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Tampering with Nature

'Eco-crime' in S.T. Coleridge's "The Rime of the
Ancient Mariner" and G.G. Byron's *Manfred*

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To a lonely reclining armchair.

To an empty seat on a floral sofa bed.

Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	1
<i>Introduction</i>	4
1 – Humans <i>in</i> and <i>against</i> Nature	6
1.1 Seeking Moral Values in Nature.....	6
1.2 Natural Orders.....	7
1.3 A Propensity of the Unnatural.....	9
1.4 Order and Disorder.....	10
1.5 Human and Non-human on Paper.....	11
1.6 The Beginning of the Fall from Eden.....	13
1.7 Developments of the Fall.....	14
2 – Attitudes towards Nature	18
2.1 “War with rude nature” – Parliamentary Enclosure.....	18
2.2 Gardens and Estates.....	19
2.3 Nature and Art: The Picturesque Tradition.....	21
2.4 Romantic ‘-scapes’	23
2.4.1 “Into that silent sea” – Romantic Seascapes.....	23

2.4.2 “ye Mountains / Why are ye beautiful?” – Romantic Mountaintops.....	26
3 – “And the STORM-BLAST came” – S.T. Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”	30
3.1 “Persons and characters supernatural”.....	30
3.2 Coleridge as ‘Nature Poet’.....	31
3.3 Coleridge on Nature, Truth, and God.....	32
3.4 “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”.....	33
3.4.1 Birth of the Poem.....	33
3.4.2 Sources.....	35
3.4.3 Symbols.....	36
3.4.4 A Parable of Ecological Transgression.....	37
3.4.5 A Gap Between Species.....	40
3.4.6 Ecological Allegory and Cautionary Tale.....	44
3.4.7 ‘Slimy terror’.....	49
3.4.8 The “Rime” and Trauma: Coleridge as the Poet of PTSD.....	50
4 – “I like the weather, when it is not rainy” – G.G. Byron’s “Darkness” and <i>Manfred</i>	55
4.1 Byron as Eco-poet.....	55
4.2 “Forests were set on fire” – Byron’s “Darkness”.....	60

4.2.1 Historical, Ecological, and Textual Analysis of the Poem.....	60
4.2.2 Byron as the ‘Prophet of Ecocide’	67
4.3 <i>Manfred: A Dramatic Poem</i>	69
4.3.1 Genre, Composition, and the ‘Byronic Hero’	69
4.3.2 Before and After <i>Manfred</i> : Byron’s Torment.....	71
4.3.3 New Horizons in the Byronic Canon.....	73
4.3.4 <i>Manfred</i> as ‘Mental Theatre’	74
4.3.5 Ecocritical <i>Manfred</i>	76
4.3.6 Blood Dynamics: Incest as a Crime Against <i>Human</i> Nature.....	84
4.3.7 Manfred the Narcissistic, Demon-summoning Faust.....	88
<i>Conclusion</i>	93
<i>Table of Figures</i>	100
<i>Bibliography</i>	101
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	113

Abstract

Tampering with Nature: ‘Eco-crime’ in S.T. Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and G.G. Byron’s *Manfred*

The relationship between ‘the human’ and nature has always been understood as a highly complex one. This dissertation opens with an introductory section analysing the philosophy behind the unstable link between these two categories. Focussing on cultural views of how humans look to nature as a source of norms for human conduct, this introduction provides an insight into how humans seek values in nature but also commit violent acts towards the natural world. Drawing from the ecocritical tradition started by Bate with his study *The Song of the Earth* (2000), there will follow a section on English Romanticism, analysing the impact of the Industrial and French revolutions, including the changes which affected the British landscape. There follows an ecocritical reading of the crime against nature in S.T. Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1798) and G. G. Byron’s *Manfred* (1817). Bate has described the presence of humans in the natural world as alien, with literature itself being seen as an act of severance from the surrounding environment and, therefore, a crime against nature. Both texts present Promethean characters in a dark quest to tamper with nature; Coleridge’s Rime presents the poet’s fascination with the supernatural aesthetic, introducing the figure of a Promethean sailor who commits ecocide out of spite for God’s creatures in a poem acting as an ecological allegory and cautionary tale. Byron’s literary production displays deep ecological awareness as well. A commentary on the historical and ecological context of “Darkness,” and the concept of apocalypse, lays the scene for an ecocritical reading of *Manfred*. With clear autobiographical references, Byron’s dramatic poem presents both a moral and religious ‘eco-crime,’ as the main character is involved in an incestuous relationship and manages to evoke spirits. *Manfred* plays the part of a god, consequently renouncing a Christian divinity. Coleridge’s “Rime” and Byron’s *Manfred*, while dealing with different instances of eco-crime, represent an opportunity to further investigate the

(criminal) relationship between nature and the realm of the human, and to open the debate to more recent developments of the 'crime against nature' trope.

*Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you is worth savin'
And you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'*

B. Dylan, "The Times They Are A-Changin'" (1964)

Introduction

Drawing from *The Song of the Earth* (2000), an influential contribution to the broader ecocritical tradition which started in the 1970s, this dissertation analyses the ‘violence against nature’ trope, providing an ecocritical reading of Coleridge’s “Rime,” composed in the aftermath of the French Revolution, and *Manfred*, a text mirroring a period of disillusionment and ecological terror in the wake of a volcanic eruption which forced most of Europe to live in perennial darkness. An introductory section studies the highly complex and unstable relationship between the ‘human’ and nature, before focussing on cultural views of how humans look to nature as a source of norms for conduct, providing an insight into how humans seek values in nature and commit violent acts towards the natural world (Daston, 2019).

A section analysing the historical background of what is conventionally referred to as English Romanticism, focussing on the many cultural, social, and political changes which affected both Europe and the Americas, provides the basis for the analysis of the texts. The impact of the Industrial Revolution is investigated in depth, examining the changes in the traditional method of production, with its social and environmental consequences. As far as the latter are concerned, the British landscape was heavily altered. This applied to industrial centres, as well as the countryside. With the Enclosure Act of 1773, peasants in the English countryside found themselves stripped of the land they were once able to farm, a tragedy made most evident in John Clare’s outcry poems on the tragedy of the enclosures, as stressed by Bate (2024).

The attitude towards nature in the late 18th and early 19th centuries was therefore double. While some defended the natural environment, capturing it in literature or the visual arts, others tampered and played God with it. This is true of picturesque painting, a tradition started by Reverend Gilpin, according to whose principles landscape painters could choose which elements were worthy of depiction. No space was left for peasants and their suffering, with the painter being in the position to manipulate, albeit on canvas, the natural environment. Others, as made especially evident in Jane Austen’s novel *Mansfield Park* (1814), partook in the practice of landscape gardening in an endeavour to render nature

suitable for the English gentry. These considerations are followed by a study of Romantic attitudes towards the sea and mountains.

The third section provides an ecocritical analysis of Coleridge's "Rime". The poem perhaps best represents the sublime aesthetic and Coleridge's fascination with the category of the supernatural, perhaps fuelled by his opium consumption, in a sharp contrast to his colleague William Wordsworth, whose collective literary endeavour led to the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). While the "Rime" does present its readers with a Promethean sailor who commits ecocide against one of God's creatures seemingly out of spite for the Lord's creation, the text also serves as an ecological allegory and cautionary tale in times of environmental distress due to its representation of natural revenge (Lowe, 2020).

The fourth and final part analyses *Manfred* under an ecocritical lens. This unperformed play is linked to Coleridge's *Rime* because of its Promethean protagonist, and is one of two Byronic texts, along with "Darkness," showing deep ecological awareness on the poet's part. Heavily inspired by Byron's life, *Manfred*'s eco-crime is both a moral and religious one, as the protagonist enters an incestuous relationship with his half-sister and manages to successfully evoke spirits, playing the part of a God, while renouncing a Christian one. The biographical echoes in *Manfred* are evident and crucial to the understanding of the text, as Byron's ways of life deeply challenged the laws of morality of his age; Byron had been forced to leave England after allegedly consuming an incestuous relationship with his half-sister and abandoning his daughter Allegra, who died in infancy. These echoes, as well as the friendship with P.B. and Mary Shelley, acted as sources of creative inspiration for *Manfred* (Mussapi, 1996).

Coleridge's "Rime" and Byron's *Manfred*, while dealing with different instances of eco-crime, represent an opportunity to further investigate the (criminal) relationship between nature and the realm of the human, and to open the debate to more recent literary developments of 'eco-crime.'

Chapter I

Humans *in* and *against* Nature

1.1 Seeking Moral Values in Nature

For centuries, humans have endeavoured to relate the world around them, and in more recent times scientists, environmentalists, and ecocritics have been attempting to pinpoint the starting point of human criminal actions against the environment. Plato, for instance, was among the first individuals to openly lament the loss of forests and the erosion of soil in Attica. However, it was Theophrastus to acknowledge the relationship between animals and their environment. Furthermore, Theophrastus maintained that “the goal of living organisms is to produce seed to perpetuate themselves, rather than to provide humans with food, fuel, or other values.” Theophrastus was also among the first individuals to denounce human crimes against nature in the overexploitation of land and forests, arguing that drainage and deforestation might cool local climates and cause soil infertility (Ghazoul, 2020: 10-2).

Manfred and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” present characters engaging in criminal acts towards nature, albeit not in the sense presented by Theophrastus, but rather as forms of violence aimed at twisting the relationship between the realm of the human and the non-human. Lorraine Daston’s study *Against Nature* attempts to provide an answer as to why human beings have looked and continue to look to nature as a source of norms for conduct (Daston, 2019: 3).

Nature can either emancipate, guaranteeing equality, or enslave, depending on how individuals interpret and twist nature. Nature can therefore be read as the pattern of all values: the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Philosophers tend to disagree when it comes to attributing values to nature, arguing that nature merely is. Looking for norms in nature may therefore be seen as a human act of transmutation and ‘naturalistic fallacy’ of cultural values to nature. Friedrich Engels attacked this strategy in his critique of Social Darwinism, a theory he deemed a social reinterpretation of Malthusian doctrines based on Darwin’s original observations of the natural world, a practice opposed by Engels,

fearing possible political consequences of subordination of the population (Daston, 2019: 4).

British philosopher John Stuart Mill too condemned naturalistic fallacy, arguing “[e]ither it is right that we should kill because nature kills; torture because nature tortures; ruin and devastate because nature does the like; or we ought not to consider at all what nature does, but do what it is good to do.” Humans however still sought – and continue to seek – values in nature and its orders, whose authority has been used, or rather twisted, to justify or condemn human behaviour and the relationship between humans and nature. While different cultures have produced different models of natural orders, there appear to be three recurring instances which have had lasting influence within the Western intellectual tradition: specific natures, local natures, and universal natural laws (Daston, 2019: 4-6).

1.2 Natural Orders

When tracing the meaning of the word ‘nature,’ scholars and etymologists are faced with a complex task. The term ‘specific nature’ refers to natures which embrace the characteristic form of things and their tendencies, and therefore their essence; while it is possible for humans to alter such essence, that would constitute an act of violence against nature, against inborn traits, as opposed to traits imposed by education and art. The order they represent can however be disrupted by monsters, entities that transgress species boundaries, or entertain in anomalous forms of sexuality. The Christian tradition, as observed by Davidson, was among a variety of religious doctrines which deemed homosexuality unnatural and somehow equating it to bestiality. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, considered bestiality worse a sin than adultery, seeing in the overstepping of the boundary of species a crime against the natural order and Christianity (Daston, 2019: 7-9). In this sense, Manfred’s incestuous relationship with his half-sister Astarte, in which they “loved each other as [they] should not love” (Byron, [1817] 1996, Act II, Scene ii line 27), fits this traditional idea of transgression against a natural, or rather moral, system.

Local natures on the other hand are strictly connected to the power of place and exhibit ideas of regularity. Local natures are shaped by human customs, and while monsters bring disruption to specific natures, disequilibria caused by human activity is responsible for upsetting the balance of nature. In this sense then nature is asked, or rather forced, to respond with revenge; vengeful nature as a system is self-regulating. However, revenge is employed in cases where human activity is complicitous in natural disasters; nature's revenge then happens as a response to human sloth, greed, and hubris (Daston, 2019: 18-20). Nature takes revenge against the sailor's crew in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" because human activity is directly responsible for the 'crime against nature' at the very basis of the poem. Coleridge's ballad can be read as a cautionary tale, an enquiry into human motives, and a means for "turning natural disasters into sagas of crime and punishment," a demonstration of how, when threatened by disequilibria, local nature respond with revenge (Lowe, 2020: 20-1).

The Mariner's is an act of severance from universal natural laws, which are both uniform and inviolable. The idea of universal natural laws goes back to ancient debates in the mathematical sciences (Lowe, 2020: 23). Both Seneca and Pliny appealed to natural laws in the field of Astronomy; however, the debate on the doctrine of universal determinism stretched into Christian theology as well as in doctrines of predestination, from Augustine to Calvin. Natural laws however were not understood to be consistently inviolable and immutable; rather, Inwood states that "nature was orderly but not exact, following customs that occasionally admitted exception rather than strict laws" (Daston, 2019: 23-5).

According to Inwood, the concept of inviolable natural laws only emerged in the seventeenth century and was linked to the idea of God as a legislator imposing norms upon nature, much like an absolute monarch upon a kingdom. 'Man' was compared to a machine, and machine analogies to clockwork contributed to such an idea, especially in the works of the philosopher Robert Boyle. The latter believed in nature as an engine built and regulated by God. In this sense, natural disasters such as the volcanic eruption described in Byron's apocalyptic poem "Darkness" are to be interpreted as foreseen by the Creator and built into this divine clockwork. These deterministic laws imposed by a

higher entity could be challenged by acts of divine will, which can lead to miracles, as opposed to acts of human will, which produce moral freedom (Daston, 2019: 25-31).

1.3 A Propensity for the Unnatural

Natural orders have represented attempts to define, or indeed oppose, the unnatural, namely monsters who violate specific natures, cause imbalance in local nature, and break the order represented by natural laws. These breaches of the natural order tend to provoke horror, terror, and wonder; the revenge of nature is particularly powerful in its evocation of passions of terror. However, the difficulty lies in ascertaining whether these passions are sparked by natural or moral disorders. The horror caused by monster-like humans and their crimes against nature might be interpreted as a transgression against moral taboos that prohibit bestiality and incest, or by scientific hubris. Human feelings of terror in the face of natural disaster might be fears deepened by a feeling of guilt over being partially responsible for such catastrophes (Daston, 2019: 33-4). These are issues which haunt the characters of Byron's *Manfred* and "Darkness," as well as of Coleridge's ballad.

Breaches of the moral and natural order often incite passions and feelings of outrage and anger (Daston, 2019: 39). The crew in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" feels at once gratitude and anger against the main character, because by killing the albatross the mariner transgresses a norm which is respected by the rest of the community, namely, the microcosm represented by the ship (Daston, 2019: 39). This view is of ecological relevance considering Aldo Leopold's 1947 speech delivered to the Conservation Committee of the Garden Club of America, during which he stressed how "[e]cology is the science of communities, and the ecological conscience is therefore the ethics of community life" (Ghazoul, 2020: 118).

Responsible adults who break the norms of nature can expect some forms of punishment, as their crimes can hardly go unnoticed. The culprit is therefore faced with the magnitude and seriousness of his or her criminal acts and forced to repent for the sake of shared values. Indignation however aims at the reintegration of the criminal into the community, accepting and forgiving the perpetrator. This is not *Manfred's* case, as

Byron's dramatic hero fears he is too far gone to even be worthy of God's forgiveness. The perpetrator loses the features which characterise people and becomes a moral monster, a transgressor of the bounds of humanity while remaining, necessarily and biologically, human (Daston, 2019: 40-1).

1.4 Order and Disorder

While monsters breaking the boundary between human and non-human certainly represent sources of terror, so does the idea of chaos. Philosophers and scientists have depicted the natural order as ruthless and utterly disinterested in the realm of the human. Life in a world characterised by the lack of order, norms, and laws is nightmarish even in mere thought. The world imagined by Byron in his poem "Darkness" is characterised by a total absence of norms, an apocalyptic reality where the world, its institutions, and the people living in it lose all their meaning. Humans cease to exist in the microcosm described in Byron's poem due to the lack of norms brought about by environmental apocalypse, thus demonstrating how "part of what it means to be human is to acknowledge some norm or another," and to recognise that norms regulate communities, not merely individuals. Literature, philosophy, and theology have envisioned orders characterised by norms of neighbourliness, piety, human dignity, and justice in which diverse elements combined into structurally harmonious wholes. Consequently, nature comes to represent all imaginable ideas of orders (Daston, 2019: 45-60).

Humans need order and norms due to their means of perception, namely the senses. However, humans are hardly satisfied with receiving appearances, but rather wish to fabricate, paint, or forge such apparitions, much like Manfred in his decision to summon spirits in Act I, Scene I, bidding the seven spirits to appear in front of him in a shape and form he can behold, one he himself has moulded. Furthermore, the appeal to nature is connected to the link between natural order and normativity. Nature and the non-human are intrinsically characterised by durability which surpasses even the most impressive of human artifacts. Therefore, natural orders represent a far stabler form of order than human systems in which nature is invoked to buttress the realm of the human. However, "[i]n an

age of genetic engineering and anthropogenic climate change this imbalance of power may be shifting in an opposite direction” (Daston, 2019: 65-9).

1.5 Human and Non-human on Paper

Bate joins this philosophical debate asking whether ‘the human’ can in fact be seen as part of nature. While science still treats *homo sapiens* as a biological being subject to the laws of nature, humans seem to stand apart from the remaining biological species living on the planet. Bate then argues that the difference between humans and other species might lie in the ability to write, and therefore to transcend immanent time and place. Abram however finds in the invention of writing a severance of the relationship between humans and the non-human, therefore defining writing as perhaps the original crime against nature (Bate, 2024: 29).

As the highest form of writing, literature too might represent an instance of crime, and a waste of natural materials too. Nonetheless, literature could also be seen as a system warning humans of the consequences of their hubris in the context human control over nature. Ancient Greek tragedy presents numerous instances of punished criminals following their attempts to bend nature under human will, an example being Prometheus the fire stealer; such a tradition would be developed by William Shakespeare in the figure of the huntsman Adonis in *Venus and Adonis*, and later by the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge with his albatross-murdering mariner (Bate, 2024: 30).

Greek poetry could be read as a first warning for human against *hubris*, based on the belief that human intelligence and technology could represent a breaking of the boundary between human and non-human, a call for independence from natural laws. Such works as Homer’s *Odyssey*, and Sophocles’ plays could therefore be interpreted as warnings to civilisation of the dangers posed by human crimes committed against nature. Poets then were faced with the task to challenge and expose the dominant beliefs of the culture in which they were living. In this sense, critics have entered debates as to whether art is to be interpreted as part of a human struggle to transcend nature, or whether it operates in

alliance with nature in the attempt to prevent a severance between humanity and nature itself (Sagar, 2005a: 1).

Nature therefore is to be interpreted both as physical environment, or ecosystem, but also as spiritual, moral, and psychological conditions which can be “consonant with or expressive of nature.” Human attacks on nature and attempts can be seen as suicidal madness; however, the history of Western civilisation is based on “[hu]man devastating crimes against Nature,” and the history of man as an attempt to make nature conform to a patriarchal, anthropocentric, and rectilinear system of thinking which started with the Industrial Revolution. The ‘heroes’ in these tales then are to be viewed as exemplar of human hubris. By stealing the fire, Prometheus set the entirety of humanity on a criminal path, one trod by Shakespeare’s Adonis, Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner* (Sagar, 2005b: 1-9), or Byron’s *Manfred*.

The attitude to crime is intrinsically human, as there appears to be a tendency to persecute, and exploit what Jung described as *anima*, the ‘self,’ which is representative of everything humans persecute, including nature itself. Sagar then claims that imagination, and therefore imaginative writing, could heal the wound between human and non-human; this is especially true of the poet’s task, whose voice might be destructive, revengeful, and embittered at first. As in the case of Coleridge’s “*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*,” the punishment might be terrifying enough, but pain and fear become “symbolic of a process which is simultaneously destructive and creative, the breaking of the complacent, self-sufficient ego, which is the locus of guilt.” Only at a second point does the voice become gentler, leading to the beginning of process of healing. The attitudes displayed by Coleridge in his “*Rime*” or by Byron in “*Darkness*” are significantly different from the ideas conveyed by Keats in such poems as “*Ode to a Nightingale*” or “*Ode on a Grecian Urn*,” texts in which the poet “accepts defeat in his fervent attempts to transcend nature” (Sagar, 2005b: 11)

Historical events and periods such as the Industrial Revolution, representing the epitome of growth and confidence for nations, have produced as a reaction these instances of dark, criminal visions. The poetry of the time could act as cautionary tales, warning against the dangers linked to a twisted perception of the boundaries between human and non-human, ‘men’ and the ‘natural environment.’ The artist, or the Romantic poet in this

case, needed to warn contemporaries. However, in more recent times, the role of the artist is “more than ever before, to heal, to discover and embody possibilities of regeneration” (Sagar, 2005b: 14).

1.6 The Beginning of the Fall from Eden

In his study *The Song of the Earth*, Bate (2000: 24-25) tries to outline a history of the ‘state of Nature.’ Bate argues that the Earth has been reduced to a planet of toxic waste, where temperatures are increasingly warmer, glaciers melt, sea levels rise, and rainfall patterns change. The question scientists have been trying to answer is whether it is possible to pinpoint when the ecological fall from Eden started, with economic historians struggling to agree on the dates of the industrial and agricultural revolutions. Myths, which Bate regards as foundational stories of no less cultural importance than history, could provide unique insights into such an issue:

Myths are necessary imaginings, exemplary stories which help our species to make sense of its place in the world. Myths endure as long as they perform helpful work. The myth of the natural life which exposes the ills of our own condition is as old as Eden and Arcadia [...]. Its endurance is a sign of its importance (Bate, 2000: 25-6).

All human communities have myths of origin which constitute attempts at making sense of the present and to establish human uniqueness as opposed to the rest of nature. However, the danger of such narratives is hubris, which then leads to slavery, social oppression, war, suicide, and environmental degradation, ills which can only be understood by means of ‘dark’ Promethean narratives of ecocrime and of human expulsion from Eden. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* displays deep ecological awareness, which becomes especially evident in Hughes’ translation of the “Four Ages” section, as the end of the first age of Gold, characterised by the absence of laws, is described as a direct consequence of social laws, empires, cities, wars, agricultural systems, and deforestation (Bate, 2000: 26-8).

*

1.7 Developments of the Fall: Rousseau and the Romantics

The story of the fall of man from Eden would acquire new shapes in the Enlightenment. J.J. Rousseau's essay *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men* represents a fundamental text in the field of human thinking about nature. While animals may share inequalities in terms of strength, age, or health, humans are forced to face social and political inequalities (Bate, 2000: 28). Rousseau claimed that to understand the origins of political inequality, it was necessary to picture a 'state of nature' characterised by the absence of laws whereby a small, rich hierarchy manages to subjugate larger and much poorer groups of people. Rousseau addressed humanity, expressing his desire to "describe the life of [the human] species, in light of the characteristics [it] once received[,] which [...] education and habits could corrupt but not entirely destroy" (Bate, 2000: 30-1).

Perhaps overly naïve readings of Rousseau's philosophy have led to the creation of the concept of the noble savage, a phrase never directly employed used by the philosopher himself. The concept captivated writers and artists of the 18th century; the Romantics in particular were fascinated by an idealised and simpler past in which people could still live harmoniously with and in nature. Consequently, the artistic and scholastic productions of the time contained celebrations of indigenous societies as culturally and spiritually in tune with the ecology of their surroundings (Ghazoul, 2020: 125-6).

In ecocritical terms, Rousseau argued that to be in touch with natural instincts is to be free; perhaps unexplainably, humans felt the need to renounce their original freedom in favour of the rule of institutions, under the compromise of education and law in what could be seen as a crime against *human* nature, an opposition made most evident in Rousseau's treatise on education *Émile*. Rousseau's argument was that institutional processes of education represent a clear denial of the natural child, and therefore of the individual's state of nature. Consequently, 'nature' represents the opposite of what might be defined as 'society,' or 'culture' (Bate, 2000: 32-3).

Soper expands on the double view of nature provided by Rousseau, developing a threefold interpretation of the concept. The philosopher describes nature as the 'non-human,' and therefore as "the concept through which humanity thinks its difference and

specificity.” Soper then goes on to define nature as the “structures, processes and casual powers that are constantly operative within the physical world [...]. It is the nature to whose laws [humans] are [...] subject.” Furthermore, Soper considers nature from an everyday and ‘binary’ point of view, using the concept to describe the world and the natural and industrial / urban dichotomy. This latter concept is described as the immediate experience and aesthetic appreciation of the same nature humans have endeavoured to destroy and pollute, which they are now asked to protect and preserve (Bate, 2000: 33).

However, humans seem to pride themselves in their apartness from the rest of nature, which might somehow be seen as an attempt at justifying a variety of crimes against the natural environment. Rousseau and the Romantic therefore tried to provide a threefold path towards a reconnection with nature. The first path was the dream of transformation for all humanity, which was supported by Rousseau’s *Social Contract* and the Romantics’ initial faith in the French Revolution; such a view however proved to be a dead end. The Romantics and Rousseau then tried to rely on two concepts highlighted by Soper: ‘the small group’ and ‘the self.’ Rousseau believed in the necessity of an ideal community of a manageable size. The Romantics too were captivated by the idea of a small-scale republic composed of free men living in nature. Wordsworth believed he had found it in the “yeomanry of the English Lake District; [...] Coleridge and [...] Southey [on the other hand] sought [...] to establish a[n] agrarian commune [...].” The final resolution however was represented by solitude preferably in a sublime setting, a wild place characterised by rough weather, in a definitive severance from any human community (Bate, 2000: 37-40).

Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men* therefore can be interpreted as the founding myth of the ‘state of nature,’ as well as an exemplary tale of human rupture with nature caused by deforestation, meat-eating, and property. In this sense, human improvement consists in altering the face of nature, and therefore in a process of exploitation. Contrarily, the savage lives in tune with nature and is at peace with all his or her fellows. The civilised, social human has forgotten necessities in favour of superfluities and the pursuit of pleasure, which depends on subjecting and enslaving others. Rousseau therefore contributed to eighteenth-century debates of social and economic theory started by the philosophers Bernard de Mandeville and Oliver

Goldsmith; however, Rousseau raised the stakes and voiced concerns which might make him appear as an early prophet of ecocide (Bate, 2000: 46-7).

By ecocide, environmentalists and ecologically conscious lawyers seek to deal with the devastation and destruction of the natural environment and all forms of life by which it is inhabited (*ELI*, 2021-2). The term entered common usage in the 1970s, in the wake of the Vietnam War, as American troops employed Agent Orange (Puleo, 2021), a powerful herbicide, to destroy foliage cover used by the Vietnamese (*ELI*, 2021-2). More broadly, the term is now used to refer to the foolish destruction of the common home shared by humans and other inhabitants of the Earth (Puleo, 2021), but also of “the systematic destruction of dwelling places in the name of progress” (Bate, 2000: 71), as well as of the conditions necessary to sustain ecosystems, human, and non-human life forms, bringing about the extinction of species at unprecedented rates (Satgar, 2018).

Rousseau argued that what might be defined as modern ecological exploitation shares a link with social exploitation; the joint emergence of agriculture and of the law of property and inequality replaced the law of nature with civil law, which is still however to be interpreted as the survival of the fittest. In *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1782), Rousseau firmly opposed civilisation’s inevitable and steady progress towards the principles of inequality, describing himself as a ‘monster,’ a concept cleverly developed by the Romantics, who were captivated by the alienation of the natural man and his ‘sentence’ to exile and monstrosity. Rousseau and the Romantics sought to present retreats from industrialised and overly crowded towns in favour of a return to a life dictated by the rhythms of nature, one in which human spirits are directly integrated with the natural environment (Bate, 2000: 48-56).

Romantic poetry dealing with these issues can therefore appear ecologic in essence. The weather, or the stress caused by anomalous weather conditions, is a reoccurring in the production of the Romantics, in whose texts weather becomes a means of linking temporality and spatiality (Bate, 2000: 109). Poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, and Byron cleverly included the natural elements in their poems, providing different views of nature as a benevolent or vengeful force, an element which humans try to subject under the yoke of their will in attempts which inevitably prove to

be dead ends, thus provoking the revenge of nature and its creatures, with utterly terrible influences for the perpetrators of the crimes against nature.

Chapter II

Attitudes towards Nature

2.1 “War with rude nature” – Parliamentary Enclosure

Modern readers may be prone to associating Romantic poetry to the Lake District or other idyllic, uncontaminated settings, thus projecting a modern, ‘ecological’ sensibility on a past shaped by historical turmoil and far from contemporary environmental discourse; such an attitude can clearly be demonstrated by a variety of practices which shaped both British mentality and soil itself. Historians are often led to describe the early Romantic Age as a period of ‘dual revolution,’ characterised by both the French and the Industrial Revolutions. However, while the former was an obvious historical event, industrialisation only happened gradually, and its impact was relative. Industrial mutations were not dramatic from the onset of the revolution, and the population only really became conscious of substantial changes around the year 1830 (Harvie and Matthew, 2000: 1-2). In “Signs of the Times,” Thomas Carlyle described the human nature of the Industrial Revolution and defined England as characterised by a mechanical society. A contemporary of Romantic poets and a historian of the French Revolution, he was deeply involved in public discourse about the condition of English society in the time of the Industrial Revolution, identifying modern technical civilisation with the gradual loss of individual freedom (Diniejko, 2010). Furthermore, he emphasised how as humans “[w]e remove mountains, and make seas our smooth highway; nothing can resist us. We war with rude nature; and by our resistless engines, come off always victorious, and loaded with spoils” (Harvie and Matthew, 2000: 3).

In Carlyle’s view then, industrial practices in Britain were to be interpreted as acts of war against nature to transform the environment in utilitarian and materialistic terms (Harvie and Matthew, 2000: 3). The configuration of the British landscape was heavily altered in the years of the revolution, with changes made to tillable land, and consequently to husbandry. The impact of the Eighteenth-century Enclosure Acts was especially dramatic and historically linked to the Industrial Revolution.

Enclosure was among the most significant processes in the evolution of both English and Welsh landscape. The practice involved the removal of all communal rights over land in favour of ‘severalty,’ or owner-exclusive control over a given field (Chapman, Kain, and Oliver, 2004: 1). Enclosure was a legal mechanism whereby commons, or waste lands, were expropriated from commoners to be aggregated, thus revolutionising private property and introducing the concept of land as commodity, driving both urbanisation and industrialisation. Landowners required fewer labourers to till their lands, thus leaving dispossessed farmers with moving to urban centres as the only viable option. Moreover, food supply became more easily available in cities and industrial centres due to more efficient agricultural techniques in a cycle which saw labourers move to the cities, seeking employment (Harris, 2022: 1-7).

Enclosure as a phenomenon has been defined as a social crime and a source of historical trauma in the context of modernisation lamented by the Romantic Poet John Clare in his denunciation of the enclosure of Helpston, in Northamptonshire. The area witnessed high levels of enclosure from the year 1730, leaving a significant mark on the landscape, with rectangular allotments and straight hedge lines prevailing in the area, which was given the impression of uniformity. In his enclosure poems, which include “The More” and “The Lament of Swordy Well,” Clare abhorred such alterations, seeing in hedges and fences used to define the boundaries among fields a means to imprison both “men and sheep, restricting their freedom of movement.” However, while farmers mostly agreed in describing enclosure as disorientating and traumatic, improvers enthusiastically advocated the newly hedged landscapes, ignoring instances of violence against animals and vegetation, and producing the planned countryside which dominates the area of the Midlands today (Daniels and McDonagh, 2012: 107-15).

2.2 Gardens and Estates

However, the need, or rather the desire to shape nature according to human taste went beyond the practice of fencing communal land. The general belief, at least among the gentry, was that nature had to be aesthetically pleasing, even if that meant that humans had to heavily alter its appearance. What began as a mere whim later became a trend, with

actual professionals working in the field of ‘improving.’ New landowners of the late eighteenth century were deeply absorbed by the latest trend: landscape gardening. The improver did not believe in a nurturing relationship with the natural environment, but rather engaged in a purely aesthetic one, regarding estates as pleasure gardens. Bate defines improvement as “the tyranny of the *nouveau riche* landowner, [...] a symptom of the growing division between the aesthetic and the agricultural sense of the word ‘culture’” (Bate, 2000: 11)

Jane Austen too seemed to be aware of the many changes taking place in England in the field of agriculture. The political reality of enclosure lies silently at the back of *Mansfield Park* in the many discussions on ‘improvements.’ The appropriation of common land by the wealthy few was seen as class robbery ultimately justified by the aim of improvement. Therefore, “it is not far-fetched to see in Fanny [...] the origin of the novel’s wider politics of enclosure” (Sutherland, ed., 1996: xxii). Moreover, Austen lamented the obsession with ‘improving’ as a whole and with landscape gardening, particularly in Fanny Price’s opposition to Mr Rushworth’s plans to improve his estate by cutting down an entire avenue of trees (Bate, 2000: 12).

The ‘improvement’ of estates soon became a widespread practice among proprietors throughout the eighteenth century (Sutherland, ed., 1996: 466). Improvement is directly linked to the practice of landscape gardening, mostly represented by Humphry Repton (1752-1818). In his *An Enquiry into the Changes of Taste in Landscape Gardening*, Repton claimed that:

If the fashion in gardening, like the fashion in dress, could be changed with no other difficulty than that of expence, [...] we might boldly modernize old places, and reduce all improvement to the whim and caprice of the day, and alter again on the morrow; but the change of fashion in Gardening destroys the work of ages, when lofty avenues are cut down for no other reason but because they were planted in straight rows, according to the fashion of former times. (Repton, 1806: 26)

The idea thus far maintained is therefore a continuation of the crime against nature trope, albeit applied to the field of agriculture and countryside estates in eighteenth-

century Britain, based on ideas which were to shape the artistic production, both literary and pictorial, of the time.

2.3 Nature and Art: The Picturesque Tradition

The ‘Picturesque’ is an aesthetic concept associated to pre-Romantic and Romantic appreciation of nature (Paden, 2013: 1). Recent critical discussion has focused on connecting the picturesque with social and agricultural changes that saw the enclosure of portions of land devoted to husbandry (Miall, 2005: 75). In the later years of the 18th century, poets including Thomas Gray and Thomas West published poems and letters describing their journey back to nature employing a sketchpad and a Claude glass, or a *camera obscura*. This phenomenon was referred to as ‘picturesque tourism’ and has been described by Andrews as an experience whereby a given landscape is aesthetically validated in paintings, thus rendering such places into commodities, making them less pristine, natural, and uncontaminated by humanity (Bate, 2000: 127).

Consequently, by publishing their works, poets and painters disseminated “their picturesque images to a huge, indiscriminating public of potential fellow-pilgrims.” The theory that the ideal landscape was characterised by a type of beauty agreeable in a picture is traditionally associated with Reverend William Gilpin. The concept however was largely criticised by a variety of authors for its aesthetic short-sightedness; therefore, the point of view of the picturesque traveller, painter, or observer clearly drifts away from nature and the realm of the non-human. Gilpin attempted to reach a plausible landscape describing at length the proper arrangement of cattle; furthermore, Gilpin’s ‘picturesque tours’ did not seem to draw from actual landscape or scenes, but rather his drawings were imaginary and presented a twisted version of nature, one which avoided “the distractions of reality” (Bate, 2000: 127-35).



Fig. 1 – T. Rowlandson, “Dr Syntax losing his way.” Engraving from Combe, W., *The Tour of Dr Syntax in Search of the Picturesque*.

Bermingham believes that as followers of the picturesque aesthetic sought to distance themselves from the harsh realities of the agricultural poor, the whole tradition might therefore be interpreted as “an attempt to wipe out the fact of enclosure and minimize its consequences.” Byerly describes the picturesque as an elitist appropriation of the natural environment, while MacLaren has defined it as social myopia. The very aim of the picturesque tradition was to overthrow the Classical premiss that art should imitate nature and to propose that nature should imitate art instead, thus maintaining the necessity of a human, artful version of nature rather than an untamed version of the environment (Bate, 2000: 136). Consequently, Gilpin allowed himself certain liberties, explaining how he would “remove a piece of paling – a cottage – a wall – or any removeable object” he disliked. Moreover, Gilpin tended to elevate “aesthetics over the habitations of the poor, whom Gilpin also observed unsympathetically [...]” (Miall, 2005: 75-81). According to Bate, the picturesque aesthetic is of cultural and ecological significance when considering Adorno’s argument:

The aestheticization of nature was the inevitable consequence of the advent of technological modernity. [This would historically explain why] the picturesque emerged when it did. And there is an inevitable historical irony about its emergence: in valuing art above nature whilst pretending to value nature above art, the picturesque took to an

extreme a tendency of Enlightenment thought which had catastrophic ecological consequences [and led to the Industrial Revolution]. (Bate, 2000: 136)

Such attitudes, while not being directly linked to Coleridge's "Rime" or Byron's *Manfred*, are likely to have shaped the Romantic poet's imagery of nature, which was later developed in unique and specific paradigms, with texts set at sea or in the heights of the Alps, traditionally associated to Burke's aesthetic category of the sublime. As a matter of fact, Romantic artists did not believe in the triumph of humans over nature, but rather advocated for peaceful ideas of coexistence with these larger natural forces (Leali, 2023).

2.4 Romantic '-scapes'

2.4.1 "Into that silent sea" – Romantic Seascapes

The development of a relationship with water in Western civilisations found expression in the literary canon, displaying a gradual change of attitude towards body of waters, which began to be regarded as approachable and tameable to an extent. As seafaring practices became safer and more profitable, the sense of human victory over nature grew. Whereas in early examples of Anglo-Saxon poetry the sea was conflated with the divine, and seafaring was associated with a life of penance, by the late 18th and early 19th century society was made aware of its dominance over the waters, famously fancying its ships 'unsinkable.' The Romantics however found such an insistence of human supremacy over nature limiting and were entranced by the transcendent power that nature held, often typified by the sea (Leali, 2023).

J.M.W. Turner's paintings are often depictions of stormy seas. *Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth* is characterised by visceral paint strokes which obscure the form of the ship in its attempt to light a signal; the ship's natural surroundings therefore consume the boat, offering an example of the sea in terms of Burke's sublime, a sensation torn between fear and exhilaration (Leali, 2023).



Fig. 2 – J.M.W. Turner, *Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*, oil on canvas, 1842, Tate, London, Great Britain.

Instability linked to nature was key to the Romantic understanding of the world, characterised by forces which go beyond human control. Romantic aesthetics might therefore be interpreted in anti-humanist terms as an acknowledgement of the smallness of human agency as opposed to the overwhelming nature of the world. Therefore, it might be argued that the goal of Romantic art was to remind humans of the heights to which they could ascend (Leali, 2023). The oceans therefore came to represent the epitome of the sublime; these bodies of water were seen as places of anticivilisation. Oceans had yet to be scientifically studied, and until the 19th century their knowledge was merely episodic, as nations started to build large navies, and their scientists researched aspects of the oceans, an unprecedented interest which began both as commercial and political agenda, spurred by industrialisation, but also leading to the foundation of the British Hydrographic Office in 1795 (Reidy and Rozwadowski, 2014: 340-2).

Sea travel became a way to connect humans, empires, religions, and ecosystems. “The World Ocean [...] drove the population of the separated continents back together. No single mariner, nation, or community fuelled those voyages by themselves [...]. From the red waters of conquest, slavery, and settlement emerged the new ecological order of globalization” (Mentz, 2020: 34).

The 19th century saw an expansion of global, maritime transportation. Consequently, sea poetry transformed literary tales of navigation into a full-scale poetic obsession with the human-ocean relationship. The Romantics, for instance, argued that the sea no longer only represented horror, but truth as well. Lord Byron embraced the water as a means for revelation and ecstasy, and sea poems by the Romantic, including Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley remain well known. The rise of transoceanic shipping was also registered by these artists, and the inhuman vastness of the sea became a tool for the representation of the world. Moreover, Romantic ‘sea fever’ retained influence on maritime empires well into the 19th century. Visions of humans beholding the vastness of nature, be it in an alpine or maritime context, were still seen as essential vistas of Burke’s sublime. The sea was still seen as ‘alien,’ thus explaining Romantic affinity for the ocean (Mentz, 2020: 77).

Lord Byron was deeply drawn to water. The poet was an excellent swimmer, and he believed the activity represented utmost energy. He was not interested in the depths unless they evoked emotionally charged historical events. Swimming was considered an art in Byron’s England. He was universally regarded as an exceptional swimmer, and many athletes challenged him; however, Byron always managed to prevail. Byron often endeavoured to overcomplicate his swimming ventures to challenge his endurance and jumped off bridges over the Thames or swam under Westminster Bridge. Italy became a setting for Byron’s aquatic adventures. He famously swam all the way from Venice to the Lido, whilst other competitors could not make it pass the Rialto Bridge; these endeavours led him to being called, at least in Venice, the ‘English fish.’ However, Byron was usually alone during these undertakings, literally submerged in places characterised by powerful, sublime beauty (Mussapi, 1996: 27-8).

The Napoleonic Wars also had a historical impact on the Romantic ‘maritime’ context. Both novelists and poets commented on British Admiralty expeditions which were taking place between the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* has been read by critics as a commentary on the northern expedition led by John Barrow, thus demonstrating the impact and influence of the Arctic frame, and therefore of the maritime element in Romantic literary culture. Unlike Coleridge, Shelley never devoted herself to the study of Arctic exploration literature. However, by including such elements in her

novel, Spufford believes she “anatomised the attractions of the Arctic to a particular male sensibility, Romantic, self- driven, and ever willing to exceed the limits of the human body” (Cavell, 2017: 296).

The reading public approved of such expeditions and voyages, thus contributing to the Romantic ‘sea craze.’ In 1815, scientist and whaling captain William Scoresby held a lecture during which he put forward a plan to reach the North Pole, insisting that ice would be covering the ocean in high northern latitudes. His words greatly affected P.B. Shelley, who set on a journey to the *Mer de Glace*, or ‘Sea of Ice,’ with Mary Shelley. The experience was of literary importance, as Percy then composed his poem “Mont Blanc,” and Mary decided to set the main part of her novel on the *Mer de Glace*. On the ‘Sea of Ice,’ Victor Frankenstein is asked to face the fruits of his crime against nature and to confront his own responsibility for the Monster’s evil actions. Frankenstein can therefore be seen as intertextually indebted to S.T. Coleridge’s poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” which Mary Shelley had heard recited by Coleridge himself during her childhood, in William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft’s circle. P.B. Shelley equally admired the ballad and praised the energy of the poem. Victor Frankenstein often relies on the “Rime” to voice his distress and terror after fleeing following the Creature’s animation, a situation which critics have described as analogous to the Mariner’s (Cavell, 2017: 298). Both texts present ideas of the sea as all-spreading and all-reaching, a reality alien to those who live on land. The sea is therefore both loved and hated, connecting and estranging, buoying and drowning, fascinating and repelling those who approach it (Mentz, 2020: 116).

2.4.2 “ye Mountains / Why are ye beautiful?” – Romantic Mountaintops

In Romantic aesthetics mountains stand tall and aloof and, as opposed to the sea, they are all-seeing and all-knowing. Those who live beneath mountains fade and become insignificant beings characterised by a condition of smallness (Mentz, 2020: 116). Romantic poets did not regard mountaintops as mere places, but rather as commonplaces, or the transformation of immaterial objects into cultural artifacts. Mountains, which were conventionally described as exemplary of separation from social life, could therefore be

interpreted as means of interchange and dialogue among Romantic poets (Randel, 1981: 294). Coleridge's mountaintop poems "Reflections on having left a Place of Retirement," "Fears in Solitude," and "Lines written in the Album at Elbingerode, in the Hartz Forest" display different attitudes and philosophical premises, with landscapes which seem to be more active than their speakers.



Fig. 3 – J.M.W. Turner, *Devil's Bridge, Mt St Gothard*, watercolour on paper, c. 1806-7, Tate, London, Great Britain.

Lord Byron sought relief from personal trauma during his voluntary exile in 1816 by moving to Switzerland and adopting a unique perspective to describe the mountaintop experience. Byron still followed Coleridge and Wordsworth's emphasis placed on accessing superhuman powers employing a Promethean, malign alternative to positive Romanticism in the experience of 'negative sublimity,' which the poet made especially evident in *Manfred*. A further example of a Promethean character acting on mountaintops appears in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, a text which displays a profound understanding of the range of mountaintop meanings in Romantic poetry (Randel, 1981: 306-11).

Keats on the other hand revised the earlier Romantic generation's perception of mountaintops by reinterpreting the notion of 'access'; while the pleasurable feelings attributed to landscape are unaltered, supernaturalism is purged in favour of human

power. In his first great poem, “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” (1816), Keats provided a traditional Romantic description of an individual standing on a mountaintop, admiring an impressive panorama, glimpsing at the sea, before finally experiencing awe (Randel, 1981: 311).

The novel *Frankenstein* incorporated Romantic mysticism of mountains as well, thus demonstrating how Mary Shelley sought to join the debate on mountains by becoming a literary creator, trying to vindicate the imagination of woman, much like her mother. Mont Blanc especially affected Byron and the Shelleys. In July 1816 P.B. Shelley composed *Mont Blanc*, a meditation in Platonic terms, while Mary set the fateful encounter between master and Monster on the hillside of Mont Blanc (Saglia, ed., 2019: 203). Therefore, by that year Mary must have been aware of the highly conventionalised use of mountains in her literary environment (Randel, 1984: 517).

This consistent presence of the Alps in English Romanticism prompted radical changes in cultural and social life, as well as in taste, arousing the curiosity of travellers. Mountains were admired for their link to wilderness and were associated to ideas of an ideal society which was free, archaic, and in direct contact with nature. During the heights of the Romantic movement, Alpine countries witnessed a growing interest in their mountains and inhabitants and were especially admired for their grandeur and ecosystem by Romantic travellers embarking on *Grand Tours* in search of strong stimuli and emotions. These travellers usually set off on ‘picturesque voyages,’ selecting the places they deemed worth visiting in advance, before registering them on paper as sketches (Scaramellini, 1996: 49-50).

In this sense, Russo maintains the publication of Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beauty* (1757) is of relevance, as the philosopher proposed a new usage of the sublime aesthetic in opposition to the concept of beauty (Scaramellini, 1996: 52). Burke maintained:

Whatever is fitted to excite the ideas of pain and danger [...], whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling [...]. When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable

of giving any delight, and are simply terrible: but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be [...] delightful. (Mills, ed., 1844, 50-2)

However, only after asserting human dominance over nature could such an attitude towards the natural world be possible. Adorno argued that as long as nature continued to dominate, it would necessarily constitute a source of fear for humans. In the 17th century mountains still elicited symptoms of fear, whereas in the 18th century their sight was associated to delight. Adorno believed that the increasing technological domination of nature which marked the 18th century resulted in the repression of nature and its wildness, thus leading to the conceptualisation of Burke's 'sublime.' Nature could therefore be seen as an image of beauty, but there seems to be a second, deeper level of interpretation; nature could be read as an object, and therefore subject to commodification (Bate, 2000: 122-3).

Chapter III

“And then the STORM-BLAST came” – S.T. Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”

3.1 “Persons and characters supernatural”

The presence of the non-human is a recurring element in the poetic production of S.T. Coleridge (1772-1834). In chapter XV of *Biographia Literaria*, perhaps Coleridge’s most significant critical work, the poet provides a brief account of one of many conversations he held with Wordsworth when living in the Lake District. The two members of the ‘First Generation of Romantic Poets’ were discussing what they regarded as the cardinal points of poetry, namely adherence to nature and the power of generating interest through imagination. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge agreed that the two elements could be combined in what they defined as the ‘poetry of nature’ (Coleridge, [1817] 1985: 314-5); This would to the decision of writing

two sorts [of poems]. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be [...] supernatural [...], supposing them real. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who [...] has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency. For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such, as will be found in every village and its vicinity, where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them, or to notice them, when they present themselves. (Coleridge, [1817] 1985: 314)

Wordsworth and Coleridge’s joint endeavour consequently led to the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), a seminal text in the history of European and British Romanticism. On composing the collection, the two poets agreed on pursuing two different goals:

[It was agreed that Coleridge’s] endeavours should be directed to persons and characters of the supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose himself as his object, to give

the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us [...]. (Coleridge, [1817] 1985: 314)

These considerations gave birth to such Coleridgean poems as “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” “Dark Lady,” and “Christabel,” texts representing Coleridge’s unique contribution to the *Lyrical Ballad* project.

3.2 Coleridge as ‘Nature Poet’

The natural world was interpreted both as a locus of imaginative energy and a source of intellectual ideas by both Wordsworth and Coleridge, who did not merely observe nature, but rather became dwellers of the Lake District in tune with the local and personal history of their surrounding environment. In his “Preface” to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth expressed his preference for common people, their ways, and their language, believing that human passions could incorporate the forms of nature, thus suggesting that language and human consciousness could be affected by a variety of forms of nature. Coleridge did not accept this theory of poetic language in full, but he agreed that linguistic form must emerge from a local set of condition (McKusick, 1996: 375).

Coleridge was especially fascinated by the naming of places, an aspect of language he regarded as a key instance in which words are generated by the interaction between the features of a given landscape and its residents. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge stated the nature of language in terms of organicism, an aesthetic doctrine indebted to the 18th-century concept of organism. Coleridge was familiar with the scientific literature of his time, having Erasmus Darwin’s *The Botanic Garden* and *Zoonomia; or, the Laws of Organic Life*; therefore, Coleridge was acquainted with theories describing the organism as a cyclical, self-regulating, and autonomous entity. More holistic conceptions of the natural world were being developed in the 18th century, and biological sciences made striking advances. Voyages too represented significant learning experiences: luminescent creatures were observed in the ocean water during Captain Cook’s first voyage, an echo present in Coleridge’s “Rime” (McKusick, 1996: 376-8).

The cyclical processes characteristic of the natural world would soon be described by means of a metaphor, the 'Economy of Nature,' operating much like capitalist economy. In this context, human intervention in the non-human realm is not necessarily seen as a controversy, as human activities are regarded as tending towards the 'improvement' and development of the landscape and its resources, a widespread view in the 18th century. Some of the most influential landmarks in ecological thought were stated in scientific writings of the period. According to Wylie, Coleridge might have been familiar with these texts, internalising the importance of new discoveries in chemistry and biology, and with the new cyclical understanding of natural processes. Therefore, he might have been impacted by such scientific discoveries, along with the concept of the 'Economy of Nature.' The poet was a staunch believer in the political doctrine of Pantisocracy, defined as a form of government characterised by equality among individuals, which went hand in hand with the economic doctrine of Aspheterism, 'the generalisation of individual property'; the 'Economy of Nature' in Coleridge's conception could provide an efficient working model for both principles, as the poet regarded the natural world as projected towards an egalitarian condition in which individual organisms could develop their unique potential (McKusick, 1996: 379-81).

Coleridge therefore was deeply concerned with the integrity and preservation of the natural world, as demonstrated by his contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*, and by placing "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere," in its original spelling, at the very beginning of the collection, Coleridge emphasised the role of his poem as a statement of themes which would be developed later in the volume. (McKusick, 1996: 385).

3.3 Coleridge on Nature, Truth, and God

Coleridge's early notebooks and journals contain minute descriptions of nature and a variety of materials which he often struggled to turn into poetic account. Originally, Coleridge attached a high value to nature in aesthetic terms close to the picturesque, and thus employing nature as symbols to organise his intangible and elusive thoughts. In this phase, Nature represented a source of stability and health on which the poet could depend at times of turmoil, a tool provided directly by God, a reasonable being who awarded men

with God-like reason to fully grasp Truth. However, Coleridge's Christianity was a religion of redemption, transcendence, and sin, rather than of creation and blessing. Coleridge did not believe in attaching spiritual or theological values to the non-human world of objects as he directly opposed pantheism, which he regarded as heretic. Therefore, he strove to keep God out of his poetic, paper-based world. However, in the years 1797-1798, Coleridge finally overcame such convictions through a combination of his own emotional responses to nature and the influence of Wordsworth (Sagar, 2005c: 1-2).

As opposed to Wordsworth's almost pedagogic view of poetry, Coleridge's approach to poetry may be defined as 'shamanic,' as shamans possess the ability to restore the natural order, acting as an intermediary between this world and the next. Furthermore, the shamans may enter the 'underworld,' acquiring new awareness which needs to be shared with the community served by such a figure (Panecka, 2018: 2-3). Coleridge believed in the need of inspiration which could transform him into a prophet, a shaman embarking on a journey "into the depths of the psyche, the spirits world, to return half-crazed, but with healing truths." The Mariner, much like Coleridge, is asked to journey into the spirit world before returning to the human world, thus ending his cyclic journey deeply transformed by his experiences with new messages and stories to share. These views characterising the Coleridgean canon were possibly influenced and shaped by the poet's years of opium use and abuse, which helped propel Coleridge's "shamanic voyages on the sacred rivers and strange seas of his own unconscious" (Sagar, 2005c: 4-14).

3.4 "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

3.4.1 Birth of the Poem

"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is deeply rooted in the English-speaking imaginary for its allusions in popular culture. The "Rime" is a clear demonstration of how literature can create bonds among characters and readers, which may result surprising, considering how the Mariner kills, seemingly without any reason, an innocent bird, thus assuming devilish characteristics typical of liminal creatures. With clear allusions to folklore, the

“Rime” was described by Coleridge’s contemporaries as a nonsensical and inconsistent text, at least according to Wordsworth. Literary critics and readers of the time too did maintain that Coleridge’s text was indecipherable at times, despite containing highly poetic elements (Coronato, ed., 2018: 9-10). Nelson remarks how English poet and essayist Anna Laetitia Barbauld believed the “Rime” had two major faults, namely that it lacked any probability and moral. Charles Burney, a contemporary reviewer, maintained, as observed by Jackson, that Coleridge’s poem and the *Lyrical Ballads* project could not be interpreted as poetry, believing the collection to be characterised by backwardness and by Coleridge’s archaic diction (Ferguson, 1977: 618-20).

Coleridge began writing the poem in 1797 while living in Somerset, not too far from William and Dorothy Wordsworth’s cottage. The two poets had begun writing a poem on Cain which was left unfinished but had a significant influence on both the “Rime” and “Kubla Khan.” The “Rime” was supposed to echo G.A. Bürger’s *Lenore*, a popular German ballad characterised by its pre-Romantic taste and popular verse. As stated by Coleridge himself in his *Biographia Literaria*, the “Rime” dealt with the supernatural and was Romantic in essence, and thus complying with the clear-cut thematical division of the *Lyrical Ballads*. Such a categorisation was not fully supported by Wordsworth, who rather claimed that Coleridge’s ballad could damage the collection, believing that readers would be met with an awkward, supernatural text set at sea, which could damage the reputation of their collective endeavour (Coronato, ed., 2018: 10-11). Wordsworth wrote a patronising and ponderous list of the many flaws characterising the “Rime,” which he included in his “Preface” to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth even revealed that he was altogether unable to read the poem, recognise its symbolic meaning, or understand the characters and imagery employed (Sagar, 2005c: 8). Coleridge on the other hand “liked his own poetry best when he [could not] understand it (Sagar, 2005c: 3).

Coleridge rewrote the “Rime” about eighteen times between 1798 and 1834, as he perpetually sought to generate metaphors to describe his own nature in an endless quest for archetypes. The poet was a perfectionist, and the different versions he published all tended to add more layers of mystery to the text. The 1798 version was first perceived as an archaic ballad and Gothic in tone. The 1817 text perhaps displays the most significant

textual changes, with the introduction of explicatory glosses, the work of an imaginary 1650 editor commenting on the ballad, first released to the public in the great age of European circumnavigations. By including a mock Late-Renaissance text at the very beginning of the poem, Coleridge virtually employed a chorus to give credibility to an otherwise obsolete form: the Gothic horror tale (Coronato, ed., 2018: 18-9).

The glosses, which were added following the authoritarian turn of the French Revolution with Robespierre's terror, may be interpreted as a stratagem to censure subversive ideas, fearing their diffusion through the press, or as an attempt made by Coleridge to revise his texts to include, or at least suggest, a moral reading. The glosses seem to explain the events of the "Rime," and the Mariner's decision to kill the Albatross is commented on in a gloss highlighting the theme of inhospitality and introducing a moral issue and the consequent punishment awaiting its perpetrator (Coronato, ed., 2018: 19-20).

3.4.2 Sources

The "Rime" contains echoes to various texts and images, but also to a range of more unreliable sources, including dreams. Wordsworth himself argued that the idea for the poem came to Coleridge after hearing a friend's account of a dream about a ghost ship. Wordsworth too claimed to have contributed to the poem, having provided Coleridge with the image of the Wedding-Guest and the ghostly appearance of the Mariner. However, Wordsworth then added that much of the poem was the result of Coleridge's toils, despite then claiming that he had suggested his friend that the Mariner could have committed a crime. Furthermore, Wordsworth warned Coleridge of the account of a voyage contained in George Shelvocke's *A Voyage Round the World by the Way of the South* (1726), relating the tale of a melancholy captain who killed a black albatross which was following the ship, believing its colour to be an evil omen. Wordsworth also maintained that he had provided Coleridge with the idea of the Mariner's punishment, as well as of the dead-crew-manned ship (Coronato, ed. 2018: 12-3).

However, despite the claims raised by Wordsworth, Coleridge might have been inspired by the travel accounts he had read since his childhood, or by legends about ghostly ships, such as ‘The Flying Dutchman.’ Plausible sources include Samuel Purchas’ *Purchas his Pilgrimage* (1617), William Bligh’s *A Voyage to the South Seas* (1792), William Mayor’s *An Historical Account of the Most Celebrated Voyages, Travels, and Discoveries, from the Time of Columbus to the Present Period* (1797), or David Crantz’s naturalistic treatise *History of Greenland* (1765), a text providing the analysis of a variety of never-before-seen marine animals. Furthermore, Coleridge could have been familiar with the account of Cook’s second expedition (1772), during which albatrosses were captured using either hooks or weapons, thus originating superstitions in the sailors onboard. Interestingly, Coleridge would directly meet a member of the crew, Cook’s astronomer, who taught Maths to a young Coleridge (Coronato, ed., 2018: 10-4).

The “Rime” also displays clear mythological echoes, as the sea represents the father of all Gods and the origin of all things, the limit humans wish to surpass. Unlike Dante’s Ulysses, the Mariner manages to return; Coleridge had read Henry Boyd’s perhaps overly superficial translation of Dante’s *Comedy*, which was reminiscent of the frozen seascapes the Mariner of Coleridge’s poem must have encountered. The character of the Mariner does however share some aspects of Dante’s Ulysses or Charon, as he is both a condemned prisoner and a guide, as argued by Brown. However, elements which might appear as realistic in the poem might in truth be entirely invented, symbols used to provide interpretations of Coleridge’s seemingly nonsensical ballad (Coronato, ed., 2018: 15).

3.4.3 Symbols

Coleridge was indebted to his sources, friends, and imagination, but also to his critical writings highlight to what extent Coleridge felt privileged to be able engage with time and space as they exist in imagination. The poet’s contemplative attitude towards nature, he argued, required him to employ symbolic language. The “Rime” easily leads readers to symbolic interpretations of the text, regarding it as a tale of sin, atonement, and redemption. In more recent times, the poem has been read as a proto-ecological parable seemingly anticipating James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis (Coronato, ed., 2018: 16),

whereby life on earth is seen as self-regulating in terms of chemical composition and climate. According to Lovelock, life on Earth can regulate its temperature and other conditions, much like living organisms are able to. ‘Gaia’ itself however is not *an* organism, but rather an interaction among organisms, a self-regulating system which connects microorganisms to their environment (Žukauskaitė, 2020: 142-3).

However, an exclusively ‘symbolic’ reading of Coleridge’s “Rime” would be problematic, as symbols may be easily overthrown; Robert Penn Warren for instance argued that the moon may represent imagination, whereas the sun both human intellect and evil. Conversely, other critics have identified the Sun as a clear metaphor for God, appearing in front of a guilt-tormented individual, and the Moon as Isis, a figure conventionally associated to reconciliation; however, others maintain a typically 18th-century interpretation of the Moon as mirror of the Sun, a platonic image of the creative mind, thus demonstrating the unreliability of such a means of interpretation (Coronato, ed., 2018: 15-6).

3.4.4 A Parable of Ecological Transgression

The “Rime” opens with a bizarre figure, an old-looking, grey-bearded Mariner who stops a Wedding-Guest, forcing the latter to listen to his story. The Mariner’s account, following the Wedding-Guest’s initial shock, seems joyous in tone, as he describes the day of his departure as a sunny day, with people cheering. This initial optimism however, mirrored by the elements, is by no means the main mood of the poem. The Mariner’s voyage of exploration to the South Pole leads him to a realm apparently devoid of life, where the Mariner seems to be a mere observer with no feelings of empathy or participation in the surrounding world of life. Out of the fog, an Albatross emerges, an animal which the Mariner spontaneously hails “[a]s if it were a Christian soul,” a human, just like the crew onboard the ship (McKusick, 1996: 385). The arrival of the bird is described in these terms:

At length did cross an Albatross,
Thorough the Fog it came,
As if it were a Christian Soul,

We hail'd it in God's name.

(Coleridge, [1817] 1985, lines 63-6)



Fig. 4 – G. Doré, *The Appearance of the Albatross to Lead the Marooned Ship Out of the Frozen Seas of Antarctica*, Scene from “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by S.T. Coleridge, wood engraving, 1876, published by Harper & Brothers, New York.

The Albatross leaves the wild ice to enter the world of men, crossing the boundary between nature and civilisation, as the animal brings company to the mariners and guides them through the mist, growing attached to the crew, returning “every day for food or play” (Coleridge, [1817] 1985, line 73). The Mariner however decides to kill the Albatross with his crossbow, a weapon representing European technology and at the same time invoking a traditionally Christian imagery of sacrifice and atonement. In this sense, if the Albatross represents an innocent creature belonging to an unspoilt realm, the Mariner is a criminal committing an unjustifiable act of aggression (McKusick, 1996: 385-6).

What ensues is the vengeance of the natural world and of the Antarctic; the Mariner is forced to witness the death of his shipmates and the decaying of his surroundings, both in

terms of ship and environment. The destruction of a single creature seemingly leads to the disruption of the whole economy of nature (McKusick, 1996: 386). Consequently

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

([1817] 1985, lines 123-6)

The 'slimy' beings, which are virtually impossible to accurately pinpoint as specific creatures, could therefore represent nature with apocalyptic intensity and its death due to destructive human acts. From a historical point of view, the voyage of the Mariner has been compared to Captain Cook's second voyage, during which the Antarctic was mapped, and its fauna catalogued. Unfortunately, the discovery of these new species led to their doom, as seals, whales, birds, and other marine animals were killed for primarily economic purposes (McKusick, 1996: 386).

A community of living things gathers around the ship during its voyage, from barnacles to schools of fish, with the hull finally resembling a reef. The initial spectacle however, as Coleridge might have known, could have led to the rapid rotting of the ship's timbers. Cook himself was fascinated by marine fauna and observed a variety 'slimy creatures' seemingly emitting light, much like the 'water-snakes' in Coleridge's "Rime." Such animals are revealed to be a vital part of the ship's underwater ecosystem, thus forcing the Mariner to admit that their repulsive aspect was merely a product of his flawed perception, finally blessing the creatures (McKusick, 1996: 386-7)

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.

([1817] 1985, lines 278-80)

In his study "The Economy of Vegetation," E. Darwin described similar creatures whose glowing aspect he attributed to putrefaction of 'fish-slime.' On observing these

living beings, and finding beauty in them, the Mariner appears to discover that all life forms are of vital importance to the natural world. The Mariner finally seems to be released from his state of alienation from nature following his blessing of the water-snakes, after which the Albatross finally sinks in the depths of the sea, going back to the realm of the non-human, the untamed ocean. In this sense, critics have argued that the Albatross might symbolise the Mariner's newly acquired knowledge of the necessity to cross the boundaries dividing human and non-human through acts of compassion between humans, bird, and beast." This concern for the notion of boundaries anticipates contemporary environmental and ecological thought (McKusick, 1996: 387-8).

"The Rime" may therefore represent an opportunity for modern readers to reflect on the ethics of species coexistence and boundaries. At the beginning of the poem, an Albatross leaves a non-human world of ice to enter a human community, represented by the crew. Then there seems to follow a shift at the poem's climax, as the Mariner blesses some sea-snakes to survive. At the end of the poem, as the Mariner sets foot on land after his fateful voyage, the sailor is helped by a Hermit inhabiting "that wood / Which slopes down to the Sea" (Coleridge, [1817] 1895, lines 514-5). These are all boundary regions, or *ecotones*, acting both as points of both departure and arrival for the poem's meditations on nature and human destruction of the natural world. As he listens to the Mariner's story, the Wedding-Guest seems to gain a melancholic disposition, as he learns that the deliberate destruction of wild creatures may lead to dramatic consequences. Considering these observations, critics have ventured to define "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" as a poem written in defence of "all things both great and small" (Coleridge, [1817] 1985, line 615), and an example of Coleridge's environmental advocacy and ecological vision (McKusick, 1996: 388).

3.4.5 A Gap Between Species

The presence of non-human animals has perhaps been unnoticed in the critical literature on Coleridge's "Rime," despite the poem largely dealing with this category. The poem largely consists in an escape from animality, a trip to a region where, as the Mariner laments, "Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken – / The ice was all between" (Coleridge,

[1817] 1985, lines 57-8). While no life seems to inhabit this remote frozen land, the ice itself gains beastly characteristics, as “It cracked and growled, and roared and howled, / Like noises in a swound! (Coleridge, [1817] 1985, lines 61-2). The only living creature seems to be the Albatross, which is later shot by the Mariner (Dumbrowski, 1986: 112).

Such a murderous act could only be rationalised by universalising the Mariner’s hatred of animals, an attempt to show his superiority to the rotting and slimy creatures inhabiting the ocean. This order however cannot, or rather will not, be imposed, as the death of the seabird brings about a deathly drought, leading to the crew’s hatred for their shipmate, forcing him to confront his primitivism by making him wear the Albatross’ corpse around his neck (Dumbrowski, 1986: 112). The Mariner is set apart by the cosmos of the poem and from other creatures due to his criminal act of violence; the unnamed sailor effectively becomes an outsider, much like Walton in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, after breaking the implicit contract of mutual dependency at the very basis of any reciprocal relations in a network of species. Therefore, the Mariner is guilty of speciesism (Bate, 2000: 49-53).

The maltreatment abuse, and exploitation of animals may often appear as connected to ideas of cultural legitimacy and happens routinely in civilised societies, as in some cultures animals may be perceived as objects existing merely to satisfy human needs. The debate on animal rights has taken two directions; Singer maintains a utilitarian view of animal rights, and therefore claims that there is a common, shared interest in the avoidance of pain, finding the latter category, along with suffering as a thread uniting species, both human and non-human. Reagan argues that animals also have moral rights, thus implying that as subjects of life they should be neither harmed nor killed (Sollund, 2016: 2). This contemporary debate on animal rights is of relevance when applied to a re-reading of Coleridge’s “Rime,” especially when considering Bate’s interpretation of the Mariner’s crime of ‘speciesism’ (Bate, 2000: 53). The Mariner could therefore be accused of animal abuse, defined by Beirne as “any act that contributes to the pain, suffering, or death of an animal or that otherwise threatens its welfare. Animal abuse may be physical, psychological, or emotional; [i]t may involve active maltreatment or passive neglect or omission[,] and may be direct or indirect, intentional or unintentional.” The Mariner’s act of violence towards the Albatross could be linked to insensibility for the other,

highlighted by difference in appearance, and therefore by emotional distance created by regarding the non-human other as 'inferior.' As argued by Luke, to view others as inferior is a voluntary choice rather than an actual proof of inferiority and is a mechanism for creating emotional distance. Such a perception of animals had been previously justified by the philosopher René Descartes, who viewed animals as machines with neither consciousness nor feelings (Sollund, 2016: 4-11). The philosopher regarded animals as non-sentient automata, believing they possessed self-consciousness and the ability to think and to speak, accepting the possibility a corporeal soul might be found in non-human animals, refuting however the existence of a spiritual soul within their being (Harrison, 1992: 219-23).

Culture, religion, and philosophy have provided legitimacy for the way humans coexist and exploit non-human animals. For instance, Aristotle believed that Nature had created animals and plants for human beings. Thomas Aquinas maintained that animals lacked reason and therefore could not equal human beings, believing them to fit on a scale between plants and humans. Consequently, animals were regarded in strictly utilitarian terms, with human rightly taking advantage over animals. More conservative and traditional interpretations of the Sacred Scriptures too seem to legitimate animal abuse by describing animals, as well as children and women, as male possessions. Therefore, under these cultural and religious filters, both the human and non-human were arranged in a hierarchical structure with humans prevailing over the rest God's creations (Sollund, 2016: 13-4).

The Mariner does not appear to be unaware of the cruelty of his actions, but rather it could be argued that he manages to carry them out because he chooses to turn a blind eye to them. 'Denial' as such happens once a perpetrator successfully manages to direct the attention away from any unpleasant action through techniques of neutralisation, such as minimising. Furthermore, Bauman stresses how the capacity to commit cruel actions increases as people commit them in group, thus demonstrating that cooperation is connected to both inclusion and exclusion, increasing the gap between 'subject' and 'object,' 'perpetrator' and 'victim.' Quoting from Cohen, Sollund maintains denial could also be caused by the concept of 'banality of evil,' and therefore a minimisation of evil resulting from ordinary human qualities (Sollund, 2016: 19-20); this happens when

not fully realizing what [your group and] you are doing; being as normal as all your peers, doing the same things; having motives that are dull, unimaginative and commonplace (going along with others, professional ambition, job security) and retaining long afterwards the [façade] of pseudo-stupidity, not grasping what the fuss was about. (Cohen, 2001: 100)

The Mariner might have been misguided by prejudice. The American behaviourist Theodore Barber himself maintained for thirty years that birds were merely led by instincts. Boerresen writes that Barber, on further researching the topic, was forced to conclude he had been mistaken for decades, admitting that since he had always supported the view that birds are instinct-driven automats, he was horrified upon discovering that he had actually been blocked by a scientific taboo against anthropomorphism, supporting the impossibility of birds having any conscience, intelligence, or feeling (Sollund, 2016: 19-20).

In this sense, the shooting of the Albatross in the “Rime” could be interpreted, in the Mariner’s terms, as too trivial and meaningless an act to need a motive. The speaker simply cuts himself off from the realm of the human, choosing to sail the silent seas, rejecting nature and the life of the sense, ultimately denying nature both as environment and Muse, and therefore starving all forms of imagination. The poet on the other hand is humble and courageous enough to accept responsibility for his actions and to allow the imagination to exact its revenge. Nonetheless, these interpretations cannot exhaust the significance of the Mariner’s crime. Critics have laid emphasis on the sexual stratus at the basis of the “Rime,” exemplified by the Wedding-Guest’s reactions to the speaker’s tale, as he is at once pulled by the joyous atmosphere of the wedding and then by the dreadful tale of the sailor, whose crossbow has been interpreted both as a crucifix and as a perverse alternative for generative phallic activity. (Sagar, 2005c: 10). The Mariner’s act of hubris is an unconscious attempt at establishing any relationship with man, nature, and God. The Albatross, on the other hand, chooses to descend from the skies and approach the humans on the ship (Sagar, 2005c: 10-2).

While the sailor manages to kill the physical, non-human bird, the powers symbolized by the creature are not extinguished following its death. On the contrary, there seem to follow a variety of changes in the micro-environment of the poem, with the sun turning

the colour of blood, and the figure of the protective virgin ‘Mary Queen’ transforming into a White Goddess bearing the aspect of both a witch and a prostitute, an entity able to both save and inspire, possessing the ability to turn the seamen mad when provoked; the Mariner himself is driven lunatic, as represented by his glittering eye. Therefore, these lines display an idea of nature which is simultaneously Christian and Pagan (Sagar, 2005c: 13):

Her skin was as white as leprosy,
Her lips were red, her looks were free
Her locks were yellow as gold;
The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,
Who thicks man’s blood with cold.

([1817] 1985, lines 190-4)

Ultimately faced with the consequences of his actions, and with the subsequent death of his crewmates, the Mariner is left despising his own enduring existence, which he likens to the slimy creatures swimming alongside the ship. The Mariner’s actions ultimately lead him to a severance from God’s creatures, a link which can only be re-established through a change of perspective with respect to the non-human and the Mariner’s own animality. Therefore, the Albatross can only fall off his neck following the necessary realisation that there is no shame in being tied to animal nature, as all sentient life makes a difference to divine life (Dumbrowski, 1986: 113-4).

3.4.6 Ecological Allegory and Cautionary Tale

The “Rime” seems to mirror the condition of the actual relationship between the human and the non-human; critics have argued that Coleridge’s poem might be read in ecocritical terms as a lamentation for the relentless devastation of the planet. Through the Mariner’s killing of the Albatross, and the ensuing calamities, the “Rime” demonstrates the effects of human dominion, acting as a cautionary tale and as an attempt to warn readers of the consequences linked to the overexploitation of the natural world. The Mariner can therefore be interpreted as the epitome of human superiority over nature, and the death of

the Albatross as the catalyst of agony for the perpetrator (Lowes, 2020: 2). The animal's death is senseless and the Stanza in which it is described yields no explanation itself:

'God save thee, ancient Mariner!
From the fiends, that plague thee thus!—
Why look'st thou so?' – With my cross-bow
I shot the Albatross.

([1817] 1985, lines 79-82)

The context in which the Mariner's heinous action takes place is presented in the previous stanza; the mention of fog cannot be read as an excuse for the death of the animal and is a flimsy justification at best. Therefore, by killing the Albatross, the Mariner causes his own ruin, as well as his companions', thus demonstrating a deep bond between humanity and nature. The Mariner's act lacks all premeditation and could be interpreted as 'motiveless malevolence,' as there seems to be no desire on the Mariner's part to end the life of the creature, but rather he seems to be characterised by a condition of apathy. This is often the case in the context of crimes against nature; as perpetrators relentlessly commits their atrocious deeds, the general condition is one of detachment, which makes it easy to forget the suffering of the planet and its creatures (Lowe, 2020: 3).

The crime is seemingly committed by the Mariner alone, as he slaughters the seabird hailed as a positive omen, one of God's creatures; in this phase, the crew hails the bird as if it were human itself, as stated by Bloom, domesticating the creature with their food, which it has never tasted before; furthermore, the sailors engage with the Albatross as if it were a pet, or a child, in what could be seen as an idyllic scene of species being allowed to live symbiotically (Lowe, 2020: 4):

And a good south wind sprung up behind;
The Albatross did follow,
And every day, for food or play,
Came to the mariner's hollo!

([1817] 1985, lines 71-4)

As the crew learn of the murder of the innocent creature, the men are furious at the Mariner's violation of the relationship with the natural world and find it reprehensible (Lowe, 2020: 4). The Mariner's actions are described as 'hellish,' and the crew call him a wretch. However, the feeling of anger is not long-lasting, and the seamen display a change of attitude as the sun rises and the breeze starts to blow:

Nor dim nor red, like God's own head,
The glorious Sun uprist:
Then all averred, I had killed the bird
That brought the fog and mist.
'Twas right, said they, such birds to slay,
That bring the fog and mist.

The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,
The furrow followed free;
We were the first that ever burst
Into that silent sea.

([1817] 1985, lines 97-110)

As the fog clears and the Sun returns, the sailors suddenly justify the actions of their shipmate, admitting that it must have been the Albatross to have brought "the fog and mist" (Coleridge, [1817] 1985, line 102). The crew then become complicit in the crime, as they recognise they have benefitted from the Mariner's gratuitous act of violence; furthermore, the men seem to condone it, forgetting any previous form of attachment towards the Albatross and severing their link with the natural world. However, the situation quickly changes again, as the breeze stops blowing and the ship, resembling a painting, is brought to a sudden halt. The sea does not move either, thus adding to the idea of utter stillness the sailors are asked to endure following the actions of their doomed shipmate (Lowe, 2020: 4-5).

The murdered Albatross has been interpreted as the feminine aspect of nature, a bird defined as 'sweet' associated with the Moon, the symbol of feminine energy *par excellence*. Therefore, the bird could be read as an aspect of Mother Nature, with critics maintaining that the Mariner might have killed *the mother*, in a clever reversal of the

Oedipus complex. As punishment, the sailors are stuck in the middle of the sea, unable to consume Mother Nature's life sustaining liquid: water (Lowe, 2020: 5), or in Coleridge's words:

Water, water every where,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water every where,
Nor any drop to drink.

([1817] 1985, lines 119-22)

In a moment of utmost desperation, the Mariner bites his own blood and drinks his blood to quench his thirst, an act of vampirism, thus demonstrating that the destruction of the natural world and of Mother Nature ultimately leads to the loss of any symbiotic relationship with the Earth, and consequently to the destruction of the self. On drinking his own blood, the speaker notices a spectral ship approaching; aboard the vessel, Life-in-Death is playing a game of dice with Death for the Mariner's soul and wins; the shipmates drop dead, and the mariner is left entirely alone, apart from the presence of sea snakes moving along the ship. No longer does the sailor perceive such creatures as the slimy beings he had previously described, but rather they are transformed into positive entities, in what seems to be the Mariner's first steps towards reconnection with the natural world (Lowe, 2020: 4-7). The Mariner therefore hails these creatures:

O happy living things! No tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware:
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I Blessed them unaware.

([1817] 1985, lines 282-7)

On recognising their beauty and blessing them, Bloom argues the Mariner is freed from the curse of the Albatross; the animal falls off the Mariner's neck into the sea and the Mariner is finally able to naturalise himself with his surroundings, feeling an intimate relationship with God's creatures (Lowe, 2020: 7).

In the closing stanzas of the poem, the Mariner is again able to pray for the first time since the curse. Previously, when surrounded by his dead shipmates, the Mariner had looked up at the sky trying to communicate with God; however, no message could possibly be exchanged (Lowe, 2020: 7). The sensation is clearly described in PART IV of the poem, in which the corruption of nature seems to mirror the state of the ship:

I looked upon the rotting sea,
And drew my eyes again;
I looked upon the rotting deck,
And there the dead men lay.

([1817] 1985, lines 240-3)

These lines signify that the Mariner's severed relationship with nature ultimately led him to be cut off from the divine. While Coleridgean thought can hardly be described as perennially consistent, the link between God and nature is a crucial aspect of his poetry, in the same measure as the link between human and non-human. The Wedding-Guest is deeply moved by the Mariner's words; first a reluctant listener, the Wedding-Guest then becomes an active participant in the tale, who enables the message to resonate. The closing stanzas of the poem emphasise the role of such an interaction. Critics argue the Mariner might be interpreted as representative of humans heading towards ecological destruction, while the Wedding-Guest, listening like a child, could represent future generations asked to endure similar future scenarios (Lowe, 2020: 7-10).

Even as the curse is finally lifted, the Mariner is forced to endure a nightmarish existence, in the anguished awareness of the horror of his past actions, despite the newly acquired knowledge of the connection between himself and God's creatures. The Mariner has already threaded the dangerous path of ecological destruction and is forced to face its inevitable consequences. The "Rime" thus demonstrates the active role humans should play in order to reach a successful union between human and non-human categories (Lowe, 2020: 10-1).

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3.4.7 'Slimy terror'

The poem is largely based on the environmentally phobic dimension of slime, with images which reiterate and critique anthropocentric thinking. Theories in New Materialism and Ecocriticism have done much to shed light on the category of the non-human, focussing their attention of the threat of non-human agency; Woodard has described the horror of the 'nightmarish microbial' as an agent able to combine the forces of life and death into slime by means of rot. This view would challenge human sense of exceptionalism by placing human beings within the material world, as revealed by the rot and '*slimic*' movement appearing in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (Estok, 2021).

Slime is central to the poem, however not as a primary source of horror; rather, the fear and revulsion are caused by the agency of the slimy entities. It is their proximity to the Mariner that terrifies the speaker, threatening him to become indistinguishable from them. The point has been stressed by Miller, who maintains that "stickiness and sliminess horrify because they erase the distinction between subject and object." What appears to be threatening is therefore posed by the agential characteristics of 'slime' and the threat of erasure (Estok, 2021).

In this sense, the "Rime" offers in its depiction of slime a retributive natural world, a response to what appears as the senseless killing of the Albatross. These ideas of a hostile, antagonistic, and vengeful nature situate the poem within the broader tradition of ecophobic environmental ethics. However, in its closing section, the poem then seems to urge mindfulness of life, a shift in environmental ethics from anthropocentric exceptionalism to biophilic belonging. The agency of the natural world is therefore no longer perceived as threatening, but rather the natural world becomes part of the larger picture, of "all things both great and small" (Coleridge, [1817] 1985, line 615), in what seems to be a lesson on ecological humility, criticising ecophobia and anthropocentrism (Estok, 2021).

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3.4.8 The “Rime” and Trauma: Coleridge as the Poet of PTSD

Thompson believes “Rime” can be interpreted as a text intertextually indebted to the scripts of contemporary shipwreck narratives and maritime misadventures. Critics have argued that the main condition of the poem is to be found in the traumatic subjectivity of the Mariner, who can be seen as a shipwreck survivor, and therefore a dramatisation of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition of trauma codified only in the late 20th century (Walford Davies, 2016: 504).

While there appears no shipwreck as such in Coleridge’s “Rime,” wrecks had an eminent role in a variety of sources employed by the poet; furthermore, the images of hunger and thirst can be seen as representative of situations that are staple elements of most shipwreck narratives. *Nauffrage*, or shipwreck, may therefore be seen as the defining experience the Mariner is forced to rehearse; thus, the poem would become the account of shipwreck and its aftermath by a disturbed survivor and a document of PTSD (Walford Davies, 2016: 507-8).

The 1798 version of the poem was still the product of a man deeply attached to land. However, Coleridge had always been both fascinated and troubled by death-by-water and catastrophes at sea. He himself nearly drowned as a child, an experience which had lasting physical and psychological effects. Moreover, it was on the night Coleridge’s father deposited the poet’s brother, Frank, as midshipman in the care of Admiral Graves of Plymouth in 1781, that the former died. One of Coleridge’s earliest surviving poems, “Dura Navis” presents a variety of sea-catastrophes, including naval battles and cannibalism as a last resort, elements which would be developed in his later writings. Furthermore, ideas of navigation and dangerous pilotage shaped the metaphorical lens through which the poet read the French Revolution and the careers of both Robespierre and Pitt. Therefore, when Coleridge wrote about ‘wrecks,’ he was imaginatively and empathetically living another individual’s trauma, while also negotiating a personal traumatic complex which saw the killing of family loss, guilt, water, and writing itself as connected (Walford Davies, 2016: pp. 511-3).



Fig. 5 – J.M.W. Turner, *The Shipwreck*, oil on canvas, 1805, Tate, London, Great Britain.

Coleridge's "Rime" perhaps best represents the concepts developed in *naufra* narratives of the period, a genre defined by a variety of voices brought together in relatively coherent terms. On reading such stories, readers are then made aware that alternative and subtly varying versions of these tales may exist. Editors often pirated material from earlier existing narratives, including their own evaluations as to how events may have happened, and why shipwrecks gave rise to a variety of tales adopting differing explicatory schema and stylistic conventions to make sense of these disasters. The many voices appearing in these texts reflect the popular and unregulated nature of the genre. The "Rime" seems to inherit the hybridity of the genre, which would only be anthologised in the first two decades of the 19th century, as piratical extraction, interleaving commentary, and heteroglossia identified by Thompson shape the ballad (Walford Davies, 2016: 515).

Thompson then argues that shipwreck narratives necessarily imply a 'disaster phase' and its subsequent developments, or 'aftermath.' As the ship is wrecked, so are the social ties binding the crew, the community, together, leading to the destruction of the web of social norms and taboos. Such characteristics resonate with Coleridge's ballad, a text concerned with factionalism and the dissolution of the chains of command, communication, and family ties. With shipwreck, formlessness breaks into the realm of

the human; consequently, representations of *naufnage* attempt to impose coherence and control to a highly irrational experience which may exceed human capacity to recall and relate the event. As the disaster phase leaves space to its aftermath, sublime terror disappears in favour of feelings of ‘gothic horror,’ revulsion, and disgust, placing interest in the response of the physical body to both trauma and privation, which are emphasised by the spatial rhetoric and the epitexts speaking of wreck, added in 1817 (Walford Davies, 2016: 516-22).

Having experienced the horrors of shipwreck in unknown water at a young age, the Mariner is afflicted by guilt, as he fears his own navigational error might be the cause of the *naufnage*. His guilt becomes evident in the maniacal attention he pays to the sun, the moon, and the stars in a tale which is the psychopathological rehearsal of the tasks he failed to address. The Mariner’s psychosis becomes evident in the fixation with dropping and sinking; the dismembered ship is reduced to a mere floating platform on which the crew face privation, turning to cannibalism as a last, abominable straw. The atmosphere onboard is characterised by fear; as the crew dies, with the sailors dropping down one by one, the speaker is left alone; some critics have argued that the Mariner might have survived because he necessarily relied on the corpses of his late shipmates, thus leading to his sense of guilt and trauma (Walford Davies, 2016: 525-6).

The Mariner’s tale is characterised by pathological repetition, or what Caruth defines as “unwanted reenactments of the past.” The Mariner’s narrative could therefore be interpreted as an example of PTSD, a syndrome which would be codified only in 1980 in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* published by the American Psychiatric Association (Walford Davies, 2016: 527). The term describes a condition sparked by psychologically dramatic events either human or natural. As demonstrated by Scott, symptoms usually lead to re-experiencing the traumatic event in involuntary and recurrent memories or nightmares, leading to prolonged distress after exposure. PTSD could also cause the inability of recalling key aspects of the traumatic experience, a feeling of alienation, or a distorted blame of self or other for causing the distressing event, which are recurrent elements in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” Furthermore, PTSD may be linked to psychotic experiences and schizophrenic conditions (Walford Davies, 2016: 526-7). The Mariner seems to hear voices:

How long in that same fit I lay,
I have not to declare;
But ere my living life returned,
I heard, and in my soul discerned
Two voices in the air.

([1817] 1985, lines 393-7)

The voices of the fellow demons of the Spirit, those of the pilot, the pilot's boy, the hermit, the Wedding-Guest, and the glossist can be diagnosed as elements of the psychosis of the Mariner. The latter opens the possibility of interpreting the speaker's account as pathological history, influenced by predisposing factors such as the Mariner's superstition, linked to the times and his profession, and starvation-and-dehydration-driven delirium. Caruth believes such rehearsals of past experiences may serve as testimony to events and bear witness to a never fully experienced past in what could be defined as 'pathologies of memory,' a term used to describe trauma not fully intelligible at the time they are experienced. LaCapra talks about the victim's fidelity to trauma, a painful and yet necessary commemoration, the same feeling experienced by the Mariner when he recalls the dead member of the crew, "The many men, so beautiful! / And they all dead did lie" (Walford Davies, 2016: 527-8).

The "Rime" is characterised by its circularity, which is evident at the end of the poem. The Mariner seems to be looking for atonement by means of astonishment, linked to Burke's sublime. The Mariner, whose *idée fixe*, or fixation, renders him utterly incapable of think of anything but his crime; everything evokes the uncalled-for murder of the Albatross, even trivial elements such as the sound of his crossbow. The speaker is therefore plunged in a state of dementia, which is typical for victims of violent traumas; Primo Levi himself, a Holocaust survivor, gave voice to his trauma through Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, saying that he felt close to the character upon his return following his harrowing stay in the Auschwitz concentration camp (Coronato, ed., 2018: 26). Levi said that, just like the Mariner, he stopped people in the streets, to share the horror of his tale. In doing so, the survivor / Mariner voices painful, distressing feelings which are then vented by the narrator on those listening (Coronato, ed., 2018: 26).

Thompson identifies the Mariner as a fictive voyager acting in the context of factual voyages haunting the imagination of the Romantics; Coleridge thus seems to keep open a form of personal trauma sparked by others' traumatic experience. Therefore, the fictional trauma presented in the poem mirrors factual trauma witnessed by those directly involved in British maritime culture, whose deepest fear was *naufnage*. Contrary to some positions held in the field of literary criticism then, the "Rime" does not stand apart from the original project of the *Lyrical Ballads*, as the poem follows the trend of privileging psychology over sensationalism and exploring "the breach between event and narration, 'history' and its writing." Furthermore, Coleridge's ballad "reveal[s] how deeply constitutive of the Romantic literary text [...] pathologies of memory [can be, as well as] the range of wounds that mark the difference between event and subsequent telling" (Walford Davies, 2016: 529-31).

Chapter IV

“I like the weather, when it is not rainy” – G.G. Byron’s “Darkness” and *Manfred*

4.1 Byron as Eco-poet

The Enlightenment saw the systematisation of nature as abstract knowledge, which the Romantics would later seek to humanise employing mimetic attitudes and mirroring nature and its rhythms, rather than through analytic responses. Wordsworth found nature by means of contemplation, looking at the natural world through the anthropocentric lens of ‘egotistical sublime,’ thus leading to an inevitably human-centred perspective. However, different paradigms would be produced during what is conventionally referred to as the Romantic Age, and recent critical approaches have led to a variety of re-reading of seminal works under perhaps unexpected perspectives. Ecofeminist readings of Lord Byron (1788-1824) for instance have resulted in an interpretation of the poet’s concept of nature in the context of his bisexuality and his bond to the feminine (Rowley, 2013: 1).

Byron’s poetry was influenced by the Wordsworthian canon, and it is likely that the former read the latter’s work, although critics struggle to believe that the contrary might have been possible. With Romanticism, poets felt the necessity, or rather the task, of returning to nature. As Wordsworth himself explained in the “Preface” to the *Lyrical Ballads*, he wrote simple poems about country people, charting the inner self in relation with the wider world. Other Romantics who chose to follow Wordsworth’s example seemed to be aware of the latter’s instrumentalist view of nature. The members of the ‘Second Generation of Romantic Poets,’ which included John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron himself sought to restore the balance which had previously been lost due to perhaps excessive rationalism. These poets often became solitary observers of an environment which had been overly schematised, acting as outsiders excluded from what they perceived as mainstream society, resembling Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog* (1818), painted two years after Byron’s “Canto III” of

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage: A Romaunt. Stanza XLV perfectly conveys the atmosphere and mood of the painting (Rowley, 2013: 2):

He who ascends to mountain-tops, shall find
The loftiest peaks most wrapt in clouds and snow;
He who surpasses or subdues mankind,
Must look down on the hate of those below.
Though high *above* the sun the glory glow,
And far *beneath* the earth and ocean spread,
Round him are icy rocks, and loudly blow
Contending tempests on his naked head
And thus reward the toils which to those summits led.

(Byron, [1816a] 1996, "Canto III", Stanza XLV, lines 397-405)

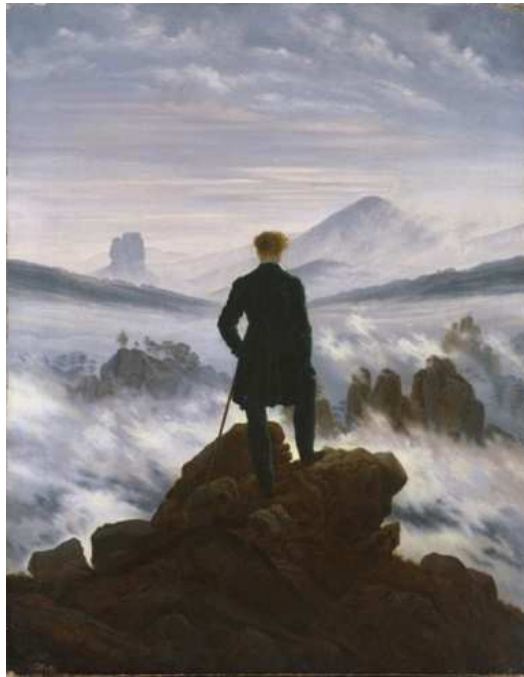


Fig. 6 – C.D. Friedrich, *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog*, oil on canvas, 1818, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany.

Byron's literary production perfectly encapsulates the solitude of the Romantic spirit in nature, facing rationality without turning its back to enchantment, mystery, and the sublime. Despite experiencing nature in solitude, the natural environment was deemed by Byron the context in which humans are least alone due to the presence of various life

forms. However, while Wordsworth proposed a contemplative attitude, Byron tended to rely on immediacy, being constantly brought down by human nature rather than by Nature itself. Furthermore, Byron's "discourse of the self via images" was in sharp contrast with Wordsworth's "poetics of incompleteness," which was why the former increasingly felt more ill at ease with the latter's concept of natural sublime. Whereas Wordsworth considered nature as a nursing and guiding entity, Byron believed he had been neglected from his early years by a benign nature because of his physical conditions (Rowley, 2013: 3-4).

A former member of the House of Lords, George Gordon Byron was born in 1788 from Captain John Byron and his second wife Catherine Gordon, a Scottish heiress. Byron passed the first decade of his life in strained circumstances; the family was in financial ruin, as Byron's father had managed to squander his wife's fortune (Manning and Wolfson, eds., 1996: xiii). Moreover, the poet's infancy was marked by the callipers he had to wear which restricted his ability to move (Rowley, 2013: 4), as he was deeply sensitive to the club foot with which he had been born, a condition his mother found revolting (Manning and Wolfson, eds., 1996: xiii). Given the prolonged absence of his parents, he was abandoned to the cares of a Calvinist nurse who abused Byron as her sister read the Calvinist doctrine of predestination and the Bible to him. These traumatic events may therefore explain the tentative relationship Byron had with the natural order, which he thought had been tainted, a claim clearly described in Stanza VII of "Canto III" of *Childe Harold* (Rowley, 2013: 4):

Yet must I think less wildly: – I *have* thought
Too long and darkly, till my brain became,
In its own eddy boiling and o'erwrought,
A whirling gulf of phantasy and flame:
And thus, untaught in youth my heart to tame,
My springs of life were poison'd. 'Tis too late!
Yet I am changed; though still enough the same
In strength to bear what time can not abate,
And feed on bitter fruits without accusing Fate.

([1816a] 1996, "Canto III," Stanza VII, lines 55-63)

Byron's childhood would torment him as a chain fettered around his entire being, much like the one presented in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843), as the ghost of Jacob Marley describes the length and weight of the coil he is forced to carry as punishment following his death. Such a chain is forged by individuals during their lives in accordance with their actions; invisible at first, it proves an utterly unbearable burden the moment its forger ceases to exist. A description of the chain Byron felt appears in Stanza IX of the third "Canto" of *Childe Harold*, representing his early memories of abuse and the restricting callipers he was made to wear in the attempt to adjust his physical deformity (Rowley, 2013: 4):

Still round him clung invisibly a chain
Which gall'd for ever, fettering though unseen,
And heavy though it clank'd not; worn with pain,
Which pined although it spoke not, and grew keen,
Entering with every step he took through many a scene.

([1816a] 1996, "Canto III," Stanza IX, lines 77-81)

Such feelings of alienation from his surroundings, and the heavy, metaphorical chains rendered the poet liable "to fall[ing] in love with the nearest object of desire" (Rowley, 2013: 5). When he was sent to school at Harrow in 1801, Byron probably met his half-sister, Augusta Byron (Manning and Wolfson, eds., 1996: xiii). Their meeting would culminate in 1813 with their illicit relationship (Rowley, 2013: 5), bearing much resemblance to the incestuous love between Manfred and Astarte in *Manfred*. At the time of their affair, Augusta was married to Colonel George Leigh, and doubts were raised over the legitimacy of the daughter of the couple, Medora, believing she might be Byron's. Consequently, rumours started to circulate charging Byron with sodomy, insanity, and incest, which would lead to a legal separation from his then wife, Isabella Milbanke, and his voluntary exile to the Continent (Manning and Wolfson, eds., 1996: xv-xvi). According to Rowley (2013: 5), the scandal surrounding what Byron deemed true love, mirroring natural harmony, having been polluted, the poet was left in a state of mental anguish; in a journal addressed to Augusta, Byron wrote:

I was disposed to be pleased – I am a lover of Nature – and an Admirer of Beauty – I can bear fatigue – and welcome privation – and have seen some of the noblest views of

the world – but in all this – the recollections of bitterness – and more especially of recent and more home desolation – which must accompany me through life (this paper’s author’s emphasis) – having preyed upon me here – and neither the music of the shepherd – the crashing of the Avalanche – nor the torrent – the mountain – the Glacier – the Forest – nor the Cloud – have for one moment lightened the weight upon my heart – nor enabled me to lose my own wretched identity in the majesty and the power and the Glory – around – above and beneath me (Marchand, ed., 1973-94: 104-5).

Byron finally decided to leave London in 1816 as he believed the ‘natural order’ had been broken by the many denunciations of scandal surrounding his lifestyle, which caused his readers “to look upon him with horror as an abhorrent source of unnatural vice.” Byron therefore sought to go back to the source of creation itself, as he believed that civilisation, in the pursuit to subdue nature, had been left wanting; true wisdom he believed could only be found in the return to nature, as described in Stanza XLVI of *Childe Harold* (Rowley, 2013: 5):

Away with these! true Wisdom’s world will be
Within its own creation, or in thine,
Maternal Nature! for who teems like thee,
Thus on the banks of the majestic Rhine?
There Harold gazes on a work divine,
A blending of all beauties; streams and dells,
Fruit, foliage, crag, wood, cornfield, mountain vine,
And chiefless castles breathing stern farewells
From gay but leafy walls, where Ruin greenly dwells.

([1816a] 1996, “Canto III,” Stanza XLVI, lines 406-14)

In ecological terms, Byron appeared to be especially aware of the problems of pollution, witnessing how human social development was affecting nature, fully understanding that human history and its atrocious deed could indict human nature too. Whereas Wordsworth’s poetry consisted in the passage from action to contemplation after recollecting emotions in a peaceful state, Byron’s differed considerably, as he never experienced tranquillity, neither in childhood nor in adulthood. Byron was often too in pain to contemplate nature in solitude; he was perhaps involved in a more harmonious

idea of nature than his Romantic colleagues Keats and Shelley, who sought to go beyond the concept of nature; Byron, on the other hand, was deeply rooted in the real world, mediated by his eco-awareness, to the point of denouncing monks cutting down trees to produce barrels, or to alter nature merely to create a road. The poet did not believe in ‘tampering with nature,’ but rather he sought a place in nature, considering both human civilisation and his own biographical history, aspects which his centrality in contemporary ecological discourses applied to literature (Rowley, 2013: 7-12).

4.2 “Forests were set on fire” – Byron’s “Darkness”

4.2.1 Historical, Ecological, and Textual Analysis of the Poem

In April 1816, Byron settled in Geneva, Switzerland, close to the recently eloped Shelleys and Claire Clairmont, Mary’s stepsister and Byron’s lover (Manning and Wolfson, eds., 1996: xvi). Byron’s physician, John William Polidori, would also join the group on occasions at Villa Diodati, Byron’s residence, to discuss literature and science, as well as read horror stories. Given the gloomy ecological context resulting from the eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia, Byron himself suggested all members should write a terrifying story, agreeing they would then select a winner. Such a trivial competition among friends gave birth to a variety of foundational texts of English Romanticism, including Byron’s “Darkness” (Saglia, ed., 2017: 7-9).

In the period ranging from April to September 1816, coinciding with Byron’s Swiss stay, it rained in the country for 130 days out of 183, with temperatures averaging about 15°C below the July mean; however, the pattern was similar across both Europe and the United States. Popularly described as ‘the year without a summer,’ bad weather led to failed harvests, and consequently to subsistence crises, with prices of food fluctuating violently and widespread food shortages. The sun darkened, thus leading to fears of apocalypse, the exact feeling described in Byron’s poem “Darkness,” a text which introduces ideas of chaos linked to the weather (Bate, 2000: 96-7).

Chaos may perhaps be defined as the most terrifying nightmare bedeviling human imagination. While excessive order may descend into horrific developments, such as

tyranny, the total lack of order may lead to utterly disastrous scenarios, states of “[e]ndless civil war” that would prove more oppressive than any imaginable dictatorship. “A land in which no promise is kept, in which the sun may or may not rise on the morrow, in which the past is no guide to the future, is a no man’s land” (Daston, 2019: 45)

The publication of philosophical and scientific works including Charles de Montesquieu’s *De L’Esprit des Lois* (1748) or Alexander von Humboldt’s *Essay on the Geography of Plants* (1807) led to the acceptance of the connection between human history and the climate. Furthermore, Benjamin Franklin maintained the possibility of a connection between climate change and volcanic eruptions in the context of the cold winter which struck Europe in the winter of 1783 following the eruption of Mount Laki, in Iceland.

As observed by Bate, scientists were fascinated by the changes in light during daytime following the discovery of sunspots on the surface of the sun which could be spotted with the naked eye, sparking a wave of panic described in the *London Chronicle* as a cause of the “remarkable and wet weather” and the “general removal of heat from the globe,” both seen as possibly announcing “the extinction of nature, and the end of the world.” Such attitudes sharply contrasted the optimistic feelings the previous Romantic generation held regarding human future; Wordsworth stated in “Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey” that “Nature never did betray / The heart and loved her” and “all which we behold is full of blessings,” whereas in his “Rime” Coleridge presented a theory whereby nature can only be considered cruel if treated as such (Guimarães, 2017: 4-5).

“Darkness” echoes several events which happened in the life of the poet during the year 1816, including his exile and the far from idyllic marriage to Annabella Milbanke, with hints to the historical context of the time, as Europe still felt the impact of the Napoleonic Wars (1807-1815). The ecological state of darkness which covered Europe was therefore interpreted as a dire prophecy mirroring the times (Guimarães, 2017: 6-7).



Fig. 7 – J. Martin, *The Last Man*, oil on canvas, 1849, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, Great Britain.

“Darkness” deals with what Paley deems images which could not possibly be imagined (Macqueen, 2015: 1); the poem opens with the speaker’s dream, describing a state of total darkness reminiscent of what most Europeans directly witnessed in the Summer of 1816 (Guimarães, 2017: 8). The sun having disappeared, it is virtually impossible for the dwellers of the cosmos described in the poem to discern any difference between day and night, or to tell the passing of time; however, Stafford writes that the horror of the apocalyptic dimension presented by Byron is represented exactly by the inexorable sense of time passing, leading to the world becoming increasingly and consistently cooler and darker (Macqueen, 2015: 4):

I had a dream, which was not all a dream.
The bright sun was extinguish’d, and the stars
Did wander darkling in the eternal space,
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;
Morn came and went – and came, and brought no day,
And men forgot their passions in the dread
Of this their desolation; and all hearts
Were chill’d into a selfish prayer for light[.]

(Byron, [1816b] 1996, lines 1-9)

The realm of the human seems to become indistinguishable from its non-human counterpart, as all institutions and their headquarters literally crumble or are set on fire for a dim light. However, this destruction is then aimed directly at nature, with forests likewise being set ablaze with little success in terms of actual brightness; space, therefore, becomes void of any distinction or boundary as darkness encompasses the world (Macqueen, 2015: 5):

And [men] did live by watchfires – and the thrones,
The palaces of crowned kings – the huts,
The habitations of all things which dwell,
Were burnt for beacons; cities were consumed,
And men were gather'd round their blazing homes
To look once more into each other's face;
[...]
Forests were set on fire – but hour by hour
They fell and faded – and the crackling trunks
Extinguish'd with a crash – and all was black.

([1816b] 1996, lines 10-20)

Byron may therefore appear to be condemning the criminal behaviour characterising humans in their relationship with the natural world. Almost resembling an evangelical preacher, the speaker depicts the humans inhabiting the poem as savages (Guimarães, 2017: 8):

All earth was but one thought – and that was death,
Immediate and inglorious; and the pang
Of famine fed upon all entrails – men
Died, and their bones were tombless as their flesh;
The meagre by the meagre were devour'd,
Even dogs assail'd their masters, all save one,
And he was faithful to a corse, and kept
The birds and beasts and famish'd men at bay[.]

([1816b] 1996, lines 42-9)

With clear echoes of Miltonic Hell, the speaker introduces the concept of death for all humans, as individuals continuously drop dead due to want of food and cannibalism, perhaps an intertextual echo to the Mariner's choice and consequent guilt described in Coleridge's "Rime." Humans appear to be inferior from a moral standpoint to animals, as demonstrated by Byron's focus on the dog protecting the corpse of his deceased master. The binary concepts of human / animal are reversed, thus emphasising the notion of chaos intrinsic to the poem, a reversal further emphasised with the employment of frequent punctuation and *enjambement* (Guimarães, 2017: 9):

[Men] gnash'd their teeth and howl'd: the wild birds
shriek'd,
And, terrified, did flutter on the ground,
And flap their useless wings; the wildest brutes
Came tame and tremulous; and vipers crawl'd
And twined themselves among the multitude[.]

([1816b] 1996, lines 32-6)

The chaotic and apocalyptic mood of the poem seems to fade in the final stanza of "Darkness," with a clear return to the iambic metre characterising the opening lines. As obscurity finally imposes its control of the poem's cosmos, Byron presents, by means of alliteration and consonance, a calmer and more peaceful context, with still seas and neither clouds nor wind, a world in which humans are no longer in the position to interfere with nature (Guimarães, 2017: 9); therefore, Schroeder believes the universe seemingly moves into an different order of perhaps non-temporal existence (Macqueen, 2015: 5):

[...] The world was void,
The populous and the powerful was a lump,
Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless –
A lump of death – a chaos of hard clay.
The rivers, lakes, and ocean all stood still,
And nothing stirr'd within their silent depths;
[...]
The waves were dead; the tides were in their grave[.]

([1816b] 1996, lines 69-78)

Byron therefore might have tried to imply that disharmony as the condition characterising the universe is a resulting consequence of human activities and their toll on the natural world, an idea shared by Coleridge and developed in his “Rime.” However, Byron does not seem to offer forgiveness, but rather his poem simply abandons humans to death and desolation in a text which is rather anti-Romantic in tone (Guimarães, 2017: 9-10). As a matter of fact, Schroeder argues Byron’s vision of the emptied spirit of nature deeply contrasts conventionally Romantic views of nature as both inspired and animated (Macqueen, 2015: 3). There appear no idealised elements and no emphasis seems to be placed on the speaker’s emotional involvement, if not for the pronoun ‘I’ in the very first line. Furthermore, there are no allusions to Wordsworthian praise of nature or to the belief in the natural goodness of human beings as presented in Rousseau’s treatise *Émile* (Guimarães, 2017: 9-10). Rather, Byron’s portrayal of the human, as the speaker beholds a dying universe (Macqueen, 2015: 4), is raw and seems to leave little room for hope, as humans in “Darkness” are described as beasts unable to act through reason, depending on selfishness and superstition, and therefore creatures who ultimately crumble and disappear when faced with the forces of nature (Guimarães, 2017: 9-10), which are evidently indifferent to human suffering (Macqueen, 2015: 6)

Critics have argued that Byron often felt connected with his characters to the point of identification, which is true of *Childe Harold* and *Manfred*, as well as “Darkness.” The latter may be interpreted as an exemplification of his behaviour at a time of historical crisis (Guimarães, 2017: 12). Stafford suggests the effects of “the French Revolution on the late eighteenth century imaginative malaise” and the publication of a variety of Last-Man narratives may be central to the publication of the poem. Enlightenment theories concerning the entropy of the sun may have contributed, in Dingley’s words, to the “genuine apocalyptic anxiety of the time,” as well as what Stafford defines Byron’s “poetry of disillusionment” (Macqueen, 2015: 3). Payne argues that Byron’s age was characterised by deep political unrest, especially caused by the Napoleonic Wars, the abolition of the slave trade in England, and the suspension of *habeas corpus*, as denounced in Byron’s ironic apostrophe to England in *Beppo: A Venetian Story* (1818), further suggesting that the poet’s contemporaries, and perhaps Byron himself, felt that the old social order might have been threatened by the triumph of chaos (Guimarães, 2017: 2):

‘England! with all thy faults I love thee still,’
I said at Calais, and have not forgot it;
I like to speak and lucubrate my fill;
I like the government (but that is not it);
I like the freedom of the press and quill;
I like the Habeas Corpus (when we’ve got it);
I like a parliamentary debate,
Particularly when ‘tis not too late;

I like the taxes, when they’re not too many;
I like a seacoal fire, when not too dear;
I like beef-steak too, as well as any;
Have no objection to a pot of beer;
I like the weather, when it is not rainy,
That is, I like two months of every year.
And so God save the Regent, Church, and King!
Which means that I like all and everything.

(Byron, [1818] 1996, Stanzas XLVII-XLVIII)

Byron was aware of darkness being a foundational aspect of existence as it occurs with no need of creation. The link among God, light, and darkness is stressed in the opening verses to the King James Bible, in which the earth is described as both formless and void and covered in darkness, ideas endemic to the dualistic philosophies of the Classical tradition, whereby light was associated with unity and the ‘male,’ whereas darkness with plurality and the ‘female.’ Therefore, critics have argued the possibility of a gendered interpretation of “Darkness” connected to a discourse of power. Payne interprets darkness as representative of “a dynamic of gender and desire” operating within the discourse of Burke’s sublime, rather similarly to the idea of ‘terror’ developed in the latter’s writings concerning the French Revolution, whose events were described as a threat of apocalyptic catastrophe. Eisler on the other hand frames “Darkness” within the events of Byron’s personal history of the year 1816. The poem could therefore be seen as a response to femininity seen as a threat, thus rendering worthy of notice the final lines of the poem, strictly related to the feminine, as “Darkness” as an entity is identified with the third-person pronoun ‘She’ (Guimarães, 2017: 12-14)

In this sense, feminine power is akin to darkness, as it may lead to “a blurring of distinction,” believing that the self, when deprived of both certainty and light, must turn to a “deified male other,” as “all hearts / Were chill’d into a selfish prayer for light” (Byron, [1816b] 1996, line 9). The young Byron however, forced to the study of Calvinist doctrines, and consequently fearing eternal damnation, would later abandon God in favour of what critics have described as ‘Byronic cynicism,’ or “godless attitudes of either quiet hopelessness or restless despair.” “Darkness” may therefore be interpreted as an apocalypse impacting the soul and mirroring natural catastrophes (Guimarães, 2017: 14-5). Nonetheless, perhaps resulting from Byron’s atheistic turn and his refusal of narratives dealing with redemption, the poet appears to present a future of total emptiness, imagining the destruction of the world of men, while also failing to provide a description of the feminised future at which he seems to be hinting in the latter section of the poem, and therefore apparently opting for total annihilation (Macqueen, 2015: 13-4).

4.2.2 Byron as the “Prophet of Ecocide”

Byron’s belief in the interconnectedness of nature and culture is crucial to the understanding of “Darkness.” The poem presents a scenario in which war ceases for some instants as humans seek, albeit for mere moments, to face the struggles posed by harsh weather as a community. However, they soon decide to take up arms once again following the famine and consequent human death, both resulting from a persistent lack of sunlight. Byron decided to write this poem as Europe witnessed a durable cessation of war for the first time in over twenty years, despite then having to face the consequences of the eruption of Mount Tambora. “Darkness” may therefore be seen as both a contemporary and apocalyptic poem, while also being powerfully prophetic, as humans may soon enough be left with a “Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless” world (Byron, [1816b] 1996, line 71), thus demonstrating that upon rereading “Darkness,” “Byron may be reclaimed a prophet of [...] ecocide” (Bate, 2000: 98). Moreover, “Darkness” might be read as an “eleg[y] for the future” seemingly lamenting the loss of Nature, fusing the prophetic and elegiac modes. The prophetic vision of the speaker seems to be privileged over the power of sight amid the condition of blindness characterising the last surviving humans. Plunged in a state of total darkness, the last two men expire as they witness, in

Byron's words, their "mutual hideousness", following their transformation caused by famine and animalesque brutality (Macqueen, 2015: 6-7).

Further emphasis on the juxtaposition between light and dark is obtained through words pertaining to the semantic field of 'illumination,' strongly opposing the images of a dying planet Earth. These include 'bright,' 'sun,' 'stars,' 'morn,' 'day,' 'light,' 'watchfires,' 'burnt,' 'beacons,' 'blazing,' 'torch,' and 'fire,' before the trunks being set ablaze finally fall and darkness ultimately prevails. In a state of desperation, the last survivors even set "[t]heir funeral piles" on fire. As all humans finally cease to exist, there appear no further references to light or sight, but rather terms associated to death, void, and negation, including 'still,' 'nothing,' 'silent,' 'rotting,' 'abyss,' 'dead,' 'grave,' 'expired,' 'withered,' 'stagnant,' 'perished.' Moreover, the description of the earth as a seasonless, uninhabited lump of clay and death foreshadows the image of an unmanned ship sailing a still and dead body of water (Macqueen, 2015: 7).

"Darkness" may therefore be interpreted as the speech of a disembodied speaker representing a plausible final surviving being in a universe dominated by death and obscurity. Being the only entity with the ability to discern these last moments through the darkness, "the speaker is cast as prophet." Rigby distinguishes between the apocalyptic and the prophetic mode; while the former considers history as predetermined and requiring preparation before entering a new beginning, the latter insists on the possibility of changing direction in the present. "Darkness" does not anticipate new beginnings, but rather Tritt argues the poem ends with a state of emptiness and negation represented by a feminine entity: Darkness itself (Macqueen, 2015: 8-9).

Byron's poem may be read as a lamentation over a sense of loss, with the speaker mourning over the loss of community and humanity itself due to the hue enclosing both human and natural existence, leading to the ultimate and inevitable demise of the former. Stafford believes the vision Byron proposes of a collective ending may perhaps be read as ironic due to the underlying view of human nature as inherently selfish. Such a characteristic is then further emphasised by the awareness of imminent death, reducing humans to mere beasts in their pursuit of survival. However, while all humans are wiped out of existence, only a dog, a non-human animal, can actively display compassion, in a

world where humans are guided by selfishness, to the point of a ghastly descent into cannibalism (Macqueen, 2015: 10-1).

Going against the conventions of ‘Last Man narratives,’ Byron chooses to present “[...] two / [o]f an enormous city” (Byron, [1816b] 1996, lines 55-6), the last survivors, thus enabling him to better represent the destruction of community and human qualities. As Stafford maintains, by means of darkness Byron envisions apocalypse as a “shared disaster [...] common to all” human beings (Macqueen, 2015: 11). Therefore, Byron’s “Darkness” must not be interpreted as a prophetic piece of advice about how to avoid ecological catastrophes, but rather as a vision of the failure of a community in a moment of crisis.

4.3 *Manfred: A Dramatic Poem*

4.3.1 Genre, Composition, and the ‘Byronic Hero’

Manfred perhaps represents one of the most significant contributions to the *mal du siècle* theme, a defining characteristic of texts Romantic in tone. *Manfred* represents a turning point in Byron’s literary production. Including direct hints at the poet’s personality and biographical history, the text gives voice to a view of the world characterised by feelings of distress and pessimism following the end of the Napoleonic Wars (Saglia, ed., 2017: 7-8).

Critics tend to agree that Byron began composing *Manfred* between August and September 1816 during his stay in Geneva at Villa Diodati following his voluntary exile, a period marked by both existential and ecological distress. Joined by the Shelleys and regularly visited by J.W. Polidori, the group famously took part in the literary competition which saw the birth of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and J.W. Polidori’s *The Vampyre* (Saglia, ed., 2017: 9); rumours started to circulate among English tourists visiting the area, with claims that literary the group was, in Marchand’s terms, a League of individuals living incestuously (Manning and Wolfson, eds., 1996). All members were inspired by the encounters and would produce notorious contributions including P.B. Shelley’s

Prometheus Unbound and Byron's *Manfred*, which he would finish during his 1817 Venetian stay (Saglia, ed., 2017: 9).

Byron himself provided a description of the genre of *Manfred*, defining it as a dialogic dramatic poem. Divided into three acts and set in the heights and vales of Switzerland, the play presents a Faust-like nobleman who feels the burden of guilt following the death of his beloved sister, Astarte, to whom he is spiritually, genetically, and bodily linked. A solitary, mysterious, dark, and cynical character, Manfred represents a further contribution to the category of the 'Byronic hero,' perhaps most famously represented in works including *Childe Harold*, *The Giaour* (1813), *The Bride of Abydos* (1813), *The Corsair* (1814), and *Lara* (1814). The heroes appearing in these texts have been codified and classified by literary scholars in terms of the characteristics they bear, including aspects of Byron's own personality and traits typical of Gothic novel villains, Milton's Satan, libertines, Romantic and pre-Romantic outlaws, and Sentimental heroes (Saglia, ed., 2017: 10). While Byron might have acted as a model, other European writers would develop unique contributions, as in the case of Aleksander S. Pushkin's novel in verse *Eugene Onegin* (1833), directly inspired by Byron's *Don Juan* (Bazzarelli, ed., 1985: 21), whose author is deeply admired by Pushkin's hero:

Although we know that Eugene had
Long ceased to be a reading man,
Still certain authors, I may add,
He had excepted from the ban:
The bard of Juan and the Giaour,
With it may be a couple more[.]

(Pushkin, [1833] 1881, "Canto VII," Stanza XXII)

The Byronic hero therefore represents a fascinating, ruthless, noble-minded, and passionate individual, an anti-hero torn between the forces of good and evil, intolerant of the norms, conventions, and sense of alienation characterising his own time. Upon publishing *Manfred*, Byron was aware that he was presenting the reading public with a familiar character and feared his play would be discredited for not introducing elements of novelty to his literary production. However, with *Manfred* the poet sought to explore

human boundaries and limits in less pessimistic tones as opposed to the reflections provided in previous works of the Byronic literary canon (Saglia, ed., 2017: 10-1).

4.3.2 Before and After *Manfred*: Byron's Torment

The period from 1815 to 1822 might be described as the dark years of Byron's biographical history. Suffering from bouts of depression following the separation from his wife Annabella, Byron felt the weight of having to suppress his challenging personality and his views on morality and society. The birth of his daughter, Ada, did not help soothe his marital problems, but rather, fearing him lunatic, Annabella decided to leave her husband altogether following rumours of Byron's incestuous relationship with his half-sister Augusta (Saglia, ed., 2017: 14). Furthermore, his political radicalism and his alleged homosexuality also sparked criticism (Buffoni, 2000: 33); consequently, as stories started to spread among Byron's contemporaries, the poet felt he had no other choice but leave English society and soil, embarking on a gloomy exile journey leading to Switzerland which most likely influenced the production and publication of *Manfred* (Saglia, ed., 2017: 14).

Byron's proximity to the Shelleys, and the creation of a literary cycle joined at times by M.G. Lewis, who translated some passage of Goethe's *Faust*, as well as the backdrop provided by the Swiss Alps, might have influenced the poet. Byron would provide detailed descriptions of his experience in his *Alpine Journal* (1816), which he dedicated to Augusta, whom critics believe might have acted as a source of inspiration for Astarte. In his *Journal*, Byron described the feeling of the sublime in an alpine context, as well as the impressions he experienced when faced with the non-human, seeking the Alps for their spiritually healing properties (Saglia, ed. 2017: 15). At the end of that summer, the Shelleys and Claire Clairmont left Switzerland and travelled back to England, where Claire gave birth to Allegra, Byron's daughter, who would prove a further source of distress in the later years of the poet (Manning and Wolfson, eds., 1996: xvi).

Byron set off for Italy; his Italian years constituted a crucial force for the development of his personality and literary works, especially in the light of his Venetian stay. While

living in the city, he entertained a hardly monogamous lifestyle, enjoying the company of both common and aristocratic women, dedicating however part of his time to the study of the Armenian language and to literary composition. Byronic texts of the Italian period are characterised by comparisons between English and Italian customs, clearly favouring the latter. Upon the publication of *Don Juan*, Byron was attacked by the editor John Blackwood, who argued Byron continuously sought to shed a negative light on his wife, Annabella, but also for the presence of shipwreck and cannibalism, and believing Byron to be disregarding all notions of propriety (Manning and Wolfson, eds., 1996: xvi-xvii).

In 1819, following his Roman stay, Byron met Countess Teresa Gamba Guiccioli, whom he accompanied to Ravenna and then back to Venice as her lover and *cavalier servente*. The Gamba Guiccioli family however would be involved in an abortive uprising; therefore, Byron and Teresa joined them in their exile to Pisa, after the poet had abandoned his daughter Allegra in a convent in the whereabouts of Ravenna, where she died aged five in 1822 of a typhus fever. Adding to the tragedy of those years, his friend P.B. Shelley drowned aged 29 in a boating accident in Lerici, thus making Byron the only surviving member of the Second Generation of Romantic Poets, as Keats had died the previous year in Rome at the age of 25 after suffering from tuberculosis for some years. “Restive in domesticity with Teresa,” Byron finally decided to leave her, devoting his life to the Greek struggle for independence. Byron ultimately died of malaria in 1824 in Missolonghi, Greece, accompanied by his page and unreciprocated last homoerotic passion Loukas Chalandritsanos (Manning and Wolfson, eds., 1996: xvii-xix).



Fig. 8 – J.D. Odevaere, *Lord Byron on his Death-bed*, oil on canvas, c. 1826, Groeninge Museum, Bruges, Belgium.

4.3.3 New Horizons in the Byronic Canon

Manfred represents a turning point in the Byronic canon both from an existential and literary standpoint, coinciding with the poet's sojourn in the Continent. Byron criticised his own work for perhaps excessively relying on the style he had previously developed in *Childe Harold* and other texts he had composed from the year 1813. However, *Manfred* displays significant changes in terms of style and themes. *Manfred* shares a variety of elements with *The Giaour*, particularly in the presence of a tragic passion and the protagonist's mysterious past; furthermore, both the protagonists of *Manfred* and *The Giaour* are moved to action by their torment, suffering, and restlessness (Saglia, ed., 2017: 19-20).

However, *Manfred* further complicates the story due to the presence of incest, the protagonist's intellectual nature, the awareness of his condition, and the dilemmas characterising his existence. These elements might have contributed to outlining perhaps one of the most innovative Byronic texts, as in *Manfred* to be consumed by destiny means, in Lansdown's terms, to be free. The Byronic hero is entitled to choose his own destiny, thus marking the passage from an inherently tragic perspective to the possibility of redemption based on the ability to forget and to rise again, or as exemplified by Manfred's words, to stand upon one's own strength. In this sense, *Manfred* represents the beginning of Byron's search for new perspectives in the imagination of the human condition and its destiny (Saglia, ed., 2017: 20-1).

Manfred also contains a variety of Promethean elements, which happen to be central in Coleridge's "Rime" too. Manfred's refusal to bend under a higher, despotic power echoes John Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* (1667), Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, as well as the Greek myth of Prometheus' rebellion against Zeus. The mythological character fascinated and captivated the group on Lake Geneva. P.B. Shelley began working on *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), Mary on her novel *Frankenstein* (1818), choosing *The Modern Prometheus* as its subtitle, and Byron wrote the poem "Prometheus," later published in *The Prisoner of Chillon* (1816). Continuing this Promethean tradition, *Manfred* deals with a character who invites readers to reflect on human nature and whose actions have yet to come to light. Addressing the Spirits, Manfred seems to claim his individuality, remarking "[t]he mind, the spirit, the Promethean Spark / The lightning of

my being” (Melaney, 2005: 462), and thus admitting he does not consider himself an ordinary mortal, setting himself against the order of the divine (Melaney, 2005: 462).

By February 1817, Byron had already composed three rough draughts for his editor John Murray, but he soon reached a literary *impasse*, which the poet only managed to overcome in Venice. The Carnival, its intrinsic ideas of transgression, and life in the Venetian Lagoon deeply absorbed Byron, who led a highly mundane and carnal life in the city. In San Lazzaro, Venice, Byron undertook the study of the Armenian language, growing attached to the figure of Father Paschal, a man of the cloth on whom Byron would later base the Abbot of Saint Maurice. By this time, Byron had finished *Manfred*, but he refused to believe the play was ready for publication. In a first draught, the Abbot was a spiteful Italian priest, but the figure was later developed into a benevolent and charitable man seeking to save Manfred from his last, fateful act: suicide. The Abbot therefore displays a philanthropic attitude towards Manfred, employing sympathetic words, unlike the Chamois Hunter, who thus addresses the protagonist (Buffoni, 2000: 34-5):

Hold, madman! – though aweary of thy
life,
Stain not our pure vales with thy guilty blood[.]

(Byron, 1817, I., ii., lines 110-2)

Despite the Abbot’s attempts however, Manfred decides to plunge into the abyss of death, thus meeting his tragic ending. As a matter of fact, Manfred lives in the awareness of having challenged the god Arimanes and committed an unspeakable crime during his youth, which also led to Astarte’s suicide (Buffoni, 2000: 35).

4.3.4 *Manfred* as ‘Mental Theatre’

Despite not being written for the theatre and Byron’s refusal to write for the stage, *Manfred* is drama, nonetheless. Byron, unlike his contemporaries Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley, who did engage with drama, albeit for economic purposes, never sought a rise to fame through the publication of plays. On the contrary,

Byron did not believe in theatrical performances, but rather he supported ‘mental theatre,’ based on the individual reading of a given play, as he deemed the nature of theatre in his time to be too spectacular (Saglia, ed., 2017: 22).

London theatres of the Romantic period were divided into ‘patent’ and ‘minor,’ where legitimate or illegitimate performances were held; the former comprised traditional genres, namely comedies and tragedies, while the latter less codified genres and performances which did not necessarily rely on the spoken word. While censorship restrained the freedom of playwrights and actors working for patent theatres, those involved in the minor kinds enjoyed a higher degree of independence, leading to consequent economic disparities between the two theatrical institutions. Melodrama proved an especially successful source of income for minor, illegitimate theatre; recognised as the principal theatrical form during the Romantic Age, melodrama was characterised by a mixture of comedy, tragedy, and pantomime with musical accompaniment, presenting its audiences with plots whose development saw the inclusion of emphasised ‘types’ rather than characters (Saglia, ed., 2017: 22-4).

Byron however did not despise the theatre altogether and was aware of its strategies, which he did include in *Manfred*. The text relies on a variety of appearances and disappearances, which might be realised on stage by means of special effects; these include the seven Spirits, the Witch of the Alps, and the Spirit and the demons in the final scene. Furthermore, its settings are reminiscent of those employed in Gothic horror theatre with sensationalistic elements, including Manfred’s attempted suicide at the beginning of Act II. Implied references to musical accompaniment are a further demonstration of Byron’s keen eye for theatrical strategies; examples include the song announcing the arrival of the Spirit and the pipe playing in the following scene (Saglia, ed., 2017: 24-5).

While Byron did not fully approve of theatre in his times, *Manfred* would be performed posthumously, thus demonstrating that despite being written for individual reading in tranquillity, *Manfred* could work on stage, confirming the ambivalent nature of Byron’s personality and work (Saglia, ed., 2017: 25-6).

*

4.3.5 Ecocritical *Manfred*

The literary strength of *Manfred* resides in the settings employed and the emotions they originate. The medieval element, represented by the Gothic gallery, the castle, and the tower embodies the human world, which enters contact with the world of spirits and demons in nature, an example being the Jungfrau summit or the waterfall scene acting as a stage for the Witch of the Alps. *Manfred* contains a variety of real geographical elements, including Mont Blanc, as well as the Coliseum, which appears during Manfred's flashback of his journey to Rome. Byron therefore sought to evoke a combination of both real and fictional places, especially the Alps, which he had explored and written about in his *Alpine Journal*, thus internalising that landscape and the sensations it could provoke (Saglia, ed., 2017: 27).

The interrelation of real and imaginary settings offers the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between the human and the non-human, to interpret human perception, and the impact of human actions on the natural world. In this sense, Byron's text may be interpreted as an 'ecodrama' in which the human, the non-human, and the alpine ecosystem enter contact and engage with one another (Saglia, ed., 2017: 27-8).

Byron's *Manfred* may generate feelings of "unorthodox environmental awareness" based on the idea of consciousness and the issue of death, central themes in Byron's drama. *Manfred* presents its readers with the "angst-ridden mind" of a protagonist visited by a variety of environmental figures. Manfred, who seems to claim his uniqueness and his separate ego, much like Prometheus, is forced to rely on the world surrounding him as a source of help. The physical and psychic darkness the character witnesses and is asked to endure has deep resonance from an ecological viewpoint, linking *Manfred* to Byron's apocalyptic poem "Darkness," however in subtler and more mysterious terms (Morton, 2007: 155-6).

The Alpine setting both surrounds and negates Manfred's powers, which becomes evident in Martin's painting *Manfred on the Jungfrau*. Facing a "vast chasm of rock," Manfred is absorbed by the paint, the brushstrokes, and the light, being almost altogether eliminated from the scene (Morton, 2007: 157). The character's very essence and

existence are therefore metaphorically annihilated by the mountainous setting, perhaps foreshadowing Manfred's final suicide.



Fig. 9 – J. Martin, *Manfred on the Jungfrau*, watercolour, 1837, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham, Great Britain.

Byron's employment of the dialogic mode seemingly creates what Behrendt perceives as a sceptical frame around the words uttered by the characters; Byron thus manages to intertwine a sense of environment and of scepticism in an alpine setting, which does not merely act as backdrop, but rather provides readers with aesthetic experiences. Therefore, *Manfred* might represent an attempt at inducing ecological awareness. The whole universe is then transformed into Manfred's mental theatre. In *Manfred*, "[t]he spiritual inside and the material outside coexist in an emulsion" without ever mixing. As natural descriptions become increasingly more intense, their ethereal and spiritual dimensions increase, and Manfred is finally rendered capable of summing up the environment and the earth in his declaration to the sun (Morton, 2007: 157-8):

Glorious Orb! the idol
Of early nature, and the vigorous race
Of undiseased mankind, the giant sons
Of the embrace of angels, with a sex
More beautiful than they, which did draw down
The erring spirits who can ne'er return. –
Most glorious orb! [...]
Sire of the seasons! Monarch of the climes,

And those who dwell in them! for near or far,
Our inborn spirits have a tint of thee
Even as our outward aspects; – thou dost rise,
And shine, and set in glory.

(Byron, [1817] 1996, III. ii., lines 3-24)

Manfred however voices his inability to experience the aesthetic dimension of nature, to love the beautiful mountains. Manfred appears to forsake his beliefs, falling into a state of despair and paralysis, as he thinks himself unable to plunge to his death while stuck on the cliffs (Morton, 2007: 159):

The spirits I have raised abandoned me –
The spells which I have studied baffle me –
[...]
The future, till the past be gulf'd in darkness,
It is not of my search. – My mother Earth!
And thou fresh breaking Day, and you, ye Mountains,
Why are ye beautiful? I cannot love ye.
And thou, the bright eye of the universe,
[...]
[T]hou shin'st not on my heart.

([1817] 1996, I. ii., lines 1-12)

In this context, Manfred perceives himself as “Half dust, half deity, alike unfit / To sink or soar”; however, he then hears what may be described as environmental music, a tune played by a shepherd, whose sound is dispersed through the air. Perhaps for the very first time, Manfred finds himself in tune with nature and seemingly vanishes into an aesthetic dimension (Morton, 2007: 159):

How beautiful is all this visible world!
How glorious in its action and itself!
But we, who name ourselves its sovereigns, we,
Half dust, half deity, alike unfit
To sink or soar, with our mix'd essence make
A conflict of its elements, and breathe

The breath of degradation and of pride[.]

[...]

Hark! The note,

[*The Shepherd's pipe in the distance is heard.*]

The natural music of the mountain reed –

[...]

Oh, that I were

The viewless spirit of a lovely sound,

A living voice, a breathing harmony,

A bodiless enjoyment – born and dying

With the blest tone which made me!

([1817] 1996, I. ii., lines 37-56)

The musical element is relevant to *Manfred*, and “[t]he play’s interest in sound effects and environmental aesthetics is not fleeting”; the presence of auditory sounds, and Byron’s *ante-litteram* employment of acousmatic sounds emanating from hidden sources, may lead to what Chion defines as synaesthetic effects. Such strategies are to be considered environmental, as they convey a sense of space to the theatre, thus rendering the audience aware of their direct participation in the dramatic sphere (Morton, 2007: 160).

A further, environmental idea is presented by the seven Spirits conjured by Manfred at the very beginning of the play. While the first five are responsible for the control of the elements, the sixth “dwells in night,” the seventh seems to oversee the star dictating Manfred’s own destiny. Critics have argued the Spirits may possibly be referred to a body of knowledge based in natural philosophy. At least at the beginning of the play, Manfred seemingly possesses the ability to control those entities, to summon them at his will, evoking them in the pursuit of oblivion and self-destruction. Manfred therefore might desire to wipe all memories from his mind, or perhaps to be erased from the minds of individuals whose path he might have crossed. The protagonist then is tormented by the voice of conscience (Morton, 2007: 160-1):

[*A Voice is heard in the Incantation which follows*]

When the moon is on the wave,

And the glow-worm in the grass,
And the meteor on the grave,
And the wisp on the morass;
When the falling stars are shooting,
And the answer'd howls are hooting,
And the silent leaves are still
In the shadow of the hill
Shall my soul be upon thine,
With a power and with a sign.

([1817] 1996, I. i., lines 192-201)

As the speech reaches its end, the voice grows more compelling and intense. Night, evoked in these lines, is characterised by both existential and phenomenological qualities which are essentially environmental, as night represents a 'presence absence,' an entity capable of enveloping the whole universe, as maintained in the final line of "Darkness." The voice is nowhere to be found, but is present indirectly and anamorphically, namely "in the process of losing (its) shape." The environment itself is anamorphic; once humans point at it, it disappears, turning into a specific aspect of nature, a specific tree, for instance. The Seventh Spirit, or Manfred's star, shares similarities with this anamorphic quality of nature. When it manifests as a beautiful woman, whom Manfred approaches to embrace, it dissolves. Consequently, nature can never appear directly in the foreground but rather it constitutes an ambient which can only be glimpsed at anamorphically. These aspects and qualities become evident in Manfred's descriptions of nature, which strike readers for their sheer beauty (Morton, 2007: 161):

It is noon – the sunbow's rays still arch
The torrent with the many hues of heaven,
And roll the sheeted silver's waving column
O'er the crags headlong perpendicular,
And fling its lines of foaming light along,
And to and fro, like the pale courser's tail.

([1817] 1996, II. ii., lines 1-6)

A further environmental element is constituted by Byron's use of language marked by "a radical hesitation between thinking of [both] language [...] and human being[s] as [either] outside or inside nature." Such a movement invites imaginative projection on the reader's part. By means of language, Manfred compares the Witch of the Alps to an ambient tint, "rose tints" reflecting on the snow of a glacier (Morton, 2007: 162):

Beautiful Spirit! with thy hair of light,
And dazzling eyes of glory, in whose form
The charm of earth's least mortal daughters grow
To an unearthly stature, in an essence
Of purer elements; while the hues of youth, –
Carnation'd like a sleeping infant's cheek,
Rock'd by the beating of her mother's heart,
Or the rose tints, which summer's twilight leaves
Upon the lofty glacier's virgin snow,
The blush of earth embracing with her heaven, –
Tinge thy celestial aspect, and make tame
The beauties of the sunbow which bends o'er thee.

([1817] 1996, II., ii., lines 13-24)

The Witch is therefore compared to a shade, and therefore a background element. She embodies Manfred's aesthetic and erotic enjoyment of nature and the earth, while also representing an intrinsically environmental entity. Manfred's desire consists in transforming the background into foreground without corrupting its nature. Nature however "can never hold still long enough for a chaste appreciation" to happen. The Witch represents the quintessence of the Alpine sublime, but Manfred can never fully experience nature, as the aesthetic dimension through which humans can witness it creates a severance between human and non-human, a gap between 'perceiving subject' and 'contemplated object' (Morton, 2007: 163).



Fig. 10 – J. Martin, *Manfred and the Alpine Witch*, watercolour, 1837, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, Great Britain.

In Act II, Scene ii, there appears a passage reminiscent of Wordsworthian poetry. Manfred describes his experience in nature as a retreat from the human brotherhood and its thoughts, claiming that “with men, and with the thoughts of men, / [he] held but slight communion; but instead, / [His] joy was in the Wilderness.” Manfred presents himself as an isolated individualist living in isolation attempting to process his identity. The protagonist then describes his pursuit of science, which began with tracing the moon and watching lightning, thus demonstrating how in *Manfred*, “the aesthetic and the scientific are [deeply] intertwined” (Morton, 2007: 164):

From my youth upwards
My spirits walk'd not with the souls of men,
Nor look'd upon the earth with human eyes;
[...]
[...] with men, and with the thoughts of men,
I held but slight communion, but instead,
My joy was in the Wilderness [and its elements.]
In these my early strength exulted; or
To follow through the night the moving moon,
The stars and their development; or catch
The dazzling lightnings till my eyes grew dim;
[...]

These were my pastimes, and to be alone[.]

([1817] 1996, II., ii., lines 50-75)

These lines might be an allegorical interpretation of a typically Wordsworthian desire to be fully surrounded by natural things; contrary to such a view, Byron seems to maintain that human simply cannot cut their heads off and live up in a tree, and that Wordsworth's proposal might rely on too limited a view of natural world and its relationship with the human realm. Such an attitude however may lead a hypocritical view of what may be defined as 'immersion in nature' (Morton, 2007: 164).

With *Manfred*, Byron presents his readers with a paradoxical view of nature as an entity represented by disembodied Spirits and the obscurity of the night. Nature seems to exclude a tormented and individualistic human subjectivity. Throughout the play, Manfred feels compelled to free himself from the metaphorical chains represented by the voices he hears and the Spirits, which are representative of a total immersion in the natural environment. The protagonist however is prevented from such a union, in what may be interpreted as a continuation of Fall narratives, and therefore of a woeful separation from nature following an unspeakable crime going against nature itself, which has been identified by literary critics as incest (Morton, 2007: 165-6). Manfred himself describes what is arguably his crime against human nature in Act II, Scene i:

I say 'tis blood – my blood! the pure warm
stream
Which ran in the veins of my fathers, and in ours
When we were in our youth, and had one heart,
And loved each other as we should not love,
And this was shed: but still it rises up,
Colouring the clouds, that shut me out from heaven,
Where thou art not – and I shall never be.

([1817] 1996, II., i., lines 23-30)

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4.3.6 Blood Dynamics: Incest as a Crime against *Human Nature*

The theme of incest is central to the understanding of Manfred's torment, and an issue investigated by Romantic thinkers seeking to comprehend human culture. Artists too have recognised the universality of incest especially in terms of establishing a boundary between the human and non-human. British literary representations of the incest taboo were developed into varying forms in different cultural moments. Consciousness holds a pivotal role in incest narratives, as those involved in such unions may be unaware of the presence of any blood bonds. In Lewis' *The Monk* for instance Ambrosio learns Antonia is his sister only following her rape and murder. On the other hand, there do exist tales of conscious incest, composed during the Romantic Age, characterised by heroes and heroines who willingly "pursue their forbidden loves" (Richardson, 2000: 554).

Romantic representations of sibling incest however are not to be mistaken for perverted inversions of sibling relations, but rather as their "extension and intensification." Romantic heroes engaging in incestuous relationships were often brought up in the same context and setting in infancy. The power of a shared childhood was such that adopted sibling, foster siblings, and neighbours appearing in Romantic narratives often claim to be part of a bond as strong, if not stronger, than any biological tie. The British Romantic tradition features a variety of incest narratives whose protagonists are either siblings or quasi-siblings following the same trajectory, from a "shared childhood to a tragic end." Examples include P.B. Shelley's *Laon and Cynthia* (1817), Byron's *Manfred* and *The Bride of Abydos* (1813), and Mary Shelley's 1818 version *Frankenstein*, which presents its readers with an incestuous relationship between adopted siblings. Significantly, as argued by Twitchell, both Byron and P.B. Shelley apparently regarded incest as an ideal union capable of transcending "artificial opinions or institutions." *Manfred* provides a rather poetic description of incest and its consequences, as its protagonist claims that through his illegitimate love, he destroyed Astarte (Richardson, 2000: 554-8):

She was like me in lineaments – her eyes,
Her hair, her features, all, to the very tone
Even of her voice, they said were like mine;
She had the same lone thoughts and wanderings,
The quest of hidden knowledge, and a mind

To comprehend the universe: nor these
Alone, but with them gentler powers than mine,
Pity, and smiles, and tears – which I had not;
And tenderness – but that I had for her;
Humility – and that I never had.
Her faults were mine – her virtues were her own –
I loved her, and destroy'd her!

([1817] 1996, II., ii., lines 105-17)

As highlighted by Rapf, critics tend to interpret Romantic incest under a Freudian lens, relying on notions of guilt and of horror. However, there seems to be a discrepancy in incest stories lying in the legitimisation of incest narratives between cousins, which feature unproblematically in a variety of novels, perhaps most famously in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, culminating in the union of cousins Edmund and Fanny (Richardson, 2000: 558).

As thus far maintained, incest also represented an important part of Byron's biographical history; other rumours were circulating at the time about alleged incestuous attitudes between William and Dorothy Wordsworth. While no proof seems to exist on the matter, doubts started to emerge about their union as the two siblings had been housemates and companions for almost the entirety of their lives (Richardson, 2000: 561).

Romantic literary studies on incest have noted a variety of significant changes in the family unit as a sphere; families became tighter during the Romantic Age and children enjoyed a higher degree of protection from their parents and relatives. Consequently, siblings tended to feel closer to one another than in the past, as attested by several autobiographical records. Moreover, the notion and representation of femininity were beginning to be reshaped in what has been defined as a crisis of the sexes further emphasised by the rise of proto-feminist movements in the 1790s. Consequently, male writers could no longer ignore their female counterparts and therefore started to regard women as ideal partners, sources of inspiration, icons of sensibility, and ethical guides, with examples including Astarte in *Manfred*, Elizabeth in *Frankenstein*, and Dorothy in much of the Wordsworthian canon (Richardson, 2000: 564).

Incest is present throughout *Manfred* either as a central theme or acting as a backdrop to the protagonist's torment. At the very end of the play, a Spirit interrupts Manfred's last speech demanding his life and reminding him of the horrible crime he committed. In Manfred's own words, Astarte was more than just his sister and lover, but rather she represented his 'self,' words which have been pinpointed as representative of Manfred's 'androcentric narcissism.' As a matter of fact, Astarte seems to share the protagonist's lineaments and features, however augmenting them through her feminine power. In Long Hoeveler's interpretation, Astarte may be seen as a "projection of [Manfred's] own mind," an unattainable return to a pre-oedipal maternal state. Therefore, Manning considers both Astarte and the Witch a plausible projection of Manfred's yearning for a maternal embrace. Narcissism may consequently pave the way to a literary pursuit of the historical and poetic articulations of incest in the Romantic and Byronic canon (Glass, 1995: 211-3).

Subsuming social, psychological, and biological categories, the incest-narcissism dichotomy in *Manfred* may be interpreted as a breach of both natural and human laws enabling social communication (Glass, 1995: 213), but perhaps more significantly of blood dynamics. Such an unnatural passion would transform Manfred into a moral monster, a transgressor of the "bounds of humanity [and of the] boundary between species" (Daston, 2019: 12-41). Furthermore, red, in its association to blood, seems to be the hue colouring Manfred's memories of his beloved sister; blood however may represent either familial affiliation or violence, as made evident in Manfred's response to the Chamois Hunter in Act II, Scene II (lines 23-30). A symbol of familial identity, blood may also cause rupture, not just due to the idea of death, but rather to the sinful act leading to the degradation of Manfred's ancestry. Incest therefore tragically leads to a consummation and violation of blood relationships (Glass, 1995: 215-6).

Incest may represent a rupture in the order of the narrative, thus blurring the agency responsible for the main plot events, the causal links between Manfred and Astarte's incestuous attraction, and the violent act which leads to the destruction of their union. Therefore, love and violence constitute a dichotomy and a severance in Manfred's subjectivity, further emphasising his torment. Words may not fully express the meaning of incest in Manfred's world; consequently, it constitutes semantic violence, a violation

of both cultural and linguistic norms (Glass, 1995: 216-7), a kind of love “love that dare not speak its name” (Douglas, 1894: line 74).

In his study *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard argues that a cultural order is a system of regulated distinctions necessary to the establishment of an individual’s identity, but also to the creation of lasting, mutual relationships. Should breakdowns happen in these distinctions, a sacrificial crisis would ensue, leading to a proliferation of violent acts and a consequent rupture in the order of representation; Girard therefore maintains that differences and distinctions hold a central role in familial relationships (Girard, 1977: 49). Manfred and Astarte, as demonstrated in Act II, Scene ii (lines 105-17) are characterised by their shared similarities and tendency of the one to superimpose himself on the other, thus establishing a relationship resisting symbolic meaning and constituting “a breakdown in representation.” Incest and violence may therefore be said to be akin as incest violates differences to the extreme, destroying them, while also compromising the differential system responsible for representation. In Garber’s reading of *Manfred*, the protagonist and Astarte are involved in a synchronic relationship, as Manfred seems to be pressured into bonds based on resemblance with those he deems important, which ultimately lead to his destruction (Glass, 1995: 217). The removal of such differences may result in violent sacrifice, as “[t]he universal spread of ‘doubles,’ the complete effacement of differences [...] is the prerequisite for the establishment of violent unanimity” (Girard, 1977: 49).



Fig. 11 – H. Fantin-Latour, *Manfred and Astarte*, oil on canvas, c. 1879, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, Netherlands.

Manfred therefore presents readers with incest as a rupture which cannot possibly be represented, a “collapse of signification and difference” and a “chaotic void replete with violence and desire” representing the movement from the lightness of Manfred’s patriarchal days, represented by Count Sigismund, “proud, – but gay and free” to the tormented, alienated state the protagonist is forced to bear in the present. In this context, Astarte may represent the missing link and the reason behind the separation between Manfred and these former, joyful times, thus rendering their incestuous relationship a failed attempt at restoring a distant past and allowing an interpretation of incest as a problem of the aristocratic class, of which Byron was a representative (Glass, 1995: 218).

In an age of revolutions, family too as an institution witnessed quick changes. Historians of the family tend to agree the Romantic Age enjoyed a heightened interest in childhood, especially in what would be Lord Byron’s societal rank. *Manfred* deals with “the problem of *representing* familial relationships in historical flux.” Astarte in Manfred’s case, and Augusta in Byron’s constitute the most significant affection and blood tie. Critical focus on the issue of incest in Byronic works such as *Manfred* or *The Bride of Abydos* is most likely due to the rising Romantic interest in childhood memories; these however would often overlap with desire and be tainted with sexual valences. The aristocratic family underwent a shift from an alliance-and-lineage-based group to a system “expected to mediate and generate affective and erotic ties,” aspects which could explain Byron’s fascination with incest, thus explaining Manfred’s relationship with Astarte as an attempt to “recuperate and incorporate patriarchal and aristocratic blood lineage into the affective and eroticized ties which characterize the modern nuclear family.” Therefore, according to Christensen, upon a closer reading of *Manfred* readers may experience the protagonist’s mysterious and guilt-ridden past as a direct consequence of a nameless, unspeakable crime (Glass, 1995: 218-26).

4.3.7 Manfred the Narcissistic, Demon-summoning Faust

The Faustian element and the pact with the devil are a further, central issue to the play. From the very beginning of *Manfred*, the protagonist is clearly not content to simply

receive visitations from the Spirits. On the contrary, he wishes to make them appear as well, as for something to be true for human beings, a ‘thing’ must appear in front of them (Daston, 2019: 66). *Manfred* contains a variety of echoes from the Faustian legend. While Byron maintained he was unfamiliar with Christopher Marlowe’s *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Dr Faustus*, perhaps the most influential representation of a Faustian character in the British literary canon, the poet had read Matthew Lewis’s translation of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust* (1808), as well as Madame de Staël’s summary of the latter provided in *De l’Allemagne* (1813) (Saglia, ed., 2017: 16-7).

Byron’s *Manfred* and Goethe’s *Faust* share several similarities. Most notably, the attempted suicide on the Jungfrau, after Manfred reveals his sense of guilt towards his family linked to his ‘crime’ of incest, presents clear Goethian echoes (Melaney, 2005: 466). Consequently, Byron was accused of having plagiarised Goethe’s work; however, Goethe himself admitted such similarities were of minor importance, adding that the representations of cosmic pain and Manfred’s torment were unique elements of Byron’s play, as guilt is not as central a theme as in Goethe’s *Faust* (Saglia, ed., 2017: 17).

Manfred therefore is not a mere copy and paste version of Goethe’s work, but rather a rewriting of Goethe’s text and its tradition, especially in its revision of the pact with the devil. Historically, the diabolic pact had been outlined as an essential part of witchcraft in the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1489), as well as a central pretext for the persecution of alleged witches during witch-hunt trials. Trevor-Roper suggests *Manfred* is not too historically removed from such persecutions, as the last legal witch-burning happened in Switzerland, the main setting for the play, in the year 1789. The figure of the Faust gained momentum exactly during those persecutions, and reinterpretations of the story often tend to stress the importance of the pact, appearing both in Marlowe’s and Goethe’s version. Pacts however, at least in the English Romantic tradition, were not necessarily binding, or at least contained escape clauses, as in Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk* (1796), or Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) (Macdonald, 1992: 26-7).

In *Manfred*, the pact is treated radically. When the infernal Spirit appears to Manfred, claiming his life, the protagonist does not mention an escape clause to release himself from the bond, but rather he altogether denies its existence (Macdonald, 1992: 27):

[M]y past power
Was purchased by no compact with thy crew,
But by superior science – penance – daring –
And length of watching – strength of mind – and
Skill
In knowledge of our fathers – when the earth
Saw men and spirits walking side by side,
And gave ye no supremacy[.]

([1817] 1996, III., iv., lines 113-9)

In these lines, Manfred seems to be appealing to “an old conception of magic” the *Malleus Maleficarum* sought to supersede, according to which magic was a “non-diabolic art that manipulated spirits without compacting with them.” In the last scene, Manfred firmly refuses to recognise the authority of the infernal Spirit claiming he has no master, as he possesses the power to “[command] / Things of an essence greater far,” having previously referred to the Spirits as his slaves in Act I, Scene i. Such words and ideas also appear in Act II, Scene ii, as Manfred similarly addresses the Witch of the Alps to the point of almost expressing disgust at the idea of being commanded by a supposedly superior being: “Obey! and whom? the spirits / Whose presence I command, and be the slave / Of those who served me – Never!”. Not even in front of Arimanes does Manfred display a change of attitude; on the contrary, the protagonist refuses to kneel to the god, admitting however he has become a slave of his own evil doings. When threatened by the Spirits who want him to kneel forcibly, Manfred retorts (Macdonald, 1992: 18-29):

‘Tis taught already; – many a night on the earth,
On the bare ground, have I bow’d down my face,
And strew’d my head with ashes; I have known
The fulness of humiliation, for
I sunk before my vain despair, and knelt
To my own desolation.

([1817] 1996, II. iv., 37-42)

Manfred then sarcastically adds that both the god and he should kneel to “the overruling infinite”. A further, Faustian element is represented by Manfred’s refusal to have other

people pray for him, much like Marlowe's Faustus refusal of the Scholars' offer. As a matter of fact, Manfred refuses both the Chamois Hunter's and the Abbot's prayers; during the conversation held with the latter, offering him to be reconciled with heaven, the protagonist voices his despair in a speech with both Marlowesque and Miltonic echoes. Manfred believes no man of the cloth and no prayer may save him, believing the torture of despair, "[w]hich is remorse without the fear of hell / [...] / Would make a hell of heaven" (Macdonald, 1992: 29).

Manfred's denial of the pact with the devil might synecdochally represent his refusal to engage in any interaction with other individuals, which is made especially clear in his encounter with the Chamois Hunter and then with the Witch of the Alps, to whom he explains he does not share any of what Byron defines as the "sympathy for the breathing flesh." The only exception in Manfred's chosen state of solitude is his incestuous relationship with Astarte, a love which, as demonstrated in Act II, Scene ii, has been described by Thorslev as 'narcissistic sensibility.' The relationship between Manfred and Astarte is highly idealised by the former and was most likely employed by Byron for its minimisation of the differences between the siblings / lovers. Their illicit relationship is necessarily demonological in its representation of an implicitly signed diabolic pact between Manfred and himself. Furthermore, the protagonist maintains he owes his magical powers to Astarte herself, as she previously aided the protagonist in his quest for magic, which Aquinas however would have argued depended on an implicit pact with the devil, nonetheless. In this sense, Manfred's non-spoken pact with Astarte seems to confirm the protagonist's inability to engage with individuals around him due to his narcissism. Only the Abbot, acting as a father-figure to Manfred, manages to penetrate the protagonist's state of total solitude and alienation which eventually leads to the latter's ultimate suicide (Macdonald, 1992: 30-6). Manfred's action is a claim to his individuality and freedom, as he aspires to seek a different world of whose existence and characteristics human beings cannot be certain; his is a claim to pain and death. In this sense, Manfred becomes anti-natural being, the representative of "[n]egative freedom and secular transcendence: the claims of Enlightenment man" (Bate, 2000: 177).

The 'crime against nature' trope therefore constitutes a crucial element to the understanding of *Manfred*. Disdaining human nature and claiming his superiority and

individuality, Manfred subverts human orders employing magic, summoning Spirits, and demanding they follow his orders, while also breaking human laws as he engages in an illicit relationship with his sister. The protagonist can therefore be connected to the tradition of the Promethean 'overreacher,' which famously includes the Mariner in S.T. Coleridge's "Rime" and Victor Frankenstein in M. Shelley's *Frankenstein*, texts which deal with ordinary human beings tampering with nature, leading to cursing and disastrous consequences.

Conclusion

The aim of this dissertation was to provide a historical and ecological analysis of S.T. Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Lord Byron's *Manfred*, two texts pertaining to the period conventionally labelled as Romanticism. Drawing from Lorraine Daston's *Against Nature* (2019) and Jonathan Bate's *The Song of the Earth* (2000), chapter I, "Humans *in* and *against* Nature," provides the philosophical context behind the relationship between human beings and the natural environment, seeking to trace the origins of the crime against nature from Theophrastus to Charles Darwin, John Stuart Mill, and Thomas Carlyle. Focussing on what may be defined as a "propensity for the unnatural," there follows an inquiry into the (un)natural implications of taboos including bestiality, incest, and cannibalism, tendencies which may lead to disorder, a central issue both in literary and philosophical studies (Daston, 2019).

Perhaps most famously, Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men* (1755) promoted the idea of a 'state of nature' in which humans were truly free from laws and equal, fully in touch with their natural instincts. However, with the advent of state institutions and education, arguably among the first crimes against nature, humans were no longer free. There followed a consequent severance between the realm of the human and the non-human, as humans took pride in the loss of the 'state of nature' and of nature itself, leading to practices including exploitation, deforestation, and meat-eating. In this sense, Rousseau may be interpreted as an early prophet of ecocide, an issue relevant to both Coleridge's "Rime" and Byron's "Darkness." (Bate, 2000: 31-46).

Chapter II, "Attitudes towards Nature," investigates the Romantic Age as a period of significant historical, social, and ecological changes due to both the French and the Industrial Revolution. The latter transformed England into a mechanical society constantly at war with nature, as argued by Thomas Carlyle (Harvie and Matthew, 2000: 1-2). The impact of the industrialisation process and the Enclosure Acts was relevant to the alteration of the British landscape. John Clare was active in the production of social outcries in the form of his poems on the tragedy of the enclosure, as he lamented the loss

of a true relationship with the land. Peasants found themselves stripped of the right to farm common lands, thus leaving them dispossessed and with moving to industrial centres as the only viable choice. (Daniels and McDonagh, 2012: 107-15).

Humans therefore felt entitled to the imposition of their control on nature believing the latter should be schematised and aesthetically pleasing. A direct result of such an attitude was landscape gardening, a widespread practice among the English gentry, famously appearing in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814). Furthermore, theories of an ideal landscape distant from the harsh realities of the poor started to rise in the period with Reverend Gilpin's theories. The belief was that plausible landscapes resulting from the rearrangement of the natural environment were to be favoured over nature as such, a further demonstration of the aestheticization of a natural world which, ironically, was not natural enough. Nature therefore started to be perceived as an object, a subject of commodification (Bate, 2000: 127-35).

Consequently, from the original feelings of fear and reverence towards nature, there occurred a shift to dominance. However, feelings of fear towards the natural world persisted and were developed in Burke's theory of the sublime, especially linked to water and the mountainous settings. The former started to be regarded as a connection among human beings, leading to what may be defined as 'wet' globalisation (Mentz, 2020: 34). The Romantics, who felt the burden of the Napoleonic Wars, and their impact on the British maritime context, were deeply connected to water (Cavell, 2017). Lord Byron's crucial Venetian stay was characterised by the poet's long swimming and diving sessions. S.T. Coleridge set the entirety of his "Rime" at sea, providing a detailed description of the Mariner's actions, (mis)adventures, and consequent guilt. Moreover, the sea holds a central position in the opening and closing sections of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818), a text which also exposed its readers to the heights of the Swiss Alps. Alpine settings were deeply admired by the Romantics, who had the opportunity to witness and familiarise with them as they embarked on Grand Tours (Scaramellini, 1996).

Chapter III, "And then the STORM-BLAST came" provides an ecocritical analysis of Coleridge's ballad "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," a text displaying the poet's genuine concern for the natural world. A demonstration of what Coleridge defined as 'poetry of nature,' the poem shows an adherence to (un)natural themes and the aim of

generating interest through imagination, including what the poet himself defined as “persons and characters supernatural, or at least Romantic” (Coleridge, [1817] 1985: 314-5).

Defined by some, including Wordsworth, as a nonsensical text, the “Rime” has been the object of a variety of ecocritical re-readings. The treatment of the issue of the crime against nature in the form of speciesism, and the primary role held by the ‘non-human’ in its coexistence with the ‘human’ lend themselves to an ecological approach. The Mariner’s actions, his feelings of human superiority over nature (Lowes, 2020), and the presence of elements typical of ‘shipwreck narrative’ present an opportunity to reflect on Coleridge’s “Rime” as a text dealing with the issue of trauma and, more specifically, PTSD (Walford Davies, 2016).

The final chapter, “I like the weather, when it is not rainy” provides a study of two seminal texts in the Byronic canon, the apocalyptic poem “Darkness” and *Manfred*, a play. An introductory section on Byron’s life and poetics highlights the significant link between the poet’s biographical experience and nature, drawing from a variety of passages taken from “Canto III” of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1816). Byron’s unhappy childhood, his deformity, the death of his daughter Allegra, and the conflict between his individualism and expectations of British society are at the very basis of the poet’s torment. Such elements are stressed throughout the chapter to provide the basis for the poet’s exile texts, composed in the Continent following Byron’s decision to leave England amidst accusation of incest and immorality.

Byron’s Swiss years, spent in the company of the Shelleys, Polidori, joined occasionally by Lewis, proved most prolific in ecocritical terms and are representative of the rupture of the natural order the poet witnessed in England (Rowley, 2013: 5). The year 1816 was a significant moment both from a literary and an ecological standpoint. Known as the ‘the year without a summer’ following the eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia, both Europe and America witnessed a dramatic drop in temperature levels. The resulting soot from the eruption covered the skies in most areas of Europe, thus leading to darkness, several failed harvests, and consequent famine and death (Bate, 2000: 96-7). Amidst fears of apocalypse, Byron decided to write “Darkness,” a poem which displays human descent into a non-human, animal realm, characterised by disharmony, selfishness, and

cannibalism (Macqueen, 2015: 10-1), and the object of the second section of this chapter. “Darkness,” represented as a feminine entity (Guimarães, 2017: 14), mirrors both the political and ecological turmoil of the time, following the Napoleonic Wars and the Eruption of Mount Tambora, making Byron what Bate defines as a prophet of ecocide (Bate, 2000: 98).

The third section focuses on *Manfred*, its genre, the history of its composition, and the role of the Byronic hero, a literary type which became a model in European literature. With clear biographical echoes, *Manfred* perfectly displays the inner turmoil, torment, and guilt Byron experienced as direct consequences of his separation, exile, alleged incestuous relationship, and death of his daughter Allegra (Saglia, ed., 2017).

In this sense, *Manfred* constitutes a turning point in the Byronic canon, as it recounts the story of an incestuous Promethean character (Melaney, 2005). A play written for the so-called ‘mental theatre,’ and therefore not meant for publication, *Manfred* enables a variety of ecocritical readings in its representation of the environmental Spirits, the Alps, and human nature (Saglia, ed., 2017; Morton, 2007). Byron’s play represents an opportunity to reason on the boundary between the human and the non-human due to the presence of incest, a central theme in Romantic literature, acting as a backdrop to the protagonist’s torment, while also blurring the boundary between humans and animals (Glass, 1995; Richardson, 2000). The presence of the Faustian element further complicates Manfred’s relationship with his human nature, as the protagonist altogether disdains his mortal condition picturing himself a spirit-summoning god following a pact with the devil (Macdonald, 1992).

The aim of this dissertation was to highlight the similarities, or indeed the differences between Coleridge’s *Mariner* and Byron’s *Manfred*, two tormented promethean characters identified by their destructive desire to bend nature under their will, to alter the relationship between human and non-human, and to impose their individuality in a system created by a higher entity, seemingly disdaining it altogether. In a world which appears to turn its back on poetic forms in favour of increasingly shorter and more easily accessible prose forms, this dissertation purposely focused on two canonical texts of the First and Second Romanticism, providing an ecocritical analysis based on ecological, meteorological, and behavioural studies.

Further, future research into the subject may focus on other coeval representations of the crime against nature trope, or Romantic solutions to the issue in the form of an opposite paradigm portraying a peaceful coexistence between human and non-human. More recent developments of the theme, coinciding with technological advancement, or indeed disasters, may also result in significant contributions to the field of ecocriticism. 'Dystopias' may be read environmentally, thus resulting in a different paradigm whereby humans commit crimes and destroy nature by means of 'science' and technology, which is the case of Aldous Huxley's novel *Brave New World* (1932). Victor Frankenstein and the Mariner play God with God's creatures as the former gives life to a corpse by means of electricity, while the latter takes a bird's life. In Huxley's universe, God is rejected altogether; creation and destruction are strictly human; in this sense, the novel's treatment of bioengineering may therefore be interpreted as a continuation of the eco-crime trope, as human beings refuse to generate life in a biological, natural way, in favour of creating human beings *in vitro* in laboratories. Such practices lead to dystopian concepts of life and death, with John the savage striving for his independence and individuality in a drug-fuelled, ecstatic world perhaps evocative of Coleridge's poetic cosmoses.

The issue of 'eco-crime' is relevant to contemporary ecological discourse. There should be no room for pseudo-science when dealing with the climate crisis, nor for greedy individuals seeking to exploit global warming and its disastrous consequences for massive profits. When global warming and climate change experts warn the population of the dangers of rising water as glaciers melt, the general public should not simply listen and nod to scientists, with no attempts whatsoever to make a difference; admittedly, they would constitute but a small drop in the comprehensive ocean which is the climate crisis, but a contribution, nonetheless. While literature can by no means single-handedly tackle the issue of climate change and the many ecological disasters plaguing the planet, poetry, songs, novels, paintings, and therefore the humanities may represent invaluable opportunities to at least represent the issue through words. Collecting tales of 'eco-crime,' revenge of nature, and natural disasters, especially when voiced or written by direct witnesses, may lead to phenomena of literary and ecological empathy and sympathy. Rather than mere statistics, literature may represent a more human and humane approach to the issue, a glimpse into the lives of those directly involved, and hit, by the climate crisis. Ecocriticism, the study of a given text in its relationship to (human) nature, should

therefore be seen as a broadening of the scope of research into the disastrous changes in weather conditions and the health of the Earth. To help solve the problem, it may be necessary to address it in its entirety adopting an interdisciplinary perspective, rather than siloed approaches, attempting to examine the matter holistically, even adopting literature as an instrument, and paying attention to the psychology behind the climate crisis and ‘eco-crimes,’ both in the case of the victims and the perpetrators.

Table of Figures

Fig 1 – T. Rowlandson, “Dr Syntax losing his way.” Engraving from Combe, W., *The Tour of Dr Syntax in Search of the Picturesque*.

Fig. 2 – J.M.W. Turner, *Steam-Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth*, oil on canvas, 1842, Tate, London, Great Britain.

Fig. 3 – J.M.W. Turner, *Devil’s Bridge, Mt St Gothard*, watercolour on paper, c. 1806-7, Tate, London, Great Britain.

Fig. 4 – G. Doré, *The Appearance of the Albatross to Lead the Marooned Ship Out of the Frozen Seas of Antarctica*, Scene from “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by S.T. Coleridge, wood engraving, 1876, published by Harper & Brothers, New York.

Fig. 5 – J.M.W. Turner, *The Shipwreck*, oil on canvas, 1805, Tate, London, Great Britain.

Fig. 6 – C.D. Friedrich, *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog*, oil on canvas, 1818, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany.

Fig. 7 – J. Martin, *The Last Man*, oil on canvas, 1849, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, Great Britain.

Fig. 8 – J.D. Odevaere, *Lord Byron on his Death-bed*, oil on canvas, c. 1826, Groeninge Museum, Bruges, Belgium.

Fig. 9 – J. Martin, *Manfred on the Jungfrau*, watercolour, 1837, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham, Great Britain.

Fig. 10 – J. Martin, *Manfred and the Alpine Witch*, watercolour, 1837, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, Great Britain.

Fig. 11 – H. Fantin-Latour, *Manfred and Astarte*, oil on canvas, c. 1879, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, Netherlands.

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