

Thinking with plants: ecological logos and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

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Only days after Wordsworth's brother, John, died at sea on the Earl of Abergavenny on February 5, 1805, Coleridge exclaimed 'No Christ, No God!', marking his move from Unitarianism to a belief in the Trinity. He noted: 'O that this Conviction may work upon me and in me, and that my mind may be made up as to the character of Jesus, and of historical Christianity, as clearly as it is of the Logos and intellectual or spiritual Christianity'.¹ The Logos, or Word, is that 'first language' from which everything else derives, the means by which non-divine things come to know the divine.² It connects the divine to the human through reason, and, in its realization and incarnation in Christ, serves as a harmonizing principle that mediates and grounds all phenomena.³ By April of the same year, Coleridge understood the Logos as the basis of a relationship of oneness with God revealed to the human through apprehension of an 'inner' nature revealed to the observer by objects in the world:

In looking at objects of Nature, while I am thinking, as at yonder moon dim-glimmering through the dewy window-pane, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were *asking*, a symbolical language for something within me that already and for ever exists, than observing anything new. Even when that latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if that new phaenomenon were the dim awakening of a forgotten or hidden Truth or my inner Nature. It is still interesting as a Word, a Symbol! It is *Logos*, the Creator! and the Evolver!⁴

Logos is ecological here, positing an organic unity and connection between things in a manner that recalls Ernst Haeckel's 1866 coining of the word 'ecology' from the Greek *oikos* (household) and *logos* (study). Logos informs the objects of nature in a way that reveals their 'Creator' and 'Evolver', both God, but also those who create by imagining. Coleridge described this act of imagining in a letter to Richard Sharp, claiming Wordsworth as imaginatively capable of enacting his 'one Life' philosophy that, like ecology, reads the world as a web of relationships. Wordsworth uses the imagination 'in that sense in which it is a dim Analogue of Creation, not all that we can *believe*, but all that

¹ Kathleen Coburn, Merton Christensen, and Anthony John Harding, ed., *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 5 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957-2002), vol. II, p. 2448.

² S. T. Coleridge, *Opus Maximum. 1819-1823*, ed., Thomas McFarland (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 109.

³ See Mary Anne Perkins, *Coleridge's Philosophy: The Logos as Unifying Principle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 22; and Jonathan Wordsworth, "'The Infinite I AM': Coleridge and the Ascent of Being", in Richard Gravil, Lucy Newlyn and Nicholas Roe, ed., *Coleridge's Imagination: Essays in Memory of Pete Laver* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 22-52 (p. 50).

⁴ Coburn et al, ed., *Notebooks*, vol. II, p. 2546.

we can *conceive* of creation'.⁵ As the expression of this 'imaginative insight', Coleridge hopes that Wordsworth's poetry, like his own, will reveal the terms of such perception.⁶ Like modern ecopoetics, Coleridge envisions a poetry that is at once attentive to the diversity of the world while willing to investigate the relationships between the anthro- and the eco-, nature and culture, language and perception.⁷ Logos is the connective energy that enables these relationships.

Coleridge describes this energy in a notebook entry that reflects on another apparent dualism, Hades and God. While 'every Sin and thought of Sin' divides the believer from God, sinking her into the underworld of 'the Hades', the Logos brings her back into 'an indivisible Breathing' with God.⁸ A world that appears otherwise as 'a mass of swirling atoms, a blur of colours, shapes, and sounds' is thus made distinct by those 'Creators and 'Evolvers' who bring order and meaning through the imagination.⁹ As Coleridge claimed: 'Nature is Hades rendered intelligible by the energy, which combining therewith makes it no longer Hades': sensation is chaos until ordered by the Logos.¹⁰ In this act, the believer is united with God and repeats 'in the finite mind' the 'eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM'.¹¹ But what kind of thinking enables this imagining of unity between all things? This essay argues that Coleridge understands Logos as ecological by envisioning the imagination as a unifying spirit in which all living things appear as a shared expression of God. This vision rests on his acceptance of the Triune God, a concept that was 'intrinsically relational' and so revelatory of the potential for interpersonal and mutual relationships between living things.¹² Rather than revisiting the philosophical story of Coleridge's relationship to pantheism and Trinitarianism, I look at the way Coleridge thinks with the natural world—the moon and its glimmer, the melted down minerals that comprise the window-pane, the dew condensed on its surface—as a way of conceiving its ecology through God.¹³ Specifically, I argue for Coleridge as a plant-thinker, by which I mean that the thinking he envisions as necessary to imagine ecological unity is already active in plants. He begins his chapter 'On the Imagination' in *Biographia Literaria* (1815-17), for example, with a reference to Milton's 'flowers and their fruit, / Man's nourishment, by gradual scale sublimed, / To vital spirits aspire', to

⁵ S. T. Coleridge, letter to Richard Sharp, Jan 15, 1804, in Earl Leslie Griggs, ed., *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956-71), vol. II, p. 1034.

⁶ Paul Hamilton, *Coleridge's Poetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), p. 172.

⁷ Forrest Gander, 'What is Eco-Poetry?' *Poetry Foundation*, November 29, 2008, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2008/11/what-is-eco-poetry/>

⁸ Coburn et al, ed., *Notebooks*, vol. V, p.5931; I am indebted to Graham Davidson for this point.

⁹ J. Robert Barth, *The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 18.

¹⁰ Coburn et al, ed., *Notebooks*, vol. V, p.5931.

¹¹ S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, 2 vols, in H. J. Jackson, ed., *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 313.

¹² Daniel P. Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 16, 24.

¹³ On the philosophical story, see Perkins, *Coleridge's Philosophy*, and Richard Berkeley, *Coleridge and the Crisis of Reason* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

acknowledge that all forms of intelligence are capable of growth, self-development and deduction.¹⁴ Plant comprehension, vital, inventive, and committed to non-oppositional thinking with and through its environment, also enacts the kind of perception promoted by Christ in the gospels. His request in the Sermon on the Mount that the believer ‘Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow’ (Matthew 6. 28) articulates a mode of cognition in which humans think like plants, relating to the world communally, gradually, diversely and without end. In registering this mode of cognition, Coleridge not only puts the logos in relationship with ecology, but reads Christianity as the basis for environmental consciousness, thus refusing some modern readings of his work in which Christianity and the ecocritical are regarded as incompatible.¹⁵ Coleridge suggests precisely the reverse in fact: that Christianity and ecology are co-mutual and together imagine a way of thinking that readily comprise ‘All things both great and small’ (l. 615).¹⁶

This line from ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ (1798) is significant because it provides a point of entry to his reading of the world as an ecological commons ‘created’ by the imagination. While ‘The Ancient Mariner’ was written before Coleridge’s turn to the Trinity, he continued to work on it throughout 1805 as secretary to the governor, Sir Alexander Ball, in Malta. Here, Coleridge encouraged Ball to read another lyrical ballad, Wordsworth’s *Peter Bell* (1798; 1819), a poem which impressed him, not because of its ‘poetic merit’, recalled Coleridge, but because of its ‘Truth and psychological insight’ into the reform of ‘hardened minds’.¹⁷ For Coleridge, such reform required guides or guardians of the national sensibility he later called the clerisy, an educated network responsible for awakening the nation from materialism and individualism into connection and unity.¹⁸ As he had already declared in *The Friend*, all things exist in relation to everything else, ‘not as parts but as manifestations’: existence is thus ‘an eternal and infinite self-rejoicing, self-loving, with a joy unfathomable, with a love all-comprehensive’.¹⁹ Without this ‘intuition’, the world appears as a grave-yard of disconnected objects; with it, the perceiver can imagine existence as evolving and transforming through the Logos into an ecology. In *Peter Bell*, the narrator is

¹⁴ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, p.307; John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (London, 1667), ll. 482-484.

¹⁵ Ashton Nichols, for example, argues that in his imagining of the ‘one life’, Coleridge offers ‘a naturalized version of a divine force, but he is clearly not describing any version of the Judeo-Christian God’, in *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Toward Urbanatural Roosting* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 21.

¹⁶ Coleridge, ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ (1798), in E. H. Coleridge, ed., *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), vol. I, pp. 186-209, further references by line number in the text; and see Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁷ S. T. Coleridge, ‘A Prefatory Observation on Modern Biography: Prefacing Sketches and Fragments of the Life and Character of the Late Admiral Sir Alexander Ball’, in Barbara E. Rooke, ed., *The Friend*, 2 vols, in *Collected Works: Vol. VI*, vol. II, p. 290; and see Andrea Timár, *A Modern Coleridge: Cultivation, Addiction, Habits* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 39-40.

¹⁸ S. T. Coleridge, *On the Constitution of the Church and State According to the Idea of Each* (1829), in John Colmer, ed., *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 23 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

¹⁹ Coleridge, *The Friend*, ed. Rooke, vol. I, p. 121.

redeemed from a life of solipsism and violence to love and connection: as the donkey teaches him how to love, Peter develops the very virtues Coleridge's clerisy would endorse. The Mariner, however, betrays the natural world to such a degree that his actions unbalance the order of the cosmos itself. Humans do not stand outside of this desecration of the world, but rather are presented as part of it, similarly damaged by the actions of an unthinking killer. The poem thus draws attention to the limitations of exclusive models of community, and embraces non-human species and their distinct being-ness within an ecological Logos. Coleridge refuses to reduce the constituent vital components of his poem to moral tableaux or metaphorical substitutions, and attends to all details of the cosmos—birds, slime, ghosts, sea-snakes, whizzing souls, ocean vegetation, moss—as a sacred commons.²⁰ The Mariner is at once aware of and unwilling to stay faithful to this commons, and so shoots the albatross with the same inexplicable ease with which violence against the natural world is constantly committed.

Instead of berating the Mariner and demanding he confess his crimes, however, the narrator of *The Rime* conceives of the universe as, in the words of historian Thomas Berry, a 'communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects'.²¹ Berry's work involves evoking the numinous dimensions of the natural world by calling humans to be more aware of the unnumbered species with whom we share the planet: the multiple intelligences and rich emotional lives of these species create new grounds for communion and relationship.²² Coleridge goes further by rejecting the subject-object dualism to envision the body politic as Logos in which all beings, even those without subjectivity, are part of existence's whole. This is not dissimilar to Timothy Morton's call for a new way of thinking about and from human interconnectedness with the world, one that rejects the environmental impulse to 'protect' nature, which, he argues, fetishizes it beyond the realm of human experience.²³ Coleridge Christianizes this thinking through the Logos, recognizing in it an interdependence of which nothing is outside. *The Rime* infers that Christianity without an ecological vision results in an abstracted and apocalyptic wait for a deferred future time, and that ecology without a Christian vision fails to encompass all the components of the creation it purports to save. The sacred commons it presents includes even the least theorized and philosophized of subjects—plants and plant life—as not only part of the dynamic unity of the logos, but as indicative of its very way of perceiving and relating to the world.

²⁰ Andrea Timár, "'There was a ship" in Malta,' *The Wordsworth Circle*, 43. 2 (2012), 95-98; and see John Hart, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

²¹ Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme. *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to The Ecozoic Era: A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1992), p. 243.

²² Thomas Berry, paper quoted in Mary Evelyn Tucker, 'Heritage of the Volume', in Paul Waldau and Kimberley Patton, ed., *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science and Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 1-5 (p. 2).

²³ See Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) and *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

Coleridge is not just an example of M. H. Abrams' 'vegetative genius', but is concerned with the vegetal itself, drawing as he does on a contemporary fascination with plant-life as well as the diversity of 'created' life.²⁴ Before examining Coleridge's plant-thinking, I offer a brief discussion of the relationship between Christianity and botany in the period, in particular how it revises narratives that assume a break between Christianity and science in the period. I then turn to Michael Marder's work on plant thinking, part of the broader field of critical plant studies, as a way into Coleridge's references to plants in *The Rime*.²⁵

The divide between Christianity and science that marks so much modern debate on ecology is linked historically to the separation of ecclesiastical theology from other disciplines of knowledge around 1100. As David Albertson argues, twelfth-century Western Europe witnessed a shift from symbolic readings of nature to a 'discovered nature' of reason and law, one that granted the natural sciences autonomy from theology.²⁶ As Arabic and Greek sources were translated and mathematical analysis privileged in physics, the concept of 'nature' came to signify through the emergence of the new sciences. The nineteenth century is often portrayed as the pinnacle of this scientific departure from theology, epitomized in the figure of Charles Darwin, who remains a strong presence in modern controversies about Christianity and science. But for many scientists, the objective of studying the natural world was to glorify God by learning about creation, variously referred to as the second 'Book of Scripture' or 'Book of Nature'.²⁷ Many naturalists responded to Carl Linnæus' famous sexual reading of plants in his *Systema naturæ* (1735) and *Dissertation on the sexes of plants* (1759) by asking how God was involved, rather by than assuming his absence. Supporters of Linnæus like Samuel Goodenough, Bishop of Carlisle, typically modified the sexual language of the classification system to shelter female readers from offence, and not because it implied any particular challenge to God. Where such a challenge was made, it was on the basis that Linnæus' classification system hierarchized creation in a

²⁴ M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 201ff.

²⁵ Michael Marder's work is part of the developing field of critical plant studies that also includes Patrícia Vieira, Monica Gagliano and John Ryan's edited collection, *The Green World: Dialogues with the Vegetal World* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), Jeffrey Nealon's *Plant Theory: Biopower and Vegetable Life* (Stanford University Press, 2015), Stephen Harrod Buhner's *Plant intelligence and the Imaginal Realm* (Bear and Company, 2014), Randy Laist's edited collection, *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies* (Rodopi, 2013), Daniel Chamovitz's *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses* (Oneworld, 2012), Matthew Hall's *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (SUNY series on Religion and the Environment) (State University of New York Press, 2011), and Elaine Miller's *The Vegetative Soul: From Philosophy of Nature to Subjectivity in the Feminine* (State University of New York Press, 2002); as well as Marder's *The Philosopher's Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium* (Columbia University Press, 2014), *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (Columbia University Press, 2013), and his co-written book with Luce Irigaray, *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

²⁶ Andreas Speer, 'The Discovery of Nature: The Contribution of the Chartrians to Twelfth-Century Attempts to Found a *Scientia Naturalis*', *Traditio*, 52 (1997), p. 138; and see David Albertson, 'Without Nature?' in David Albertson and Cabell King, ed., *Without Nature? A New Condition for Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

²⁷ Susannah Gibson, *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: How Eighteenth Century Science Disrupted the Natural Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 24.

manner inconsistent with a benevolent God. The Unitarian physician Thomas Percival, for example, saw in creation ‘the greatest possible sum of happiness’ driven by a ‘life force’ by which plants can feel sensation and move towards light and push down into the earth (phenomena later known as heliotropism and geotropism).²⁸ This vitalist account of plants, wherein they shared the ‘spirit’ or spark that distinguished living things from other matter, differed from materialism, in which all existence is understood as energy. Both theories were compatible with the idea of the ‘vegetable soul’, a life principle that allows for growth, regeneration and nutrition and serves as a ‘point of axis’, around which plant life revolves.²⁹

The vegetable or plant soul was initially considered the lowest kind of soul, relegated under the sensitive soul of animals and the rational soul of human beings. By the late eighteenth century, however, this hierarchy was interrogated by vitalist readings of plant sensation, which in turn triggered generic questions about the ‘natural’ order of the world and God’s overseeing of it.³⁰ William Paley’s watchmaker analogy, advanced in his popular *Natural Theology* (1802), implied a benevolent designer who had created objects perfectly adapted for purpose within a balanced and harmonious order. Many scientists agreed with Paley’s formula: Coleridge’s friend Humphry Davy stated that the objective of chemical philosophy is the application of ‘natural substances to new uses, for increasing the comforts and enjoyments of man, and the demonstration of the order, harmony, and intelligent design of the system of the earth’.³¹ Design arguments were also compatible with natural theology to the extent that both promoted a sociability based on affective bonds between things, an ‘organic assurance of connection’ that made sense as rhetoric, if not always as reason.³² The validity of such arguments was tested as much by Darwinian theories of biological creation, mutation and natural selection as by discoveries like oxidation, thermodynamics, light waves and electrons. The idea of evolution itself had long been established by Erasmus Darwin in *The Loves of the Plants* (1789), republished as *The Botanic Garden*, and *The Temple of Nature* (1803), the initial title of which—*The Origin of Society*—foreshadows his grandson’s later *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Like Linnæus, Darwin was denounced for ascribing emotion, intention, pleasure and sexuality to plants, claims that implied a connection between humans and vegetal life that embraced all of creation. As Ashton Nichols argues, Darwin’s vision of the world as a connected biotic realm was held together by a ‘sum’ happiness guaranteed by the relationships between things: life composes, decomposes and

²⁸ Thomas Percival, ‘Speculations on the perceptive power of vegetables’, *Memoirs of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester*, 2 (1785), 114–30, in Gibson, *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral*, p. 161.

²⁹ Franz Julius Ferdinand Meyen, *A Report on the Progress of Vegetable Physiology during the year 1837*, trans. William Francis (London: R. & J. E. Taylor, 1839), p. 3.

³⁰ Gibson, *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral*, p. 178.

³¹ Humphrey Davy, *Elements of Chemical Philosophy*, Part 1, Vol 1 (Philadelphia: Bradford and Inskeep, 1812), p. 1.

³² Colin Jager, *The Book of God: Secularization and Design in the Romantic Era* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), pp. 59, 81.

recomposes.³³ As the basic materials of life move through this shared process, they are joined in what Darwin called a ‘system of morality and benevolence, as all creatures thus became related to each other’.³⁴ This connectedness served to collapse hierarchy, not only between plants and animals, but also life and non-life, forming the basis of a post-Copernican ‘peaceable kingdom’ in which organic unity modified the Great Chain of Being.³⁵

The idea of an organic unity connecting all things is associated more with Romanticism than late eighteenth-century botany, and Coleridge’s ‘one Life’ and Wordsworth’s ‘motion and a spirit’ are related to a contemporary correspondence between literature and natural history established by Darwin.³⁶ With Thomas Malthus, Jean Baptiste de Lamarck, J. C. Prichard, W. C. Wells and Charles Lyell, Darwin underlines the period’s fascination with the idea of a constantly transforming ecosystem that culminated in Charles Darwin’s concept of mutable species.³⁷ Modern critics tend to overplay the extent to which this idea of a transforming ecosystem impacted on religious belief. Certainly Coleridge noted that Erasmus Darwin’s poetry possessed only ‘the *epidermis* of poetry but not the *cutis*; the *cortex* without the *liber*, *laburnum*, *lignum*, or *medulla*’; or, in Rebecca Stott’s paraphrase, ‘all shell and no nut, all bark and no wood’.³⁸ For Coleridge Darwinism amounted to the same as pantheism—the one equating to an evolutionary materialist atheism; the other with an assertion of God with world he associated with Spinoza. He understood Trinitarianism as the ‘only possible Escape from one or the other of the two former’.³⁹ The geologist James Hutton, whose work Coleridge read, had already written about the subject of variation among animals in 1797 and the vision of nature in dynamic motion is there in Hegel, Schelling and even Wordsworth’s joyful nature of change.⁴⁰ Change is not a problem for Coleridge: the issue is change without a final cause. If Darwinism implied being without meaning beyond the material, and Spinoza claimed that ‘nature has no particular goal in view; and final causes are mere human figments’, Coleridge thought that ‘The World was made for the Gospel’ and ‘Christianity is the final

³³ Ashton Nichols, ‘The Loves of Plants and Animals: Romantic Science and the Pleasure of Nature’, in James McKusick, ed., *Romanticism and Ecology, Romantic Circles Praxis Volume* (November 2001), <https://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/ecology/nichols/nichols.html>.

³⁴ Erasmus Darwin, ‘The Temple of Nature’ (1803), ed. Martin Priestman, *Romantic Circles Electronic Edition*, October 2006, Canto IV, p. 164, http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/darwin_temple/

³⁵ Edward Hicks, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1826), National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

³⁶ S. T. Coleridge, ‘The Eolian Harp’ (1795), in Coleridge, ed., *Poetical Works*, vol. I, pp. 100-102 (l. 26); William Wordsworth, ‘Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey’ (1798), in Stephen Gill, ed., *William Wordsworth: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 134 (l. 101).

³⁷ See Ashton Nichols’ ‘Romantic Natural History: A survey of relationships between literary works and natural history in the century before Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859)’, <http://blogs.dickinson.edu/romnat/>; Charles Darwin, letter to J. D. Hooker, January, 1844, in Frederick Burkhardt, ed., *Charles Darwin’s Letters: A Selection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 81.

³⁸ S. T. Coleridge, *Anima Poetae: From the Unpublished Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* [1805] (London: William Heinemann, 1895), p. 280; and see Rebecca Stott, *Darwin and the Barnacle: The Story of One Tiny Creature and History’s Most Spectacular Scientific Breakthrough* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2003), p. 135.

³⁹ S. T. Coleridge, *Marginalia*, ed. George Whalley and H. J. Jackson, 6 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980-2001), vol. I, p. 679.

⁴⁰ Coleridge, *Opus Maximum*, clxxvii.

Cause of the World . . . the Idea of the Redemption of the World must needs form the best central Reservoir for all our knowledges, physical or personal'.⁴¹ Without such faith in a final cause for existence, life seems unbearable, as his poem 'Human Life: On the Denial of Immortality' (1815) reveals:

If dead, we cease to be; if total gloom
 Swallow up life's brief flash for aye, we fare
 As summer-gusts, of sudden birth and doom,
 Whose sound and motion not alone declare,
 But are their whole of being! . . .
 Surplus of Nature's dread activity . . .
 Blank accident! nothing's anomaly!
 If rootless thus, thus substanceless thy state
(ll. 1-5, 10, 14-15)⁴²

This is not a poem that suggests that 'positive negation' is 'the best that life offers' nor a 'breakdown of spirit' that fears meaninglessness. Rather the poem's 'Ifs' imply that contradictions are employed to take the reader through despair, 'till by negations we stand on the edge of a new faculty'.⁴³ This new faculty rejects the academic speculations of 'Human Life' for a consciousness of being driven by love and, Coleridge the plant thinker might note, rootedness (rather than 'rootless'). As he wrote to Thomas Poole: 'Love so deep & so domesticated with the whole Being, as mine was to you, can never cease to be'.⁴⁴

This unceasing, ever-moving reading of human life reverses the logic of the poem—being's being is not contradictory because it is stabilised by love and there is a considerable difference between being sad or glad, seeking or shunning. The 'one life' was not a collapse of differences but a way of unifying them in connectedness and regeneration in God: 'every Thing has a Life of it's [sic] own, & that we are all *one Life* . . . In God they move & live & *have* their Being—not *had*, as the cold System of Newtonian Theology represents / but *have*'.⁴⁵ As Seamus Perry argues, the 'One Life offers a new doctrine of atonement: not the gloomy superstition of the Established Church, but atonement as an imaginative act', the immanence of God in his creation.⁴⁶ For Perry, the one life constitutes 'a redemptive inclusiveness' in which things recognize themselves in their unification with other things, as exemplified in Coleridge's 'Religious Musings' (1794):

⁴¹ Coleridge, letter to Edward Coleridge, July 15, 1825, in Griggs, ed., *Collected Letters*, vol. V, p. 481.

⁴² Coleridge, 'Human Life: On the Denial of Immortality' (1815), in Coleridge, ed., *Poetical Works*, vol. I, pp. 425-426.

⁴³ Coburn et al, ed., *Notebooks*, vol. III, p. 3575.

⁴⁴ Coleridge, letter to Thomas Poole, February 13, 1813, in Griggs, ed., *Collected Letters*, vol. III, p. 435. Edward Kessler, Coleridge's Metaphors of Being p. 71

⁴⁵ Coleridge, letter to William Sotheby, September 13, 1802, in Griggs, ed., *Collected Letters*, vol. II, pp. 864, 866.

⁴⁶ Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), p. 74.

The whole one Self! Self, that no alien knows!
 Self, far diffused as Fancy's wing can travel!
 Self, spreading still! Oblivious of its own,
 Yet all of all possessing! This is Faith!
 This the Messiah's destined victory! (ll. 154-8)⁴⁷

The Rime also explores this unity, revealing existence as eternally self-rejoicing and self-loving without sliding into a pantheist love of nature or idealizing logic in which nature reserves and protected landscapes are artificially cordoned off from other living things. An emergency mode of thinking about the environment that seeks to separate the human from it only perpetuates the very apocalyptic thinking that has produced the modern environmental crisis. *The Rime* gestures towards a counter to such thinking in the form of 'plant thinking', a term I borrow from the philosopher, Michael Marder. Coleridge is a plant thinker, not because he explicitly called for a focus on plants in the way contemporary botanists did, nor because he consistently expresses sympathy with nature. As Graham Davidson argues, Coleridge saw Nature as 'a wary wily long-breathed old Witch . . . sure to get the better of Lady MIND in the long run'.⁴⁸ But even as this observation 'bemoans the disempowerment of the mind', as Perry puts it, it also opens the question of how to regain control by thinking the unity of mind and nature, invisible and visible, in a meditation that is itself plant-like.⁴⁹ While Coleridge would not have sought to model human consciousness on plants, then, he does invoke a thinking of creation already apparent in the way plants live, move and experience the world.

Marder suggests that while plants do not consciously 'experience' the world in which they grow, this does not mean they are not thinking and doing in philosophical and ethical ways. For Marder, vegetal life is deeply connected to human life: humans eat, drink, wear, sleep on, read with and live inside various forms of plant life, and this connection allows humans to conceptualise new ways of thinking about and relating to all forms of life. He argues that by engaging with plants, 'brush[ing] upon the edges of their being', humans can 'grow past the fictitious shells of *our* identity and *our* existential ontology'. By this he means that humans have an ontology or a being that is based on an inhabitation of the world 'as a collection of natural resources and raw materials' freely available for use. Humans impose meaning and hierarchy on these resources, assuming a sense of self 'superior' to the subjectivity of other species. But plants are not defective animals, nor passive beings: while 'vegetate' has now come to mean to languish, the 'vegetable soul' was once perceived as vital and vehicular: Marvell's 'vegetable love' is an overt example.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Coleridge, *Religious Musings* (1794-6), in Coleridge, ed., *Poetical Works*, vol. I, pp. 108-125.

⁴⁸ Graham Davidson, *Coleridge's Career* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), p. 119; Coleridge, letter to James Gillman, October 10, 1825, in Griggs, ed., *Collected Letters*, vol. V, p. 497.

⁴⁹ Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division*, p. 38.

⁵⁰ Michael Marder, 'Plant Soul: The Elusive Meanings of Vegetative Life', *Environmental Philosophy*, 8. 1 (2011), 83-99 (85); Andrew Marvell, 'To His Coy Mistress', in *Miscellaneous Poems*, ed. Mary Marvell (1681), l. 11.

The plant moves in a way appropriate to its being and so is ensouled, even if that movement is usually too subtle for human cognition to register. One might protest that plants lack the inwardness that would allow for purpose or any kind of higher capacity beyond nourishment and propagation and the function humans impose on them as, for example, the lungs of the planet. But the body of a plant does not exist for any other being because plants draw no line between self and other, merging with the environment and so offering a direct challenge to assumptions about closed identity. Plants, Marder writes, are ‘passages, the outlets, or the media for the other’ and ‘let the other pass through them without detracting from the other’s alterity’. Trees use fungi as a communication system to warn neighbours of aphid attacks; slime mould can navigate along previously taken pathways; and the act of water droplets, insects, shadows or the wind touching a leaf causes an elaborate response inside of plants that constitutes awareness if not consciousness.⁵¹

Plants are not always models of hospitality: poison ivy, toxic sap, stinging nettles, sharp thorns, spines, carnivorous plants like the Venus flytrap and vampiric plants like mistletoe all defend their plant life in a way that undermines the idea of a sacred commons. But their exuberance and connectedness is evident: plant-life makes up slightly more than 99% of the entire biosphere, and organic life breathes and thrives because of it. To recognise the existence of a plant soul might help foster different relations to the environment and acknowledge a non-conscious thinking independent from instinctual adaptation and formal intelligence. By non-conscious thinking Marder acknowledges a thinking without the head, or thinking without thinking, in which the plant acts, but in a way entirely immersed within its milieu. It has intention and memory and even, as Schelling claimed in 1799, a ‘sensibility’ through which it articulates its soul-life, striving towards the sun and exploring deep into the soil.⁵² As many botanists observe, roots are active foragers and move through the soil by avoiding the direction of nearby roots so not to get in the way: its intentionality, then, might not be conscious, but it does pertain to vitality and inventiveness. To think like a plant, then, means to think non-oppositionally and with one’s environment, where thoughts or discernments are not stored in the interiority of consciousness but circulate on the surface and keep close to the phenomenal appearance of things. Plant thinking preserves the unthinkable and so builds a bridge to those elements of life humans have no way to articulate or pin down, elements that Coleridge explores in *The Rime*.

The plant references in *The Rime* are themselves hidden and immersed within the milieu of the poem. They either appear as imagistic tropes, and so avoid attention (‘The bride hath paced into the hall, / Red as a rose is she’, ll.

⁵¹ See Dominic Pettman, ‘The Noble Cabbage: Michael Marder’s “Plant-Thinking”’, *LARB*, July 28, 2013, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-noble-cabbage-michael-marders-plant-thinking/>; and Olivier Van Aken, et al, ‘Mitochondrial and chloroplast stress responses are modulated in distinct touch and chemical inhibition phases in *Arabidopsis*’, *Plant Physiology*, 171. 1 (2016).

⁵² F. W. J. Schelling, *First Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. K. Peterson (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), p. 146.

33-34); or give way to a sense of the dramatic that overwhelms the image ('And every tongue, through utter drought, / Was withered at the root', l. 135). But there are plants everywhere in the poem, 'the leafy month of June' (l. 370); 'the sleeping woods' (l. 371); the 'meadow-gale of spring' (l. 457); the spirit's 'honey-dew' voice (l. 407); the hermit singing 'in the wood' (l. 511); the moss that 'wholly hides' the 'rotted old oak-stump' (ll. 521-522); the 'ivy-tod' 'heavy with snow' (l. 535); and the 'garden-bower' (l. 593) that frames the wedding. The ocean itself is tellingly green, its hue produced by marine plants and plant-animal hybrids, like the green sea slug that looks like a leaf and produces chlorophyll independently of the algae it feeds on.⁵³ Coleridge's green sea is apparent throughout the poem: the 'mast-high' ice that floats past after the storm in part 1 is 'green as emerald' (ll. 51-54); the water, 'like a witch's oils', burns 'green, and blue and white' in part two (l. 130); the water-snakes, having swum about in the shadow of the ship, have a 'Blue, glossy green, and velvet black' shimmer in part four (l. 279); and the mariner, stared at by the stony eyes of the dead men, recalls 'I viewed the ocean green' (l. 443) in part six.

Despite the ocean's prevalence in the poem, however, it cannot help the mariner. While there is not a drop to drink because of the sea's saltiness, Coleridge's notes emphasise that his lines about this unappetizing water marks the place in the poem wherein 'the albatross begins to be avenged'. The water is more than simply undrinkable—it is oily and burned and rotten:

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

About, about, in reel and rout
The death-fires danced at night;
The water, like a witch's oils,
Burnt green, and blue and white. (ll. 123-130)

It is hard not to read these lines in relation to environmental catastrophe. Anne Crow's edition of the poem relates these lines to stories Coleridge heard about Sargasso Sea, an area in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean surrounded by ocean currents. Any plants or rubbish that drift into its surrounding currents eventually end up in the Sargasso Sea, and the movement of the currents stop them from drifting out again. Sargassum weed provides a habitat for many creatures usually found near coasts, such as crabs and other creatures which might look like slimy things with legs. Seaweed, algae and crustaceans all merge together, without individual subjectivities or selves, in one being—a slimy thing with legs. But the ocean's burnt sheen cannot but remind us of oil spills, which indeed burn like death-fires poisoning everything around them;

⁵³The *Elysia chlorotica*, or eastern emerald elysia, is a species of green sea slug that lives off sunlight like a plant.

while the 'reel and rout' of its currents foreshadow the plastic and chemical pollution of the five gyres.⁵⁴ Coleridge's green sea is full of plant-life, then, but one that also indicates the damage of an unthinking human presence.

From this at once polluted and eerie atmosphere rises the demon Spirit Coleridge associated with Josephus and Psellus in his notes on the poem. Flavius Josephus was a Romano-Jewish historian who compared the material corruptibility of the body to the immortality of the soul; and Michael Psellus was a Byzantine philosopher who wrote on the spiritual and metamorphosing nature of daemons. Significantly, Psellus classifies daemons according to the element in which they live and Coleridge's demon spirit prefaces the deathly ghost ship that disrupts the climate and 'comes onward without wind or tide'. The great chain of being has been thrown into complete disarray here and the mariner and his crew appear as vulnerable as any species, more so, perhaps, because of a curse inflicted on them for concurring with the mariner's crime: 'For all averred, I had killed the bird / That made the breeze to blow' (ll. 93-94). The sailors are able to see the connection between the albatross and the climate—the bird is blamed for making the breeze blow, and bringing fog and mist—but they are unable to understand their own relation to the bird and environment. Only when the mariner prays and is so freed to bless the water snakes do the dead men rise and act like plants, their voices heliotropically directed towards the sun:

Sweet sounds rose slowly through their mouths,
And from their bodies passed.

Around, around, flew each sweet sound,
Then darted to the Sun;
Slowly the sounds came back again,
Now mixed, now one by one. (ll. 352-357)

This image of reunification connects the sailors back to each other and also to the things around them: the sky-lark begins to sing, which in turn sounds first like a flute, then like an angel (ll. 364-365). The 'pleasant noise' that accompanies the resurrected ship also triggers the memory of a 'leafy month' in June, wherein the brook sings to the sleeping woods (ll. 368-372). This pastoral moment, however, is not sustained by the poem. It is immediately jolted by the intervention of the 'Two voices', both of whom direct the mariner away from a deluded fantasy of nature, and back to the ocean around him: in Timothy Morton's formula, the mariner is invited to reject 'Nature' for 'the ecological thought'. When he does, his fears are balanced by the wind,

⁵⁴ The five gyres are the largest systems of rotating ocean currents that gather uncommonly high concentrations of plastics and chemical sludge. The primary source of marine debris is the illegal dumping of rubbish and manufacturing products. Unlike organic debris, which biodegrades, plastic only photodegrades into smaller and smaller pieces until it is digested by aquatic organisms, and so enters the food chain: a different kind of connectivity between all things! See *The 5 Gyres Institute*, www.5gyres.org.

which feels to him 'like a welcoming' (l. 459), and the sailor's spirits are not only drawn to the sun, but become light through the angels that take away their corpses (495), now merged with an environment at once oceanic and heavenly. The mariner's observer, the Hermit, is also assimilated into a landscape that connects the woods, the sea, and the spiritual: 'This Hermit good lives in that wood / Which slopes down to the sea. / . . . He kneels at morn, and noon, and eve' (ll. 514-515, 519). An amateur botanist, the holy man prays on a cushion of moss that covers an old oak-stump (ll. 519-522), and perceives the ship's sails like 'Brown skeletons of leaves' (l. 533), an image that again brings together the human with the plant.⁵⁵ Despite many negative critical accounts of this image, it does unite the worlds of human, spirit, landscape and seascape: the skeletal sails only suggest 'decay and malignancy' outside the sacramental commons with which the poem ends. Within a commons inclusive of 'all things great and small', even moss and algae, the reader can glimpse a 'Trinitarian intra-divine flow of life embodied by the relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.'⁵⁶ The mariner may be condemned to repeat his horrible story over and over, like many modern observers do who seek to resist a mechanized and instrumental vision of the universe by continually asserting environmental disaster and exploitation. That story is undoubtedly uncomfortable, and environmentalists are reluctant to render it more fantastical by adding the spirit into a biosphere already packed with material species. Coleridge shows, however, that Christianity might enable what Wills Jenkins calls 'a register of response at once adequate to the slow terror of ecological degradation . . . desperately needed by contemporary environmental consciousness'.⁵⁷ In recognizing a shared consciousness in all things, *The Rime* foretells the urgency of such a response by grounding it in an ecological Logos that thinks all species together.

⁵⁵ See Lane Cooper, 'The "Forest Hermit" in Coleridge and Wordsworth' (1909), in Harold Bloom and Janyce Marson, ed., *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Bloom's Classic Critical Views (New York: Infobase, 2009), pp. 79-87 (p. 84).

⁵⁶ L. D. Berkoben, *Coleridge's Decline as a Poet* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), p. 82.

⁵⁷ Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace*, p. 229.