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Can Poetry Save the Earth?

A STUDY IN ROMANTIC ECOLOGY
CARLISLE HUNTINGTON

I. Introduction

The impending environmental crisis has motivated many Romantic scholars to reconsider the Romantic's love of nature. Though it has often been mischaracterized as escapist, many writers, such as Johnathan Bates, James McKusik, Seth Reno, and others, take an ecocritical point of view, arguing that Romantic nature poetry is actually the first instance of western proto-ecological literature. This "Green Romantic" perspective stands in stark contrast to earlier views held by new historicist scholars such as Jerome McGann, Marjorie Levinson, and Alan Liu who argue that the romantic idealization of nature serves primarily as a mode of displacement of the political failures of the French Revolution. As Alan Liu once infamously argued, there is no nature except that which is "constituted by acts of political definition made possible by particular forms of government."

While our conception of nature may be affected by social and political structures, it is dangerous to underestimate the importance of nature's physical reality. As James McKusick argues, "the reproduction of knowledge and culture depends on, and indeed presupposes, a material infrastructure that is not entirely or even primarily cognitive or cultural." In other words, though our perception of the natural world may be colored by certain cognitive functions, those very cognitive functions are still the result of natural processes, so we can never truly disentangle society from nature. However, to reintegrate the physical importance of nature in to romantic poetry, is not to entirely divorce it from politics either. To express a love for the natural world is still, in many ways, an inherently political act. It is to "enact through emotion" a resistance towards "industrialization, consumer capitalism, and certain strands of conservative ideology."¹ So when Wordsworth claimed that "love of nature lead[s] to a love of mankind," it was not

¹ Reno, Seth T. *Rethinking the Romantics' Love of Nature*. U of New Hampshire P, 2016.

without its political implications. However, to read Wordsworth *only* for these political implications would be just as reductive.

It is a grave mistake to attempt and draw a stark line between human society and nature and it is this attitude that has contributed to the advent of ecological crisis such as climate change. Addressing the reality of climate change means addressing the interconnected nature of all life on earth not just from a scientific perspective, but from a cultural one as well. By combining environmental science with literary studies, ecocriticism allows us to achieve a greater cultural awareness that enables a more critical examination of our role as a species in our own global ecosystem. Now more than ever, it is important that we take the time to evaluate our relationship with the physical world, as the well-being of human life has been proven time and time again to be inexorably tied to that of our environment.

In this regard, Romantic literature seems an excellent starting point. As an artistic movement taking place at the dawn of industrialization, in the midst of political revolution, and beside many advancements in the realm of natural science, romantic literature provides an intellectual landscape ripe with insights in to the relationship between human consciousness and the natural world, insights that I believe could be invaluable to current environmental discourse. In this paper I will analyze two foundational poems in William Wordsworth's and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's joint collection, *The Lyrical Ballads* from an ecocritical perspective and discuss how the Romantic framing of humankind's relationship with nature as a correspondence facilitated by human imagination may be applied to more contemporary theories of environmental ethics, such as Arne Naess's Deep Ecology.

II. Deep Ecology and Romantic Pantheism

Environmental ethics, and the environmental movement at large, currently stands divided in to two groups: “shallow” and “deep” ecology. Shallow Ecology, as named by self-proclaimed “deep ecologists,” refers to traditional modes of environmentalism whereby nature is preserved for the “health and affluence of developed nations,”² rather than for its own intrinsic value. Deep Ecology, conversely, is a movement in environmental ethics popularized by philosopher and environmentalist Arne Naess, which stipulates that all of nature, regardless of its utility, beauty, or significance to the human race, is worthy of our protection. To the Deep Ecologist, each organism serves as an integral knot in the “biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations,”³ and as a result, all ways and forms of life have an “equal right to live and blossom.”⁴ Rather than simply mitigating the degree to which we exploit nature, Deep Ecologists seek to challenge the very normative structures that perpetuate humanity's anthropocentric worldview.

Unlike other theories of environmental ethics, Deep Ecology takes a uniquely emotional and spiritual approach to environmentalism. According to Naess, we tend to deeply “under-estimate ourselves,” confusing our “self” with the “narrow ego,”⁵ instead of the capacious and dynamic system of relations that comprises our total being. Traditionally, the “mature” or “fully realized” self is thought of as extending beyond the ego, in to the social self, and then eventually, the metaphysical or spiritual self. Naess, however, argues that there is another

² Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary.” *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology*. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley CA, 1995.

³ *ibid* p. 3

⁴ *ibid* p. 4

⁵ “Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World” *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology*. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley CA, 1995.

component of our consciousness: our "ecological-self," that often goes underdeveloped in modern societies. Our "ecological self" includes our relationship with our immediate environment, such as our homes, where we belonged as children, and our identification with *non-human beings*.⁶

Naess argues that by integrating our relationship with nature in to our process of self-realization and definition, not only could we expand our capacity for richness and fulfillment, but also our capacity for empathy and understanding. As we mature, our sense of self is developed through our constitutive relations. We inevitably come to identify with others—that is—we come to see ourselves in others. This not only increases our quality of life, but also strengthens our sense of empathy and morality. Naess argues that if we simply expand this process of self-identification to include the greater biosphere, we no longer have a need for moral obligations, as they will come intuitively and naturally. The deep ecologist will acquire, "a deep-seated respect, or even veneration, for ways and forms of life." They achieve a level of empathy and care usually reserved for humans or "a narrow section of ways and forms of life." According to Naess, the process of identification makes "the equal right to live and blossom" an "intuitively clear and obvious value axiom."⁷

It should come as no surprise that it is quite popular in Green literary circles to apply the philosophy of Deep Ecology to that of Romantic Poetry. In fact, there are a number of intriguing ideological parallels. The idea of self-extinguishing identification appears to align neatly with Wordsworth's famous "blessed mood" wherein one's mind is able to see clearly "in to the life of

⁶ ibdb p. 14

⁷ "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary." *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology*. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley CA, 1995.

things.”⁸ One can also find a similar critique of the “narrow ego” in Wordsworth's "*Lines Left Upon a Seat in a Yew Tree*," wherein he warns that "the man, whose eye / is ever on himself " sees only "the least of nature's works."⁹ Coleridge too, expresses the self-realization of Naess's "ecological field worker," stating: "I never find myself alone within the embracement of rocks and hills [...] Life seems to me then a universal spirit, that neither has nor can have an opposite."¹⁰ There undoubtedly appears to be a strong parallel between the emotional identification Naess describes, and the greater romantic lyric, but how deep does this connection go? To answer this question, one must first turn to the philosophical underpinning of Romantic's Pantheism: Baruch Spinoza.

Baruch Spinoza was a 17th century philosopher whose philosophical system, though rejected in his own time, would go on to inspire many facets of 18th century radicalism. The core of Spinozan philosophy centers on two primary axioms. The first being that there is a God, the second being, that He is truly infinite. In order for this to be the case, Spinoza argues that all finite substance must be “nothing but modifications of the attributes of God.”¹¹ This means that instead of being the creator of all things, God is merely the universal energy, or in more Spinozan terms, the *substance* all things are necessarily made from. No longer is God an independent transcendent entity with a will, judgement, or a plan. Under Spinoza's system, not only is the whole of nature alive and moving as an infinite totality, but also the whole of nature is considered to be part of, or at the very least an expression of, the divine.

⁸ Wordsworth, William, "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" *Lyrical Ballads*. Poole ; Washington, D.C., Woodstock Books, 1997.

⁹ Wordsworth, W. (1997). *Lyrical ballads* (Revolution and romanticism, 1789-1834). Poole ; Washington, D.C.: Woodstock Books.

¹⁰ Griggs, Earl L. " Letter 484 to Thomas Wedgwood," *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Vol. II: 1801-1806*. Oxford Press, 1956.

¹¹ Thomas Mcfarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition*

For many Spinoza's vision of divinity held an undeniable appeal, as it implied a certain cosmic egalitarianism. Spinoza then replaces divine transcendence with divine imminence. Under his system, vagabonds and outcasts are just as close to God as the king or the pope. This undoubtedly is what made Spinozan Pantheism so popular in a period of widespread political revolution. The idea that a divine and universal energy comprised everything, that humans could not only have an intimate, physical relationship with the divine, but be part divine themselves, held an extreme emotional resonance for those who felt marginalized by their society. As a result, Spinoza's thinking maintained a powerful presence in the mainstreamed intellectual current of the late 18th century, and his previous heretic status made him even more the intellectual martyr of the age. Thomas McFarland discusses this at length, citing Schleiermacher's call to the coming century to embrace the "holy, rejected Spinoza!" who was "filled with the lofty world spirit," the infinite and the divine "his beginning and his end."¹²

Spinoza has often been attributed as a sort of proto-Deep Ecologist and in fact, the two systems do have a fair amount of similarities. For example, the kind of cosmic egalitarianism that Spinoza's philosophy implies is, as we have discussed above, a core component of the Deep Ecology world view. Humans, along with all other living beings, exists on the earth as "mobile parts."¹³ They are a single aspect of a vast totality, and hold no special standing or importance. The same is true for Spinoza whose system also depicts nature as an infinite totality comprised entirely of divine energy, within which humankind bears no special standing. Everything simply exists, "striving to preserve its being," as an expression of the universe. Just as well, humans are

¹² Thomas Mcfarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition*

¹³ "Self-realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World" *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology*. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley CA, 1995.

in no position to place value judgements on ways or forms of life. According to Spinoza, we cannot attribute to nature “beauty or ugliness, order or confusion,” as these are constructs of the human imagination, not qualities found in nature.

However, unlike Deep Ecology, Spinoza's system does not assume any moral implications. If anything, Spinoza's Pantheistic system problematizes the very conceptions of free will and personal responsibility that human morality is founded upon. Yes, all things seek "to preserve their being," but this fact does not imply the innate "right" of all things to "live and blossom," as Naess suggests. Morality, much like "beauty" or "ugliness," is just another invention of the human imagination. Nature may well be a collection of interconnected bodies of equal value, but they are only equal because no value can in fact be imposed to begin with. They are a necessary *effect* of the same cause— that is — God. Nature has, according to Spinoza, no ultimate purpose, except to exist as it does and by its own laws.

Although Spinoza's Pantheism first appears empowering, it also effectively extinguishes fundamental human values such as individuality, free will, morality, and transcendence. One may be just as close to the divine as the king or the pope, but so too are rocks and insects. While Pantheism reintegrated people in to the world around them, making them more than just passive observers of a lifeless universe, it also effectively demolished separateness. No more was there an ontological basis for personal identity, as we were all just finite expressions of the same careless infinite force. Under Spinoza's system, there is no one to turn to in times of personal struggle, of sorrow and of pain. If God comprises everything, how does one explain the existence of evil or hope for some cosmic retribution? All of these ensuing anxieties are a part of what McFarland calls “the dilemma of Pantheism.”

This is the fundamental crisis of the Romantic poet. It is easy to see God where there is life and beauty, but where is there God in destruction and tragedy? While Deep Ecology tends to idealize nature as an arbiter of moral and spiritual truth, much of romantic poetry explores the darker anxieties that such a Pantheistic world view provokes. Naess places much emphasis on the process of identification or self-realization, but little time is given to discuss what that process may look like. Certainly, Naess acknowledges that it is different for everyone, but nowhere is the potential violence of this process explored. After all, the destruction of the "narrow ego" is not always such a liberating process. In no other poem are these ontological anxieties better explored than in Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancyent Mariner."

III. **Rhyme of the Ancyent Mariner and the Pantheistic Dilemma:**

"The Argument: How a ship having passed the Line was driven by Storms to the cold Country towards the South Pole; and how from thence she made her course to the tropical Latitude of the Great Pacific Ocean; and of the strange things that befell; and in what manner the Ancyent Mariner came back to his own country."

So begins Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancyent Mariner", one of the five poems Coleridge contributed to *Lyrical Ballads*. At its core, "Rime of the Ancyent Mariner" is a story of departure and return. A man is pushed past the edge of the known world and thus forced to confront his own cosmic insignificance, leading to a crisis of self-definition. It is only once the Mariner is able to identify with the natural world, thereby forfeiting his illusory human dominance that he can begin to free himself from his purgatory. But rather than a liberating process of self-discovery, the Mariner's tale is dark and violent. And in the end, one still can

question whether or not the Mariner is ever to make peace with his own smallness. In just this short preface, Coleridge alludes to the poem's central anxieties such as the lack of human agency, as well as the strangeness and power of the natural world. We begin with mention of a ship, but not of the men supposedly sailing it. Instead of being manned or controlled, it is "driven" to inhospitable regions by a great storm, illustrating humankind's lack of agency in the greater universe. The men on the ship are both literally and figuratively set adrift, at the mercy of nature, not unlike humankind under a Pantheistic system— alone, without God and yet surrounded by Him always.

As the Mariner and his crew descend beyond the reach of civilization, the lines separating humanity and the natural world grow virtually indistinctive. As soon as they begin their journey, they abandon all the usual points of human reference, such as religion and reason, dropping "below the kirk" and "below the light-house top" (lines 27-28). Once they reach the ice caps, far beyond the influence of human society, even the barren landscape is given agency, as illustrated by the mariner's description of ice that "crack'd and growl'd and rosr'd and howl'd," as if it possessing a life of its own (line 59). It is only once the albatross flies overhead that the crew can finally find comfort in another living being. They identify with the bird, hailing it "in God's name" (line 64). They welcome the creature in to their small ecosystem, sharing their biscuit warms and finding joy in its play (lines 65-66). However, this act of compassion is short lived, as the mariner, in an attempt to assert his agency over the animal, suddenly shoots the bird.

Although the crew condemn the Mariner at first, they quickly revert back to their anthropocentric perspective. The mariner, along with the rest of the crew, erroneously place themselves at the center of the world, mistaking the appearance of the "glorious sun" as "Gods own head" (lines 95-96), or a sign of divine approval, and decide that the bird was the one that

“brought the fog and mist” (line 99). They place themselves at the center of causality, ignorant of their own insignificance. As a result, they are imbued with a false sense of agency, as illustrated by the ship's flurry of movement: “the breezes blew, the white foam flew, / the furrow followed free” (98-99). Their hubris is further emphasized by the triumphant tone of the next line, as they sail in to the pacific, claiming to be “the first to ever burst / into that silent sea” (101-102).

The following stanza, however, reflects their actual cosmic insignificance and lack of agency in the greater universe, as the breeze suddenly stops and the sailors stay motionless like "painted ship / upon a painted sea" (lines 113-114). This sudden shift reflects the spiritual conflict between Pantheism and traditional conceptions of an anthropomorphic god. Whereas before, the sailors believed they were chosen by God, as made evident by the rising of the sun and the flowing breeze, they begin to realize they do not, in fact, hold any special standing in the eyes of nature, reflecting the difference between a transcendental, anthropomorphized God, and a Pantheistic one. This anxiety is reflected in the famous paradoxical stanza from the poem:

“Water, water every where
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water everywhere,
Ne any drop to drink”

The crew's thirst then comes to represent to unquenchable human thirst for divine transcendence. Because they have yet to identify with the natural world, they can do nothing but mourn the loss of divine transcendence. God is everywhere, yet he is somehow even more unreachable than before. There is no greater force acting in their best interest, no one to appeal to in times of need.

Human beings become souls adrift in the vast expanse of the universe, much like the mariner's ship, adrift in the endless sea.

This ontological anxiety then causes the Mariner to view the natural world as even more foreign and antagonistic than before. The mariner cannot identify with the natural world because to do so would be to confront his own mortality and finiteness. Instead, he recoils in fear from the "slimy things" that crawl beneath the water's surface, and the "death fires" that light up the ocean at night, making the water appear like a "witch's' oil" (124-125). The natural effectively turns super-natural, as the Mariner tries desperately to distance himself from his environment. This anxiety comes to a crescendo when the Mariner encounters the specter ship where Death and the Devil play a game of dice for the crew's souls, wherein everyone but the Mariner is killed. The fates of these men are reduced to a mere game of chance, highlighting their utter lack of power in the face of the greater universe (line 202). The specter ship serves as a dark manifestation of the mariner's fears. The Mariner mourns the loss of his crew, wondering how "men so beautiful" could die while he and "a million slimy things" lived on (240). No longer is there any sense of universal justice or morality. With no anthropomorphic God, or afterlife, the fear and totality of death becomes all consuming. There is no order or reason to life, just a haphazard chaotic sequence of events that could end with just the role of a die.

It is only when the mariner is able embrace the whole of life, that he able to overcome his fear and resentment of death. Once he looks at the snakes and value them as "happy living beings" (line 286), he is able to overcome his own ontological uncertainty through his identification with nature. He is finally able to see the beauty in life itself, including in creatures as strange and unfamiliar as the water snakes. Suddenly, a "spring of love" surges from within him as he "bless[ed] them unaware" (lines 286-288). Once the Mariner is able to expand his

sense of self via identification with the natural world, he is then able to move with the universal spirit rather than against it. The fear of the finality of death lessens as the dead sailors rise and tend the ship. At first the Mariner is frightened by the "ghastly crew," but as they work, "sweet sounds" begin to rise "slowly thro" their mouths" and as the mariner listens their song begins to take on a life all its own, passing "around and around" and flying "to the sun" (lines 340-343). The Mariner's experience of the song can be read as his active experience of the world soul. As his ego is diminished, him and the crew, and the energy of all other life mixes together to create an act of expression "like an angel's song," so beautiful it could "make the heavens mute," illustrating the Mariner's embracement of life as a dynamic totality (lines 353-354).

In the end, the Mariner does come to develop an ecological ethic, telling the wedding guest:

He prayeth best who loveth best,
 All things both great and small:
 For the dear God, who loveth us,
 He made and loveth all.

Although the Mariner has found beauty in life itself, and has adopted this ecological consciousness, it did not come to him without violence or pain. The Mariner's story in fact implicates intense pain and fear as an essential component of self-discovery and self-realization. This is made all the more salient when the Mariner tells the wedding guest that there is "no sadder tale" than his, and the wedding guest too will wake tomorrow morn both "sadder and wiser" than before (lines 365-366).

Rather than the idyllic, joyous act of identification Naess describes, Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner illustrates the darker and more sinister side of the all-consuming self. Unlike,

Naess, Coleridge does not subscribe to the belief that there is morality inherent in nature. The nature presented in Rime of the Ancient Mariner is by no means a moral force, as shown by the decimation of the Mariner's crew. It is wild and mercurial and it does not teach the Mariner the moral he espouses at the end. Rather, it is nature's ferocity that forces him to change his perspective and enables the mariner to then reconstruct a worldview that accommodates this change. It is essential to understand that it is the Mariner who creates the Moral, and the forces of nature that instigate that creation. Morality is presented not as inherent in nature, but rather as a construction of the human imagination.

IV. **Tintern Abbey and the Pantheistic Epiphany:**

Just as Coleridge's "Rhyme of the Ancyent Mariner" is a story of a departure from and return to society, so too is Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" the story of one man's departure from and return to nature. Where "Rhyme of the Ancyent Mariner" explores the pantheistic anxieties of self-negation, "Tintern Abbey" demonstrates how emotional identification with nature can be an ultimately self affirming endeavor. However, while the poet's "blessed mood" wherein he can "see in to the life of things" is analogous to the fully-realized state of Naess's "ecological fieldworker," it is important to note how the two diverge. One small, yet significant nuance found in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," is the role of memory and the imagination in constructing the self. Rather than the spontaneous epiphany Naess espouses, the narrator of "Tintern Abbey" constructs what might be described as their "ecological self," entirely in the retrospective. It is only after the narrator has been removed from his initial experience, having spent presumably five years "mid the din of towns and cities" (lines 27-28), that it begins to truly

inform his sense of self. While the initial pantheistic epiphany certainly instigates the process of self-realization, it is only once this experience is recalled as a memory long steeped in the artistic imagination, that it is then fully integrated in to the poet's understanding of himself and the world he is a part of.

Although the Narrator's initial experience of the landscape sets his process of self-construction in motion, it is not until he recalls the experience as a memory that it begins to develop lasting emotional resonance. In his "thoughtless youth," the Narrator "bounded o'er mountains" and "wherever nature lead," more like one "flying from something that he dreads," than one seeking "the thing he loved" (lines 71-93). Nature serves, at first, as an escape from the toils of society. The Narrator does not yet understand nature as totality of intrinsic relations, of which he himself is apart of. Rather, the young narrator views nature "all in all" (line 75), as a closed system separate from himself. When he does experience a moment of identification with the natural world, its "colors and [its] forms" acting as "a feeling and a love" (line 80), he is still not able to fully integrate this experience of nature in to his sense of self. The immediate identification with nature, or the feelings of "aching joys" and "dizzy raptures" (line 86), are not what bring the narrator to greater self-realization, as much as his recollection of such "wild ecstasies" once they have "matured" into "sober pleasures" (line 140-142).

The actual insight gleaned from these close encounters with the natural world are not fully comprehended or internalized until they are reconstructed via the human imagination. It is only once the initial experience has passed through the Narrator's "purer mind"—that is— their imagination, that they are able to fully integrate nature into their sense of self, as illustrated by the Narrator's entrance into that "blessed mood" wherein the body is "laid asleep" and they become "a living soul" (lines 42-26). It is through memory, the most fundamental act of the

human imagination, that the narrator is able to transcend their ego and become one with the totality of nature as a “living soul.” The act of self-realization is not one that instantly occurs after an act of identification. Rather, it is a gradual process of rekindling the “gleams of half-extinguished thought” in times of darkness (line 60).

While Naess seems to paint the process of identification with nature as a spontaneous and self-explanatory process, Wordsworth seems to suggest that the self-realization made possible by the identification with the natural world is a more deliberate and thoughtful process. The human sense only “half-create” the ecological self. Nature may “inform the mind that is within us” (lines 129-130), but it is only with the additional work of the human imagination that one may be able to look on nature and hear the “still, sad music of humanity” (line 94). Wordsworth in fact defines the act of poetry as a kind of remembering, “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” recalled in a state of tranquility.¹⁴ It is through this act of imaginative recollection, Wordsworth argues, that we can come to “describe objects and utter sentiments of such a nature and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves [...] must necessarily be in some degree enlightened.”¹⁵ The use of the human imagination (and more specifically the poetic imagination in Wordsworth’s case) as an ontological tool is an essential component of the Romantic lyric, and one which can grant a great deal of insight into Deep Ecology. Where Naess and other Deep Ecologists lack specificity, the Romantic worldview offers a much needed nuance in regards to the process of ecological identification.

¹⁴ Wordsworth, William, "Preface" *Lyrical Ballads*. Poole ; Washington, D.C., Woodstock Books, 1997.

¹⁵ *ibid*

V. Final Thoughts:

Deep Ecology's instinct to approach environmentalism through a more emotional and spiritual lenses displays interesting promise. Global climate change is a crisis unlike any other, and the sheer size of its scope can leave many feeling afraid and helpless. While the situation is indeed dire, the empirically based strategy of modern environmentalism does little to address these fundamental ontological anxieties, a void which Deep Ecology may be able to fill. However, it's model can feel vague and difficult to put in to practice. Coleridge and Wordsworth however, provide a helpful schema for the construction of Naess' "ecological self." The study of Romantic poetry (and art more generally) in conjunction with theories of environmental ethics such as Deep Ecology, give us a medium through which we can come to understand these theoretical concepts with a greater emotional resonance.

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