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# Reading the Animal: An Ecocritical Approach to the Discourse of the Sublime in “The Ancient Mariner”

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**I**N A LETTER to William Sotheby, Coleridge struck the following remarkable note of writerly advice:

[N]ever to see or describe any interesting appearance in nature, without connecting it by dim analogies with the moral world, proves faintness of Impression. Nature has her proper interest; & he will know what it is, who believes & feels, that every Thing has a Life of it's own, & that we are all *one Life*. (CL II 864)

This seminal passage in Coleridge's philosophical thinking invites diverse interpretations from a variety of critical perspectives.<sup>2</sup> Read from an ecocritical vantage point, it phrases the tension between the independent value of every organism (biodiversity) and its mutually dependent relationship with the rest of the earth's ecosystem (biological unity).<sup>3</sup> A very similar dialectic surfaced in the pamphlets of early nineteenth-century animal rights philosophers.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, these sought to gainsay the biblical instrumentalist view of nature by claiming that animals did have their own interests, regardless of humanity's dietary or financial needs. On the other hand, new developments in anatomy amply demonstrated the physical and psychological likenesses between humans and animals, showing how different species were capable of experiencing similar sensations. Interestingly, the dictum that “each Thing has a Life of it's own, & yet they are all one Life” also maps out the moral and epistemological trajectory followed by the Ancient Mariner in Coleridge's *Rime* (CL II 866). The Mariner's alienating encounter with an indifferent, even antagonistic natural world paradoxically gives him a profound insight into the kinship between human and non-human animals. This dynamic between

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<sup>2</sup> For an interesting metafictional interpretation of Coleridge's comment, see Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division*, pp. 188-200.

<sup>3</sup> This “double vision,” according to Karl Kroeber, *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind*. New York: Columbia UP, 1994, p.43, is a hallmark of the Romantics' philosophy of nature: “On the one hand there was what may be called the macroscopic vision of nature as an indifferent mechanism of cosmic physical forces. On the other hand, there was the microscopic view of the natural world as the wonderfully contingent play of minutely particularized biochemical processes.” Wordsworth, for one, Onno Oerlemans (35) argues, “may be seen to include an awareness of the indifference, hostility, and inimicalness of material reality to an idea of the ‘one life.’”

<sup>4</sup> Along with other emancipatory pressure groups, the animal rights movement received important aesthetic and legislative backing from a motley collection of Romantic poets, including William Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron. The Romantic-period writers and legislators, however, did not initiate the animal rights debate. For a comprehensive survey of its history, see Richard D. Ryder's *Animal Revolution: Changing Attitudes Towards Speciesism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989) or two anthologies edited by Kerry S. Walters and Lisa Portmess, *Ethical Vegetarianism: From Pythagoras to Peter Singer* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999) and *Religious Vegetarianism: From Hesiod to the Dalai Lama* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999).

independence and interdependence, or between multiplicity and oneness, I will argue in this article, is energised by the erratic yet highly political play of attraction and repulsion underpinning the sublime.

### I

The vast and rapidly expanding corpus of scholarship on the sublime is characterised by a growing tendency to construe the transient but overwhelming confrontation between the self and the other as a primarily moral experience, a tug-of-war in which power relations are negotiated and finally reversed or consolidated.<sup>5</sup> The moot point remains, however, whether the elusive and rather precarious semantics of the sublime can eventually crystallise into a stable system of morality. Can there be, in other words, something like an ethical or ecological sublime? And more importantly, can there be an ecological sublime in a poem that, according to Anna Barbauld at least, lacks a moral anchor?<sup>6</sup>

Immanuel Kant's sublime displays a tripartite structure, including a preliminary phase in which "the mind is in a determinate relation to the object," a sublime stage temporarily unbalancing the equilibrium between the self and other, and ultimately an uplifting synthesis that aggrandises the ego.<sup>7</sup> According to Kant, that final phase "reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of [nature] and a superiority over nature on which is grounded a self-preservation of quite another kind than that which can be threatened and endangered by nature outside us."<sup>8</sup> Needless to say, Kant's model presents the surest route to environmental exploitation and pollution, not to conservation.

Reminiscent of Kant (*ibid.* 129), who paradoxically conceives of the sublime as a "negative pleasure," Edmund Burke (109) believes it to occasion a "delightful horror." "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger," he writes in his *Philosophical Inquiry* (1759), "that is to say, 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" (*ibid.* 47). The sublime's residual effects, including "admiration, reverence, and respect," nevertheless mitigate this uniformly negative sensation and turn it into a much more morally ambiguous experience (*ibid.* 80). Particularly apposite to "The

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Barbara Claire Freeman's *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> According to Coleridge (IT I 272-73) himself, however, the poem "had too much moral." "In a work of such pure imagination," he writes, "I ought not to have stopped to give reasons for things, or inculcate humanity to brutes" (273 n.7). Moreover, Coleridge's comment in his letter to William Sotheby precisely argues against the moralisation of nature's sublimity. For an argument for and against an ecological sublime, see Tester (*op. cit.* note 19) pp. 29-31; and Midgley, Mary, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*. 1979, rev. ed. London: Routledge, 2002, p. 346-50 respectively. For an in-depth analysis of the ecological sublime in American fiction, see Christopher Hitt's "Toward an Ecological Sublime," *New Literary History* 30 (1999): 603-23.

<sup>7</sup> Weiskel, Thomas. *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976, pp.23-24.

<sup>8</sup> Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. 1790. Ed. Paul Guyer. Trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000, p.145.

<sup>9</sup> Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful: With an Introductory Discourse Concerning Taste, and Several Other Additions*. 1759. Basil: Tourneisen, 1792, p. 10.

Ancient Mariner” and to the ecological sublime in general is the emphasis Burke puts on the animal’s potential to induce a mind-expanding sensation in its human observer. The Burkean system, it appears, does not hinge on the animal’s species or physique but on its degree of domestication and social relationship to mankind. Animals that form part of the human sphere will rarely elicit a sublime traffic, he contends, because their otherness and awe-inspiring potential are co-opted to satisfy human needs. Only the wild animal, free from humanity’s stranglehold, is capable of evoking the terror and contrariety necessary for producing a collision between antipodes. “[I]n the light of an useful beast,” for instance, “the horse has nothing of the sublime”; when “the useful character of the horse entirely disappears,” on the other hand, “the terrible and the sublime blaze out together” (*ibid.* 95-96).

The Coleridgean sublime straddles the Kantian and the Burkean system. In theory, Coleridge subscribes to Kant’s scheme, in which the mind (or the Secondary Imagination in Coleridge’s case) successfully bridges the Cartesian gap between human consciousness and nature, eventually restoring the chaotic, phenomenal world to order (BL I 304). This synthesis, though, is not always attained in practice. When he enters a gothic cathedral, for example, Coleridge’s sense of self disintegrates, leading him to exclaim in a true, Burkean fashion: “I am filled with devotion and with awe; I am lost to the actualities that surround me, and my whole being expands into the infinite; earth and air, nature and art, all swell up into eternity, and the only sensible expression left is, ‘That I am nothing!’” (L II 79). In the face of nature’s uncanniness, the Ancient Mariner suffers a similar collapse of self, which reveals the animal’s autonomous existence and temporarily displaces man from his central position in the cosmos. This deflation of the Mariner’s ego is to some extent counteracted by the synthetic power of the Coleridgean sublime to unify all organisms and subsume them under the “one Life”: “Where neither whole nor parts, but unity, as boundless or endless allness – the Sublime”.<sup>10</sup>

## II

Still reluctant to exchange their old faith for the new empirical truths, the vast majority of people in eighteenth-century Britain continued to swear by Christianity’s anthropocentric taxonomy, which set man thoroughly apart from other animals and endowed him with a quasi-divine status. Coleridge was no exception in this regard.<sup>11</sup> Even though he maintained that everything has a Life of its own (including minerals and vegetables), Coleridge’s natural order remained profoundly hierarchical, with man, “the firmest, the truest, because

<sup>10</sup> Wittreich, J.A. *The Romantics on Milton: Formal Essays and Critical Asides*. Cleveland: Case Western Reserve UP, 1970, p252-3.

<sup>11</sup> For brief discussions on Coleridge’s anthropocentrism, see Oerlemans, Onno. *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2002, p. 134-35; and Kenyon-Jones, Christine. *Kindred Brutes: Animals in Romantic-Period Writing*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001, p. 78.

the most individual,” occupying the highest echelon.<sup>12</sup> All the same, the biblical view that humans and animals were wholly different beings was slightly tempered by the ancient assumption that non-human nature represented an analogy or metonymy of the human condition (Thomas 75).<sup>13</sup> Many natural processes and species of animals, according to this “rustic ignorance” (Wordsworth, *Excursion* IV 615), symbolised divinatory signs or omens, from which humanity could extract useful information with respect to its present and future: nature was thus supposed to speak to man, who merely had to translate its patois.<sup>14</sup>

Coleridge strongly rejected this “*narcissine* part of our nature,” which involved “the not me becoming great and good by spreading thro’ and combining with all things, but all becoming me and to me by the phantom-feeling of their being concentrated *in me* & only valuable as associated in the symbolical sense [...] with our own Symbol” (CN II 2495). His opinion on this moralisation of the natural world was not always that consistent. Very much like his poetry, Coleridge’s philosophical thinking has all the earmarks of a work in progress, something that was, to quote Paul Valéry, “never finished, only abandoned.” A case in point of his open-ended *modus operandi*, “The Raven” (1798) narrates how a raven’s mate and nestlings are killed after a woodman chopped down their tree, using it to build a ship. Strikingly reminiscent of “The Ancient Mariner,” Nature avenges this crime and the ship’s crew perishes in a storm. In 1817 Coleridge added an overly didactic corrective: “We must not think so; but forget and forgive, / And what Heaven gives life to, we’ll still let it live” (PW 145 42.1.1-42.2.2). In an additional note he nevertheless dismissed these lines:

Added thro’ cowardly fear of the Goody! What a Hollow, where the Heart of Faith ought to be, does it not betray? this alarm concerning Christian morality, that will not permit even a Raven to be a Raven, nor a Fox a Fox, but demands conventicular justice to be inflicted on their unchristian conduct, or at least an antidote to be annexed.<sup>15</sup>

As in his letter to William Sotheby, Coleridge here criticises the anthropomorphic conception of nature that demotes the animal to a signifier of the human condition and, in so doing, appropriates its Life of its own.

It is against this self-serving domestication and exploitation of the Other that Coleridge also reacts in “The Ancient Mariner.” At the beginning of the poem, nature appears to be polluted with numerous pathetic fallacies and

<sup>12</sup> Hints towards the Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life. Ed. S. B. Watson. Farnborough: Gregg International, 1970, p. 85-86.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas, Keith. *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800*. New York: Penguin, 1984, p. 75.

<sup>14</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Routledge, 2002, pp.35-6

<sup>15</sup> PW 1.1 320, note to lines 41-2.

ominous signs.<sup>16</sup> The albatross, likewise, finds itself humanised in various ways. When the crew offers the bird human food (“It ate the food it ne’er had eat” [PW 161 67]), it establishes an aberrant dependence and entices the animal into the human sphere of influence. This dietary acculturation is complemented by an assimilation of a more fundamental kind. Humanity, Neil Evernden suggests, homogenises the natural world at large by subjugating its ineffable character to the standards of human knowledge and by capturing it in a conceptual category or “a word–cage.”<sup>17</sup> In a remarkable passage in *The Prelude* (1805), Wordsworth similarly criticises the epistemology of the natural sciences for inscribing theoretical distinctions onto nature as empirical facts:

to thee  
 Science appears but what in truth she is,  
 Not as our glory and our absolute boast,  
 But as a succedaneum, and a prop  
 To our infirmity. No officious slave  
 Art thou of that false secondary power  
 By which we multiply distinctions, then  
 Deem that our puny boundaries are things  
 That we perceive, and not that we have made. (2: 211-220)

Finally, the albatross’s singularity and independence are entirely eclipsed by its totemic status as “a bird of good omen,” signifying a divine intention to be recognised and deciphered by the ship’s crew (Coleridge’s gloss, lines 71-74). This “discernment of meaning or purpose in Nature” once more amounts to “a *conceptual pollution* of reality” that humanises the animal and thus neutralises its otherness (Evernden 50).

### III

The Mariner’s fabulous, yet stable and coherent view of the natural world is subverted when the ship’s crew fails to decipher the albatross’s encrypted meaning. At first, the Mariner’s shipmates believe the bird to symbolise a good omen, which benevolently causes “the breeze to blow” (96). After the Mariner has killed the albatross and the fog has dissipated, though, they think the animal signified a bad omen, responsible for the “fog and mist” hampering their voyage (102). To complicate matters further, the wind subsequently subsides as well, a clear signal that either the albatross paradoxically symbolised both a good and a bad omen, or that it simply encompassed no supernatural meaning or purpose whatsoever. Either way, nature displays an error message, a blank screen: the ancient system of hermeneutics has crashed. At that very

<sup>16</sup> Oerlemans (87) goes so far as to label the poem “a tour de force indulgence of the so-called pathetic fallacy.” However, this personification of nature does not make Coleridge’s characters look “frail and small,” as Oerlemans claims. Quite the opposite, I believe, the pathetic fallacies at the beginning of the poem are symptomatic of a completely humanised, almost Disneyfied world, where the Other does simply not exist.

<sup>17</sup> Evernden, Neil. *The Social Creation of Nature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992, p.89

moment, when stripped of anthropomorphic projection, the natural world appears to be meaningless and mute, no longer speaking to man or providing him with nautical advice. “The silence of the sea” following the albatross’s death is ultimately also a reticence, a silence of nature (110).

Up to the end of the sixteenth century, Michel Foucault indicates in *The Order of Things*, the natural world was conceived of as a complex fabric of analogies and resemblances: “the earth echoing the sky, faces seeing themselves reflected in the stars, and plants holding within their stems the secrets that were of use to man.” (*ibid.* 19) One type of these resemblances, the “play of *sympathies*,” Foucault notes, “has the dangerous power of *assimilating*, of rendering things identical to one another, [...] of causing their individuality to disappear.” (*ibid.* 26) These assimilating effects of Sympathy are counterbalanced, however, by the play of “Antipathy,” which retains the autonomy of things and highlights their individual differences (*ibid.* 27). It is this play of Antipathy that manifests itself at this point. The Mariner looks at the world, expecting to see himself and his thoughts reflected in it, but much to his horror he is confronted with, to pick up a phrase from Coleridge’s notes on his trip to Malta, a “barren sea” where “no related Mind” can be spotted (CN II 2086). The result is an almost Beckettian alienation from both nature and himself:

Alone, alone, all, all alone,  
Alone on a wide wide sea!  
And never a saint took pity on  
My soul in agony. (232-35)

This desolate seascape plays a crucial role in the Mariner’s change of mindset. Coleridge now depicts nature as an antipathetic desert of water, a place so sterile and utterly impractical that it cannot but destabilise the Mariner’s anthropocentric and instrumentalist worldview. This change of setting finds an interesting biblical parallel in Genesis. In reaction to Eve’s transgression, God creates “thorns and thistles,” fitting symbols of a natural world that no longer merely exists for humanity’s benefit: nature, or at least parts of it, now becomes useless, indifferent, and even antagonistic to human consciousness (Gen. 3: 18). A similar scenery change also transpires in “The Wanderings of Cain,” a poem on which Coleridge had started only a few months before. Following Cain’s crime, the natural world, once a domesticated and utilitarian garden, is defaced and transformed into a lifeless desert, populated by only serpents and vultures: “The scene around was desolate; [...] the bare rocks faced each other, and left a long and wide interval of thin white sand. [...] The pointed and shattered summits of the ridges of the rocks made a rude mimicry of human concerns” (PW 160 59-61, 68-70).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The desert motif also appears in Wordsworth’s “Hart-Leap Well,” in which the phallogocentric abuse of woman and nature culminates into an apocalypse of sorts. As in “The Ancient Mariner,” the main character’s crime finally brings about a new, moral insight:

Both Genesis and “The Ancient Mariner” explore the causal relationship between alienation and knowledge. Coleridge’s narrative proves here to sound strikingly in tune with the socio-historical context. The eighteenth-century estrangement from nature, ensuing from the progressive urbanisation of British society, Keith Thomas (*op. cit.* 89) points out, resulted in a more detached and scientific outlook onto the natural world. Instead of classifying animals in terms of their usefulness for mankind (as Aristotle and numerous others had done ever since), naturalists now adopted a more disinterested research method and studied nature as a self-regulating system. “The Ancient Mariner,” in the light of this, presents itself as a coming-of-age story of modern epistemology, allegorising how the urbanite’s alienation from the animal led to a more scientific and less fabulous understanding of the universe. In the Mariner’s case, however, that alienation is not fuelled by the urbanisation but by the sublime’s *Verfremdungseffekt*.

But what is the nature of this sublime that shakes the Mariner’s beliefs beyond repair and will eventually give rise to a new moral code? Surely, the Burkean terror cannot reside in the albatross’s physique, which manifestly fails to summon up the menace and intimidating pre-eminence evoked by, say, Burke’s tiger or rhinoceros. Less physical but therefore no less consequential, it is an epistemological dread, what Vicki Hearne, drawing on Stanley Cavell, describes as the “skeptical terror about the independent existence of other minds.”<sup>19</sup> The horror results from the idea, Hearne explains, that both man and animal “know for sure about the other [...] that each is a creature with an independent existence, an independent consciousness and thus the ability to think and take action in a way that may not be welcome (meaningful or creature-enhancing) to the other.” (*ibid.* 108-9) Whereas the Kantian sublime “reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of [nature],” its ecological counterpart, quite the reverse, reveals a capacity for judging nature as independent of us, as something that ultimately withstands domestication and conceptualisation (*ibid.* 145). Because it exceeds the threshold of human knowledge and thereby foregrounds the confines and deficiencies of that knowledge, the animal is thought of as a threat, as an exasperating crux that renders man’s *logos* painfully inadequate. That pain or idea of pain – as unsettling and humbling, yet perhaps not as corporeal as in Burke’s model – lies at the core of the ecological sublime.

#### IV

“Poor Man! he is not made for this world.” Oh! herein they utter a prophecy of universal fulfilment; for man must either rise or sink. (BL I 242)

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One lesson, Shepherd, let us two divide,  
 Taught both by what she shows, and what conceals;  
 Never to blend our pleasure or our pride  
 With sorrow of the meanest thing that feels. (176-80).

<sup>19</sup> Hearne, Vicki. *Adam’s Task: Calling Animals by Name*. New York: Akadine, 2000, p. 233

The very deep did rot: O Christ!  
 That ever this should be!  
 Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs  
 Upon the slimy sea. (123-26)

When first confronted with the water-snakes, the Mariner feels overpowered by a fear too horrifying to be rationally controlled: this is terror without delight, a uniformly negative experience far removed from Kant's satisfying synthesis between self and other. As Coleridge wrote in *The Friend* (F I 367), the sublime "absolutely suspend[s] the power of comparison, and [...] utterly absorb[s] the mind's self-consciousness in its total attention to the object working upon it." Along the lines of Kant's model, this impasse can only be broken through painstaking introspection, through an imaginative *tour de force* that elevates the Mariner above the natural world and that prevents him from sinking in it. This difference between sinking and rising, I will show, essentially echoes the Coleridgean distinction between the Fancy and the Imagination.

Besides its sweeping impact on epistemology, the sublime also represents an aesthetic category entailing a particular perception of the natural world. The Mariner's close encounter with the water-snakes, then, will impel him to drastically revise his aesthetic appreciation of nature. At first, the Mariner construed the world through the Fancy, which according to Coleridge, "has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites. The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space" (BL I 305). Tapping into his old, falsified *episteme*, the Mariner's Fancy, not surprisingly, proves inadequate to defuse or domesticate nature's sublime excess.

In the second encounter with the water-snakes, on the other hand, the selfsame animals appear to simulate an extremely colour-coordinated kind of submarine pyrotechnics sending the Mariner into raptures. What has changed is not the spectacle but the man watching it, and more specifically, the way he watches it. Nature, now, is viewed through the Secondary Imagination, which "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify" (BL I 304). In addition to its synthesising qualities, which will allow the Mariner to "becom[e] great and good by spreading thro' and combining with all things" (CN II 2495), the Secondary Imagination also animates the lifeless world, finally giving the Mariner an insight "into the Life of things": "It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead" (BL I 304). That Coleridge regarded serpents as symbols of the imagination, "with undulating folds, for ever varying and for ever flowing into itself, – circular, and without beginning or end" as Hazlitt paraphrased Coleridge, adds

an interesting dimension to the argument.<sup>20</sup> Incidentally, also notice how Hazlitt's phraseology may well apply to describe the fluctuant dynamics of the sublime.

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

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. (277-87)

Though the Mariner's exhilaration seems to suggest otherwise, this pleasure taken in what Iris Murdoch calls "the sheer alien pointless independent existence of animals" remains a negative pleasure, a delightful horror.<sup>21</sup> When he ecstatically realises that "no tongue / their beauty might declare," the Mariner, in point of fact, admits that the animal has escaped from its word-cage and that nature has triumphed over semantics. The pleasure taken in that triumph may well be a token of the Mariner's esteem for the animal's beauty, yet it is also peculiarly redolent of a masochistic gratification, a sense of enjoyment derived from one's imperfections, as though the Mariner truly delights in the disintegration of language and reason. That masochism, though, is far from gratuitous. Precisely by aestheticising and wallowing in his dissolution in nature, the Mariner discovers in himself a way to come to terms with his fading importance and to protect his ego from being entirely washed away by nature's flux. The Mariner, it seems, can only preserve his autonomy by rejoicing in its very breakdown, or as Coleridge put it: "Strange & generous Self, that can only be such a Self, by a compleat divesting of all that men call Self" (SWF 1: 215). In this way, the aesthetic of the sublime operates as a prophylactic by which the Mariner can reassert his sovereignty as an independent human being with a Life of his own. That human self-preservation, a keyword in Kant's model, may well be one of the main drives behind the aesthetic of the sublime is the unsettling conclusion also reached by Terry Eagleton:

The aesthetic is in this sense a kind of psychical defence mechanism by which the mind, threatened with an overload of pain, converts the

<sup>20</sup> Hazlitt, William. *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, after the Edition of A.R. Waller and Arnold Glover*. Ed. P.P. Howe. 21 vols. London: Dent, 1930-34, vol 18, p. 371.

<sup>21</sup> Murdoch, Iris. *The Sovereignty of Good*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, p. 85

cause of its agony into innocuous illusion. The sublime is therefore the most typical of all aesthetic moods, allowing us as it does to contemplate hostile objects with absolute equanimity, serene in the knowledge that they can no longer harm us. [...] the subject cannot be entirely negated as long as it still delights, even if what it takes pleasure in is the process of its own dissolution. The aesthetic condition thus presents an unsurmountable paradox.<sup>22</sup>



Coleridge's concluding moral lesson that "He prayeth well, who loveth well / Both man and bird and beast" suffuses his poem with an air of fabulous didacticism and simplicity (612-13). If one should trust the tale rather than the teller, though, the moral of "The Ancient Mariner" seems to reverberate precisely those dissonances that also complicate a straightforward appreciation of the workings of the sublime. When the Mariner cries out "A spring of love gushed from my heart," for instance, one should note that Love is a very morally ambivalent emotion in the Coleridgean ethic. It is a "union of opposites, [...] a completion of each in the other," suggestive of both the dialectic of the sublime and the Foucauldian interplay between Sympathy and Antipathy: "Sympathy constitutes Friendship – but in Love there is a sort of Antipathy or opposing Passion. Each strives to be the other, and both together make up a one whole" (L II 428; TT II 270).

The Mariner's insight into the antipathetic otherness of the animal paradoxically motivates him to sympathise with it, an argument also affirmed by Keith Tester, who writes that while "[i]n the old days, animals were treated differently because they were the same; now they are treated the same because they are different."<sup>23</sup> This Sympathy no longer entails a one-way assimilation of the animal by that "narcissine part of our nature" to which Coleridge referred. Moving in the opposite direction now, it is a "me becoming great and good by spreading thro' and combining with all things," what Deleuze and Guattari somewhat opaquely describe as a becoming-animal, a becoming-other of the human.<sup>24</sup> In Coleridge, remarkably, this becoming-other ("combining with all things") turns out to be a way of self-preservation, of safeguarding one's autonomy ("to become great and good") in the face of nature. The politics of the sublime in "The Ancient Mariner" thus appear not to be green but strikingly Darwinian.

<sup>22</sup> Eagleton, Terry. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, pp.163-4.

<sup>23</sup> Tester, Keith. *Animals and Society: The Humanity of Animal Rights*. London: Routledge, 1991, p.54.

<sup>24</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Athlone, 1988. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *becoming* is, even considered by postmodern standards, pretty abstruse. They define it *ex negativo* as follows: "Becoming is certainly not imitating, or identifying with something; neither is it regressing-progressing; neither is it corresponding, establishing corresponding relations; neither is it producing, producing a filiation or producing through filiation" (239). What is more interesting is that, like all other *becomings*, *becoming-animal* boils down to a *becoming-molecular*. *Molecular* refers to the stream or flow of meaning and being; that is, meaning and being as constantly changing processes, not as steady, transcendental, or "molar" ontologies. This *becoming-molecular* or *becoming-animal*, for that matter, challenges "the great molar powers" (233) and accordingly disrupts the fixed, arborescent hierarchies of Western thought (the species taxonomy in this case). Clearly, it is also closely related to the vibrant mechanisms of the sublime and the Coleridgean Imagination.