1794–96), Coleridge became steeped in the contemporary conception of the organism as an autonomous, cyclical, and self-regulating entity.⁴ This organic metaphor is apparent in his poetry as early as 1795, when it provides a conceptual foundation for the speculative pantheism of *The Eolian Harp*:

And what if all of animated nature
 Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,
 That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
 Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
 At once the Soul of each, and God of all?⁵

The term “organic” is used here with scientific precision; this passage asserts that all living creatures, no matter how “diversely fram'd,” must possess an internal process of self-regulation. Coleridge’s emphasis falls not on the autonomy of the organism, but on its vital response to an external stimulus, represented here as an “intellectual breeze” that sweeps over it. Although this passage is manifestly about the nature of sentient beings, it implicitly refers to the making of poetry and the ontology of the poetic artifact. If poems are organisms, then they should not merely be tightly-woven structures, but they should also exist in harmony with their surrounding environment (metaphorically understood as a literary or discursive context). Such a conception of the poem as an organism residing in a local habitat is implicit in Coleridge’s poetic practice in the *Lyrical Ballads*, and it represents the culmination of an eighteenth-century tradition of speculation about the nature of poetic form. Before exploring the aesthetic implications of this concept any further, however, it seems appropriate to investigate its scientific origins.

During the eighteenth century, a holistic conception of the natural world was gradually articulated as the result of a growing scientific understanding of the dynamic operation of closed systems, ranging from the individual organism to a more global scale. The biological sciences made particularly striking advances in their understanding of how animals distribute and regulate their energy resources. The anatomist William Harvey (1578–1657) demonstrated in 1628 that the heart works as a pump to circulate blood in a closed cycle.⁶ This unexpected discovery led to further striking

4. For further discussion of Coleridge’s acquaintance with Erasmus Darwin, see Desmond King-Hele, *Erasmus Darwin and the Romantic Poets* (New York: St. Martin’s P, 1986).

5. *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912) 1.102, lines 44–48. Subsequent citations of Coleridge’s poetry refer to this edition by line number.

6. William Harvey, *An Anatomical Disquisition on the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals* (London, 1628).

developments in the field of physiology during the eighteenth century, and it held enormous implications for the conception of living systems generally, since it demonstrated that all higher organisms, including humans, are permeated by a cyclical process that distributes nutrients throughout all parts of their bodies. The Dutch anatomist Anton Van Leeuwenhoek (1632–1723) continued the investigation of circulatory processes at the microscopic level; he was the first to describe red blood cells, and he extended the scientific knowledge of capillary function. Leeuwenhoek is perhaps best known for his discovery of “animalcules,” microscopic organisms whose ubiquity in such common substances as rainwater suggested the presence of a teeming microcosm that lurked just beyond the normal boundaries of perception. Luminescent “animalcules” were observed in seawater during Captain Cook’s first voyage, lending the ocean an eerie glow that later contributed to its luster in “The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere.”

On a larger scale, the Swedish botanist Linnaeus (1707–1778) envisioned the entire terrestrial globe as an interlocking web of cyclical processes, using the hydrological cycle of evaporation, condensation, and precipitation as a paradigmatic instance. In an influential essay entitled “The Oeconomy of Nature” (1751), Isaac Biberg (a disciple of Linnaeus) described how the hydrological cycle distributes water everywhere on earth, sustaining all forms of life; he also described how predators and prey coexist in a hierarchical food chain that serves to maintain the population balance of various species. Biberg’s essay provides a classic formulation of the prevailing eighteenth-century scientific conception of the world as a harmonious, self-regulating system: “By the Oeconomy of nature we understand the all-wise disposition of the Creator in relation to natural things, by which they are fitted to produce general ends, and reciprocal uses.”⁷ All natural things, according to this view, exist in reciprocal relation to other things, resulting in a complex order of cyclical processes that was termed the “economy of nature,” and that bears some functional resemblance to our modern conception of a global ecosystem.

The chemist Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), in announcing his accidental discovery of photosynthesis in 1772, likewise employed a cyclical model, describing the respiration of plants as a “restorative” process that uses the energy of light to cleanse the “vitiating air” produced by animals and humans.⁸ Exploring the global implications of this hypothesis, Sir John

7. Isaac J. Biberg, “Specimen academicum de Oeconomia Naturae,” *Amoenitates Academiae* 2 (1751): 1–58. English translation: “The Oeconomy of Nature,” trans. Benjamin Stillingtonfleet, in *Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to Natural History, Husbandry, and Physick* (London, 1759). Cited from the second London edition (1762): 39.

8. Joseph Priestley, “Observations on different Kinds of Air,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 62 (1772): 147–264.

Pringle (the President of the Royal Society) stated in 1774 that the vegetation of "remote and unpeopled regions" is essential to cleanse the polluted air produced by cities. In Pringle's view, "good air" and "bad air" are circulated by wind currents in a process analogous to the hydrological cycle.⁹ Erasmus Darwin, in Part I of *The Botanic Garden*, entitled "The Economy of Vegetation" (1791), further described the vital environmental role of green plants in producing oxygen and sugar by means of photosynthesis; he also proposed a theory of evolution that in some respects foreshadows that of his grandson, Charles Darwin, especially in the assertion that competition among individuals can lead to beneficial changes in the species.

From Linnaeus through Erasmus Darwin, an economic metaphor is employed to suggest that these cyclical processes in the natural world promote the efficient distribution and consumption of resources in much the same way that Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) had described the circulation of goods in a free-market economy. The "Economy of Nature," according to eighteenth-century science, operates very much like a capitalist economy, with the assurance that some "hidden hand" will optimize the results of individual action. Human intervention in the natural world is not generally seen as a controversial issue by these scientists, since human activities on a local scale, even if apparently destructive, are regarded as tending toward the improvement of the landscape and the development of its natural resources.

The new holistic sciences of the eighteenth century were thus quite limited in their understanding of the possible deleterious effects of human encroachment upon natural systems. There was also a significant gap, especially in the biological sciences, between macrocosm and microcosm. Despite the rapidly growing understanding of the inner dynamics of organisms and the large-scale cyclical processes of the terrestrial environment, there was very little effort to integrate these theoretical perspectives by investigating how particular plants and animals relate to each other within a regional context. In the field of taxonomy, there was a vast increase in the number of species described and catalogued, but only limited attempts to describe the range and habitat of each species, or to observe its behavior and life cycle as a member of a biological community.

This type of detailed local investigation, forming a link between the individual organism and its role in the global "Economy of Nature," was pioneered by Gilbert White (1720–1793), a patient, self-effacing, and highly observant clergyman who spent most of his life in the remote English parish of Selborne. White combined the scientific precision of natural history with

9. John Pringle, *A Discourse on the different kinds of Air, delivered at the anniversary of the Royal Society* (London, 1774).

a deep love for all living things, thus enabling him to compose *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* (1789), a landmark in the development of ecological thought.¹⁰ This delightfully rambling and anecdotal collection of informal letters seeks to encapsulate a complete “parochial history” of the district of Selborne, providing not merely a dry taxonomic description of its flora and fauna, but a detailed account of each species’ habitat, distribution, behavior, and seasonal variation or migration. White’s scrupulous attention to the living organism in its local habitat marks a significant step beyond the narrow-minded specimen-collecting and cataloguing that typifies much eighteenth-century natural history. White’s penchant for anecdotal presentation, and his frequent use of vernacular or dialect words to supplement the “official” nomenclature of Latin words for genus and species, likewise pioneers a new, more colorful and engaging kind of nature-writing.¹¹

Some of the most essential insights of ecological thought—the adaptation of species to their habitats, the interrelatedness of all life forms, and the potentially catastrophic effects of human intervention in natural systems—are first explicitly stated in the scientific writings of the eighteenth century. As Ian Wylie has demonstrated in *Young Coleridge and the Philosophers of Nature* (1989), Coleridge was well-versed in the scientific writings of this period and had fully internalized the broader implications of the new discoveries in chemistry and biology. In particular, Coleridge was fascinated by the new cyclical understanding of natural processes, and (as John Livingston Lowes first pointed out) he planned to use this scientific model as the basis for a series of hymns to the elements.¹²

For Coleridge, this scientific model also had social and political implications; his Pantisocracy scheme was evidently intended to create an “Economy of Nature” on the banks of the Susquehanna River. Coleridge’s radical democratic politics received welcome support from his view of the natural world as an egalitarian biological community. The main political doctrine of Pantisocracy, “the equal government of all,” went hand in hand

10. Gilbert White, *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne, in the County of Southampton* (London: T. Bensley, 1789; rpt. Menston, England: Scolar P, 1970).

11. Coleridge was a great admirer of Gilbert White; he annotated *The Natural History of Selborne*, and he shared White’s preference for the local vernacular names over the “learned names” for plant species (*Notebooks* 1.1610). He also shared White’s interest in the larger, holistic view of the natural world implicit in the phrase “economy of nature.”

12. See John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination*, second ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1930) 69–72, 83–84 and 174. Lowes’s meticulous analysis of Coleridge’s intellectual development might well have been subtitled “a study in the ecology of mind.” For more detailed discussion of the influence of Darwin’s “The Economy of Vegetation” on Coleridge’s intended Hymns, see Ian Wylie, *Young Coleridge and the Philosophers of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 73.

with the economic doctrine of Aspheterism, “the generalisation of individual property”; and the economy of nature, as Coleridge conceived it, could provide a working model for both principles.¹³ Rather than subscribing to the laissez-faire model of the economy of nature extrapolated from Adam Smith, Coleridge regarded the natural world as tending toward an equality of condition in which each individual organism can develop its unique potential. This egalitarian view of the economy of nature is implicit in his poem “To a Young Ass,” in which Coleridge hails the beast as a “*Brother*” and evokes the pantisocratic community as a “Dell / Of Peace and mild Equality” where beasts and humans can live together in harmony. The political and economic doctrines of Pantisocracy are thus allied with an idealistic (though perhaps naive) ecological doctrine that advocates the possibility of restoring the natural world to its original Edenic state of peaceful coexistence among all creatures. The radical Adamicism of this view is reminiscent of Blake’s visionary politics, and although Coleridge would later repudiate his youthful radicalism, his turn to more conservative and essentially Burkean political views (in such late works as *On the Constitution of Church and State*) remains compatible with an organic conception of social organization, since he envisions an evolving and (ideally) self-regulating relationship between individual members of the “clerisy” and the established institutions of the church and state. Coleridge’s commitment to an organic model of human society may be regarded as a constant element that underpins the shifting and often inconsistent expression of his political views during the course of his intellectual career.

Coleridge’s observations of the natural phenomena of the Lake District, as recorded in his *Notebooks*, tend to reflect a holistic awareness of the plant and animal communities native to that region. On his extended walking tour of the Lake District in August 1802, for instance, Coleridge lists several plant species that are found in association with each other: “Dial plate Flower, & wild Thyme roam up the Fells in company—with them the Fox’s Tail—Fern, Rushes, &c” (*Notebooks* 1.1216). Like Gilbert White, Coleridge expresses a distinct preference for the common vernacular names of species over the standard Linnaean terminology, largely because of the close association of vernacular names with local history and a personal sense of identity. In a notebook entry of 1803, Coleridge envisions “a noble Poem of all my Youth nay of *all my Life*,” including “One section on plants & flowers, my passion for them, always deadened by their learned names” (*Notebooks* 1.1610). He further resolves “Yet ever to note those [plant

13. Robert Southey, letter of September 1794, *Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey* 1: 221. Cited by Lowes 573, n. 8. Coleridge first uses the words “Pantocracy” [sic] and “aspheterized” in a letter to Southey, 6 July 1794, in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956–71) 1.84.

species] that have & may hereafter affect me,” and his notebooks from this period evince a sustained effort to record specific information about the habitat and association of particular plant species. In December 1800, Sara Hutchinson transcribed several pages of English vernacular plant names into Coleridge’s notebook from the index of William Withering’s *Arrangement of British Plants* (1796). This list includes some interpolations by Sara, based on her personal knowledge of regional plant names; a brief citation will indicate something of the character of the list and of Sara’s interpolations:

Upland Burnet. Valerian. Velvet leaf. Venus comb. Venus Looking glass. Vernal Grass. Vervain. Vetch. Vetchling. Vine wild. Violet. Violet Calathian. Viper Grass. Virgins’ Bower (=Traveller’s Joy, Great Wild Climber, Honesty, Clematis)¹⁴

This colorful list of vernacular names indicates Coleridge’s concern for the rootedness of English words in the soil of common experience, and the list of alternative names for “Virgins’ Bower,” added by Sara, suggests that her knowledge of regional plant names was confident and extensive. Coleridge presumably regarded this list as a source of raw linguistic material for subsequent literary adaptation.

Throughout his August 1802 walking tour, Coleridge typically regarded human dwellings, pathways, and activities as indigenous to the landscape of the Lake District, as if they were self-generated features rather than embodiments of particular historical processes. Thus he describes the natural setting of Ulpha Kirk as “a most romantic vale, the mountains that embosom it, low & of a remarkably wild outline. . . . The Kirk standing on the low rough Hill up which the Road climbs, the fields level and high, beyond that; & then the different flights of mountains in the back ground” (*Notebooks* 1.1225). Human agency is tacitly elided from this description, which assigns finite verbs to the things themselves: the kirk *stands*, the road *climbs*. Active verbal constructions are used in a subsequent passage: “from this House the <line of the> Beck *runs* almost straight up to its Fountain head / and a beautiful Road *serpentinizes* over the Hill” (*Notebooks* 1.1227; emphasis added). The lowly shepherds’ cottages of Eskdale take on a special

14. *Notebooks* 1.863. The most significant of Sara Hutchinson’s interpolations to this list is the name “Forget me not” (which she substituted for Withering’s “Mouse-ear”). As Kathleen Coburn’s note to this passage points out, Coleridge later used the term “forget-me-not” in his poem “The Keepsake,” which is cited by the OED as the first recorded English usage of this word (except for one sixteenth-century citation). Presumably, however, this plant name was current in popular speech. In Coburn’s view, “it is not unpleasant to reflect that Coleridge and Sara between them may have been responsible for re-introducing it into English letters.”

charm from their imbeddedness in the local topography: "never sure were lovelier human Dwellings than these nested in Trees at the foot of the Fells, & in among the intervening Hills" (*Notebooks* 1.1222). All of these human artifacts are seen as organic forms, in the sense that they are autonomous and self-sufficient; yet they also represent integral elements of the larger landscape.

Coleridge's mature theory of aesthetic organicism, although derived in part from German sources, may be seen as a logical development of these early views on the integrity and interrelatedness of the natural world. From an ecological perspective, just as the concept of the organism needs to be completed by a consideration of its habitat, so too the inner form of an aesthetic object (whether it is regarded as a well-wrought urn or a self-consuming artifact) is less significant than its relation to the linguistic and cultural environment that surrounds and nourishes it. Coleridge's journeys in the Lake District, as recorded in his notebooks, offer evidence that he was working through the concept of organic form toward a new and more contextual understanding of the various ways that human artifacts can work in harmony with their natural surroundings.

Coleridge's fascination with the natural and social ecology of the Lake District was combined with a renewed appreciation for the vital and evolving nature of language within a local environment. We have already described his interest in the origin of local place-names and in regional vernacular names for flora and fauna. As a professional man of letters, Coleridge was actively engaged in the word-making process of linguistic evolution, and his poetry and prose frequently bear witness to his intentional coinage of new words.¹⁵ Especially in his early notebooks, Coleridge's coinages occur most frequently in the context of landscape description, and they reflect his understanding of linguistic form as the result of an ongoing conversation between the land and those who dwell upon it. By turns playful and profound, Coleridge's informal prose evinces a richness of lexical innovation that is unmatched by any other writer of the romantic period. There is an abundant class of new words ending in the collective suffix "-age," suggesting that Coleridge was learning to see natural objects in complex aggregations. Thus we find the words *treeage*, *hillage*, and *cloudage* at various points in these notebooks, generally used of natural objects encountered on his wanderings in the Lake District. He coins the term *kittenracts* as a playful diminutive of *cataracts*, and the words

15. For a list of 700 Coleridgean coinages, see James C. McKusick, "Living Words': Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Genesis of the OED," *Modern Philology*, 90 (1992): 1-45. The coinages discussed in the present essay represent additional discoveries, not included in the previously published list.

breezelet and *wavelet* are diminutives of the same order. He creates the terms *waterslide* and *interslope* to describe specific aspects of waterfalls, and *twistures* to denote the convoluted appearance of trees growing out of cracks in the rocks. The term *lacustrial* refers to the enduring presence of lakes in the local topography. The exquisite word *greenery*, first recorded in “Kubla Khan,” recurs three times in Coleridge’s notebook accounts of his German walking tour, each time to designate a symmetrical (and perhaps magical or sacred) clearing in the forest. The term *rockery* is coined, evidently by analogy with *greenery*, to designate a symmetrical collocation of rocks.¹⁶

The boldest of these word-coinages occurs in Coleridge’s plan for a series of Hymns to the Elements, which was intended to culminate in “a sublime enumeration of all the charms or *Tremendities* of Nature.”¹⁷ The freshly-minted term *tremendity*, along with the coinages previously cited, reflects Coleridge’s striving to express his developing perception of the natural world as a systematic collectivity, rather than merely a set of discrete objects. This new way of looking at the world as an integral community is vitally expressed in new lexical forms that seek to denote the organic relationships among natural objects. These newly-created lexical forms might well be collectively described as an *ecolect*, in the literal sense of a language that speaks for the *oikos*: the earth considered as a dwelling-place for all living things.¹⁸ Unlike certain other writers of the romantic period whose poetic diction was virtually indiscernible from the cultural mainstream, Coleridge largely succeeded in creating a uniquely ecological idiom, an *ecolect* that reflects local environmental conditions and expresses his own distinctive way of perceiving and responding to the natural world.

16. The following words from Coleridge’s early *Notebooks* are unrecorded in the OED: *breezelet* (1.1449), *hillage* (1.1433), *interslope* (1.1449), *kittenract* (1.412), *treeage* (1.789), *twisture* (1.1495), and *lacustrial* (1.1495; note that the word *lacustral* is recorded in the OED with a first citation of 1843). Coleridge’s use of certain other words significantly antedates the citations in the OED: *rockery* (1.495, 1.855) is first recorded in 1843, *waterslide* (1.804) is first recorded in 1869, and *wavelet* (1.1489) is first recorded with a Coleridge citation of 1810. The word *doudage* (1.1635) is first recorded in the OED with a Coleridge citation of 1818; Coleridge’s earlier use of *cloudage* in the *Notebooks* was cited by Fred Shapiro, “Neologisms in Coleridge’s *Notebooks*,” *NE&Q* 32 (1985): 346–47. The word *greenery* is first recorded in the OED with a citation from “Kubla Khan” (1797); this word appeared three more times in Coleridge’s *Notebooks* of May 1799 (1.410, 411, 417).

17. *Notebooks* 1.174. The word *tremendity* is unrecorded in the OED; it was cited as a Coleridgean coinage by Joshua Neumann, “Coleridge on the English Language,” *PMLA* 63 (1948): 642–61.

18. The term “ecolect” was invented by Hugh Sykes Davies, *Wordsworth and the Worth of Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) 274–75. Davies derives “ecolect, from the word [*oikos*] (=a household), to describe a variation peculiar to a particular household, or kin group” (319, n. 8). In the present essay, the term “ecolect” is extended to encompass a more global sense of “household.”

Coleridge's engagement with the integrity of the natural world, and his concern for its preservation, is apparent throughout his contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*, a volume that is constructed with thoughtful attention to the situation of poems in a larger discursive context. The placement of "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" as the first poem in the collection serves to emphasize its role as a stark and compelling statement of themes that will receive more varied expression later in the volume. Regarded in this way, "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" may be read as a parable of ecological transgression. The Mariner, an Everyman figure on a voyage of exploration in "the cold Country towards the South Pole," encounters a frigid realm that is apparently devoid of life: "Ne shapes of men ne beasts we ken— / The Ice was all between."¹⁹ The word "ken" suggests that the Mariner's plight is fundamentally a crisis in western ways of *knowing*: an epistemic gap (or deep romantic chasm) that separates him from the hidden creatures of the Antarctic. The Mariner embarks on this voyage as a Cartesian dualist, a detached observer who is cut off from any feeling of empathy or participation in the vast world of life that surrounds him.

The Albatross appears out of the epistemic "fog" as an emissary from the Antarctic wilderness. In a spontaneous act of identification, the mariners hail it as "a Christian soul," as if it were a human being like themselves:

At length did cross an Albatross,
Thorough the Fog it came,
And an it were a Christian Soul,
We hail'd it in God's name.

(61–64)

The Albatross crosses from the wild ice to the world of men, and its act of "crossing" the boundary between nature and civilization indicates a possible resolution of the Mariner's epistemic solitude. The Albatross brings companionship to the lonely mariners, it guides them through the pathless ice, and returns "every day for food or play" (71). The 1798 version of the poem specifies that "The Mariners gave it biscuit-worms" (65), a homely detail that renders the symbiotic exchange between man and beast: the mariners provide nourishment for the Albatross, while the bird provides them with more intangible benefits of companionship, guidance, and play. These biscuit-worms are more than mere vermin; they play an essential role in the web of life, and they suggest that what we regard as ugly or

19. "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere," *Argument*, and lines 55–56. All citations of this poem will refer to the 1798 version by line number; this version is reprinted in Coleridge's *Poetical Works*, volume 2.

obnoxious may nonetheless be appealing when considered from another (inhuman) perspective.²⁰

The Mariner kills the Albatross with his “cross bow” (79), a weapon that embodies the relentlessly destructive tendency of European technology at the same time that it invokes, with some irony, the traditional Christian imagery of sacrifice and atonement. If the Albatross is regarded as an innocent emissary from the unspoiled natural realm of the Antarctic, then the Mariner’s deed represents an unmotivated act of aggression against all the creatures of that realm. But the Antarctic, through the agency of the Polar Spirit, wreaks a terrible vengeance upon the Mariner, who must witness the death of his shipmates and the decay of the entire living world around him, as if the destruction of a single creature had disrupted the whole economy of nature:

The very deeps did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be!
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy Sea.

(119–22)

These slimy creatures with legs, unknown to any textbook of natural history, represent with apocalyptic intensity the death of nature as a result of destructive human acts. On a specific historical level, the voyage of the Mariner may be compared to Captain Cook’s second voyage, which mapped the Antarctic region, described the incredible abundance of its fauna, and thereby ushered in an era of wholesale destruction of seals, whales, birds, and other marine life.²¹

As the Mariner’s vessel “made her course to the tropical Latitude of the Great Pacific Ocean” (“Rime,” *Argument*), a community of living things is gathered around her. Any wooden sailing ship in tropical waters will gradually accumulate a host of fellow-travelers, ranging from barnacles and seaweed to schools of fish that shelter within her shadow. The ship comes to resemble a floating reef, and the teeming flora and fauna offer both perils and opportunities to those aboard her. As Coleridge could have learned from several narrative accounts of maritime exploration in tropical latitudes, the fouling of a ship’s bottom and the rapid rotting of her timbers can lead to her destruction, but the abundance and variety of marine life surround-

20. Coleridge makes a similar point about the eerie “creeking” noise of the rook in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison”: “No sound is dissonant which tells of Life” (*Poetical Works* 1.181).

21. For much fuller discussion of this historical analogue, see Bernard Smith, “Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner* and Cook’s Second Voyage,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 19 (1956): 117–54.

ing the ship was cause of wonder and amazement for many British explorers. Lowes cites a typical passage from Captain Cook's third voyage:

During a calm, on the morning of the 2d, some parts of the sea seemed covered with a kind of slime; and some small sea animals were swimming about. . . . When they began to swim about, which they did, with equal ease, upon their back, sides, or belly, they emitted the brightest colours of the most precious gems. . . . They proved to be . . . probably, an animal which has a share in producing some sorts of that lucid appearance, often observed near ships at sea, in the night. (Lowes 42)

The slimy creatures found in the vicinity of Cook's ship display unexpected flashes of beauty to the scientific observer, just as the water-snakes in Coleridge's poem are revealed to be vital participants in the ship's local ecosystem. Their repulsive aspect is eventually shown to have been the result of the Mariner's flawed perception, not their intrinsic nature. The Mariner's act of blessing the water snakes enables him to see them, with a striking intensity of vision, as creatures that inhabit "the shadow of the ship," an *ecotone* (or boundary region) that provides a rich habitat for an abundance of marine life:

Within the shadow of the ship
I watch'd their rich attire:
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black
They coil'd and swam; and every track
Was a flash of golden fire.

(269–73)

As Ian Wylie has pointed out, the luminescent trails of these sea-snakes strongly resemble the tracks of light described by Erasmus Darwin in "The Economy of Vegetation," which are attributed by Darwin to the "incipient putrefaction" of "fish-slime."²² By finding the hidden beauty in such slimy substances, the Mariner discovers that all life forms, even microscopic ones, play a vital role in the natural world.

By blessing the water-snakes, the Mariner is released from his state of alienation from nature, and the Albatross sinks "like lead into the sea" (283), crossing back from civilization into the untamed ocean. The Mariner has learned what the Albatross came to teach him: that he must cross the boundaries that divide him from the natural world, through unmotivated acts of compassion between "man and bird and beast" (646). In its concern

22. Erasmus Darwin, "The Economy of Vegetation," *The Botanic Garden*, Add. n. IX; cited by Wylie, *Young Coleridge and the Philosophers of Nature* 154.

for boundary regions, “The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere” foreshadows some of the most seminal thoughts of contemporary environmental writers. Romand Coles, in a recent essay entitled “Ecotones and Environmental Ethics: Adorno and Lopez,” describes the ethical and imaginative significance of such boundary regions:

Natural ecologists know that ecotones—with their intermingling borders—are especially fertile, “special meeting grounds” charged with “evolutionary potential.” When we combine this knowledge with the etymology of *ecotone*, *oikos* (dwelling), and *tonus* (tension), we evoke an image of the fertility and pregnancy of dwelling at the edge of the tension between different people, beings, landscapes. . . . “What does it mean to grow rich?” [Barry] Lopez asks in the prologue to *Arctic Dreams*. It seems to me that he poses one answer to this question through a dazzling display of the biological and metaphorical wealth of Arctic ecotones. Yet the most profound ecotone in the book—and he knows this—is the one that occurs at the dialogical edge between the self and the otherness of the world, between Lopez and the light, the beings, the people of the Arctic.²³

“The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere” likewise ponders the ethical significance of dwelling on boundaries between different realms. In the poem’s initial episode, an Albatross crosses from the inhuman world of ice “as green as Emerauld” (52) into the human community of the mariners. At the poem’s climax, the “shadow of the ship” (264, 269) delineates a rich tropical ecotone inhabited by sea-snakes that the Mariner must “bless” in order to survive. At the end of the poem, the Mariner returns from sea to land, drifting across the “Harbour-bar” (473) and rowing ashore with the help of a Hermit who inhabits yet another ecotone, “that wood / Which slopes down to the Sea” (547–48). All of these boundary regions serve as points of departure and arrival for the poem’s profound meditation upon the green world of nature and the destructive tendencies of human civilization. The wedding-guest is transformed by the Mariner’s tale into “a sadder and a wiser man,” having learned that the deliberate destruction of any wild creature may bring unforeseen consequences. Written explicitly in defense of “all things both great and small” (648), this poem exemplifies the environmental advocacy that is integral to Coleridge’s ecological vision.

Coleridge’s use of language in “The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere”

23. Romand Coles, “Ecotones and Environmental Ethics: Adorno and Lopez,” *In the Nature of Things: Language, Politics, and the Environment*, ed. Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993) 243. Citing Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* (New York: Bantam, 1986).

provides crucial evidence of his endeavor to construct a new ecocrit. As Lowes points out in *The Road to Xanadu* (296–310), the 1798 version of the poem is more than just a fake antique ballad on the model of Percy's *Reliques* and Chatterton's "Rowley" poems. Lowes demonstrates that Coleridge combines three fairly distinct types of archaic usage: first, the traditional ballad lexicon (*pheere, eldrich, beforme, I ween, sterte, een, countrée, withouten, cauld*); second, the diction of Chaucer and Spenser (*ne, uprist, I wist, yspread, yeven, n'old, efsones, lavrock, jargoning, ministralsy*); and third, seafaring terminology (*swound, weft, clifts, biscuit-worms, fire-flags*). All three types of archaic usage are severely curtailed in the 1800 edition of the poem, perhaps in response to a reviewer in the *British Critic* (October 1799) who denounced the poem's "antiquated words," citing *swound* (397) and *weft* (83) as flagrant examples of nonsensical diction. Coleridge omitted the vivid seafaring term *weft* in 1800, along with most of the other words listed here. The merits and demerits of Coleridge's 1800 modernization and his later addition of a marginal gloss in *Sibylline Leaves* (1817) have been widely debated; Lowes regards Coleridge's revision of "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" as a definite improvement, and more recent critics tend to accept this established opinion. Yet the accessibility and stylistic coherence of the 1817 version is accomplished at the expense of the multifaceted syncretic quality of the original version, which bespeaks the author's desire to reassemble the surviving fragments of archaic language into a richly textured and deeply expressive mode of poetic discourse.

In my own view, the 1798 version of "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" enhances the poem's ecological themes through its conservation of lexical diversity. Coleridge's use of archaic diction and spelling goes beyond the mere intention to appear quaint, or to follow a literary fashion. Rather than seeking to epitomize the English language at a single time and place, the poem draws eclectically upon many strands of diction from discrete historical periods and social strata. The purpose of this lexical variety is to construct an idiolect for the Mariner that embodies polyglossic and diachronic features; the adjacence of modern and archaic words enables the poem to characterize the Mariner as a wanderer through geographic space and historical time, and to situate his discourse at the (ecotonal?) conjunction of modernity and romantic *Sehnsucht*. Moreover, the use of archaic diction provides a linguistic analogue to the poem's main environmental theme, since the extinction of an archaic word can have unforeseen repercussions upon the integrity of a language. If the English lexicon is regarded as a close-knit organic system, then the loss of a single word may result in consequences as dire as the Mariner suffers upon killing an albatross. Coleridge elsewhere describes "words as living growths, offlets,

and organs of the human soul,” and he urges writers to employ the entire “reversionary wealth in our mother-tongue.”²⁴ From the perspective of this organic conception of language, it seems apparent that “The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere” aspires to enrich and revitalize contemporary poetic diction through the recovery and preservation of archaic words.

A particular example may help to elucidate this thesis. Coleridge’s term “Lavrock” (348) derives from Middle English *laveroc*, a precursor of the Modern English *lark*. The Lavrock (like the Nightingale encountered later in the *Lyrical Ballads*) is a “most musical” bird, and Coleridge’s impression of this bird evidently derives from his recollection of Chaucer’s version of *The Romaunt of the Rose*:

There mightin men se many flockes
Of Turtels and of *Laverockes* . . .
Thei song ther song, as faire and wel
As angels doen espiituell . . .
Layis of love full wel souning
Thei songin in ther *jargonig*.²⁵

Coleridge likewise uses the word “jargonig” to describe the Lavrock’s song:

Sometimes a dropping from the sky
I heard the *Lavrock* sing;
Sometimes all little birds that are
How they seem’d to fill the sea and air
With their sweet *jargonig*.

(347–51; emphasis added)

The Lavrock enters the poem at an ecotonal boundary of “sea and air,” lending its mellifluous voice to the Mariner’s growing sense of ethical redemption. The “sweet jargonig” of the Lavrock is metaphorically related in subsequent stanzas to the sound of human instruments, the song of angels, and the “singing” of a quiet brook. All created beings, and even inanimate objects, are accorded some form of linguistic expression. The voice of the Lavrock exemplifies a radical environmental usage, suggesting that the animate creation has its own language, and its own way of responding to the aeolian influences of the One Life. The word *Lavrock*

24. Samuel T. Coleridge, *Logic*, ed. J. R. de J. Jackson (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981) 126, and *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) 1.86n. The word “offet” is a Coleridge coinage; its usage in the *Logic* (circa 1819–1828) antedates the 1838 citation in OED.

25. Lowes, *Road to Xanadu* 306, citing *The Romaunt of the Rose*, lines 661–62, 671–72, and 715–16, as published in Anderson’s *Poets of Great Britain* (1795). Emphasis added.

contains a hidden lexemic trace of the word *rock*, possibly foreshadowing the Mariner's return to solid ground and the "kirk . . . that stands above the *rock*" (476–77, emphasis added). When Coleridge substituted "skylark" for "Lavrock" in the 1800 edition, this subliminal trace of the word *rock* was lost, along with the word's Chaucerian echo and its distinctive contribution to the poem's lexical diversity. The 1800 edition of this poem, bowing to the critical demand for stylistic decorum, was severely impoverished by the loss of such words as *weft* and *Lavrock*. Indeed, the deletion of *Lavrock* obscures the main thematic point of the word "jargonning," which (according to the *American Heritage Dictionary*) is "probably of imitative origin," and thus refers to the inscrutable sounds one might hear in a language contact zone (or linguistic ecotone). The archaic word *Lavrock* represents the admixture of heteroglossic elements that constitutes a *jargon*, in the same way that the Lavrock's song traverses the boundary between human and inhuman language. Just as the Lavrock's song is perceived as a "sweet jargonning" by the Mariner, so too the word *Lavrock* contributes to the poem's distinctive "jargon," which might properly be termed an ecolect that emerges from the encounter between humankind and the natural world.

In their collaborative composition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth and Coleridge shared a common perception of the natural world as a dynamic ecosystem and a passionate commitment to the preservation of wild creatures and scenic areas. Their 1798 volume was designed as a habitat that would provide a nurturing environment for the diversity of poems contained within it. Coleridge's unique contribution to this collaborative endeavor was his conception of language as a living thing, an integral organic system that can be cultivated by the poet for maximum diversity, either through the coinage of new words or the recovery of archaic ones. This holistic conception of language was clearly indebted to the new understanding of the organism that had emerged from eighteenth-century biology, and it represents a metaphorical extension of the cyclical view of natural process that was expressed in the notion of the economy of nature. For Coleridge, the historical development of language is deeply conditioned by its relation to the natural environment, and his aesthetic principle of organicism likewise entails reference to the linguistic habitat of a poem as an essential determinant of its meaning. "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" most fully embodies the poetic praxis envisioned by this organic conception of poetic language; its eclectic use of archaic diction serves to enhance and preserve the lexical diversity of the English language throughout the broad range of its social, geographic, and historical variation. Like Wilhelm von Humboldt, whose seminal work *On Linguistic Variation and*

Human Development remains a foundational text in the field of ecolinguistics, Coleridge regarded language not as a product (*ergon*) but an activity (*energeia*).²⁶ Coleridge's poetic energies were devoted to the development of a distinctive ecolect that might express the proper role of humankind in the economy of nature.

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26. Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts* (Berlin, 1836); translated by Peter Heath as *On Language: The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988) 49. Coleridge describes his 1806 encounter with Humboldt in *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969) 1.510. On the emerging discipline of ecolinguistics, see Einar Haugen, *The Ecology of Language* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1972) and Adam Makkai, *Ecolinguistics: Toward a New **Paradigm** for the Science of Language* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1993).