Human and Non-Human: Coleridge, Peter Larkin and Eco-Poetry

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THE WORDS "HUMAN," "HUMANIZE," AND "HUMANITY" occur frequently in Coleridge's prose in praise of civilization, language, beneficent emotions, and beneficent political systems—distinctly human constructions that keep humans from being "bestializ'd" or "bething'd." Their frequency indicates Coleridge's mission to defend the human from late eighteenth and early nineteenth century pressures to turn humans into things or numbers, to measure them, to diminish their uniqueness, or to absorb them into the flow of Spinozistic nature.[1] Two hundred years after Coleridge's writings in defense of "humanness" (a word he coined), humans no longer need defending. Their dominion over the supposedly "less sentient" creatures (Genesis 1, 26) has led to worldwide ravage. Robinson Jeffers called on humans to devolve into their original substances, to:

> unhumanize our views a little, and become confident
> As the rock and ocean that we were made from. ("Carmel Point")

Czeslaw Milosz hoped that humanity as a "destructive plasm" would be wiped off the earth. [2] Where first-wave environmentalists urged human beings to live "holistically,"[3] second-wave environmentalists seek a radical post-human ethics based on the shared embeddedness of all matter.[4] In this era the word "human" is no longer an honorific.[5]

Along with the industrial mechanisms that have produced "the choke at the

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1 Anya Taylor, *Coleridge's Defense of the Human* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University, 1986). Anya Taylor, ed. *Coleridge's Writings: On Humanity*, in *Coleridge's Writings*, ed. John Beer (Basingstoke: Macmillan/St. Martin's Press, 1994). On the early erosion of the human-animal divide already seen in Montaigne, see Bryan Alkemeyer, "Remembering the Elephant: Animal Reason before the Eighteenth Century," *PMLA* 132-5 (20017), 1149-1165. For Coleridge's turn against pantheism, see the monumental work of Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1969).

2 Czeslaw Milosz, *A Book of Luminous Things: An International Anthology of Poetry* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1996), p. 34.

3 James C. McKusick, Introduction and "Coleridge and the Economy of Nature," *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 1-52, authoritatively surveys the origins of American ecological concerns in English Romantic poetry and science writing. Amanda Jo Goldstein, "Reluctant Ecology in Blake and Arendt…", *TWC* 44, 3 (Summer 2015), p. 145, speaks of Goethe's "tender empiricism," "an ethos alive at once to the fragility of the object and to the vulnerability of the knower at the scene of the experimental trial."

4 For first and second wave ecocriticism see Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 1-30. Buell asks, "Can the nature-preservation emphasis of first-wave ecocriticism be reconciled with second-wave concerns of issues of environmental justice?"

5 Peter Remien, "Oeconomy and Ecology in Early Modern England," *PMLA* 132-5 (2017), pp. 1117-1133, explains that "the critical movement away from ecological harmony and sustainability derives largely from Daniel Botkin's revisionist ecology" (note 2). Louise Westling 2012, 127, cited in Alexa Weik von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2017), p. 10, states that "all beings exist intertwined and in constant interaction with the flesh of the world around them."

environmental sink,"[6] human language is destructive of the environment by its very core of subject / object dichotomy. Purging language of its built-in assumptions about power and passivity began with Ernest Fenollosa whose ideograms brought language close to the things it depicted, and now swells into the non-human poetry of Eduardo Kac and Amy Catanzano.[7] Kac creates structures made from organic and inorganic materials to simulate nature's artistry in non-verbal "poems." Catanzana incorporates light and physics into her verbal processes in an effort to "crack and vaporize the medium, leaving behind a replica of the route." For such "non-human" poets, nature itself has artistic agency, even its own non-verbal "language."

Working likewise to undermine human dominance, but subverting it from inside of language, the contemporary poet Peter Larkin creates a language that bypasses the human in order to convey the givenness of nature's life.[8] We see this diminution of the human in the opening long poem "Hooks in Case of Trees" in Larkin's 2017 volume, *Introgression Latewood (Shelter Partials*).[9] Using words as pencil drawings Larkin creates a panorama on the page; verbal brush strokes delineate stanzas like clumps of trees on a landscape, also designing a musical score for a continuum of sounds. Larkin's word "haptics" indicates that touch is involved as well as optics and music; from the Greek *haptein*, "to fasten," *haptics* encompasses the kinds of touching by which human and non human animals and plants can communicate.[10] Larkin allows the fields and groves to create their own connections with one another as hooks and fasteners, "beckoning" and "leanings," in a "wood wide web."[11]

The theme of "Hooks" is announced in an epigraph from Coleridge's notebook entry CN I 1462: "some dark-green with forest Trees / The most striking, & frequent, Form of Bay, is the Hook." [12] In these notes from the Scottish walking tour with William and Dorothy Wordsworth in August 1803, Coleridge observes "the superficies of Objects" with "energetic precision" (as

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6 Peter Larkin, *Terrain Seed Scarcity: Poems from a Decade* (Applecross, Western Australia: Salt Publishing, 2001), p. 3.

7 These poets and others were featured in session 90, "Nonhuman Poetics: New Boundaries in American Experimental Poetry," at the Modern Language Association meeting, Philadelphia, 2017.

8 G.C. Waldrep, "'Go Quotiently': A Review of Peter Larkin, *Leaves of the Field*," *Kenyon Review*, Spring, 2012, reprinted in *The Wordsworth Circle* 43, 3 (Summer 2012), 186-7, declares that Larkin's "stunning collection [ ]completely uproots and re-establishes nature writing in English in one blow"; that "Larkin's vision is deeply, even compassionately (if this is possible) inhuman; he comes closest in apprehending the natural world on its own terms, yet somehow in human language." Waldrep writes that "the reader is eavesdropping on something that is not exactly *in*human but is, perhaps, *a*-human."

9 (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2017), p.8.

10 See Peter Wohlleben and Jane Billinghurst, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from a Secret World* (Vancouver/Berkeley: Greystone Books, 2016). Vin Nardizzi, *Shakespeare's Theatres and England's Trees (*Toronto: Univ. Toronto Press, 2017) looks at timber as Renaissance matter and metaphor.

11 PBS radio had a recent discussion of "the Wood Wide Web" of communication in the ground and atmosphere.

12 Coburn notes that, compared to Dorothy Wordsworth in her journal for this Scottish trip, Coleridge "loses himself, at any rate in what he writes down, in the shapes and colours and movement of the landscape, trying with more energetic precision to articulate them."

Kathleen Coburn calls it). Mona Modiano sees that he "practices the very doctrine he preaches against" in Wordsworth's poetry.

Having observed canopies of larch, sycamore, yew, birches, hazels and oak in entries CN I 1452 and 1460, Coleridge sketches in pencil and dark ink the parallel curves of "melted-silver-white Sunshine" on "tongues of land"; he notes that the shapes have "the same bounding, plunging, vaulting Line of Descent."[13]

With comparable vaultings, Larkin sees permutations of the hook in lines of verse that occur in parallel curves, bends, and "diminutive beckoning"; "connectivities limbed with short / (unsought) retrievals." Clumps of words in cubes or rectangles reveal new kinds of connections such as "hasps," "pleating," "grip," and "the vertical curdle of hook." Blocks of words transition one to another by delicate hooks that permit visible, auditory, or tactile affinities. Such transitions create a leaping dance from hook to pluck, as trees lengthen, recurve, snag, stalled "in the abating crest." Motion accelerates velocity, "flinging *with* the palpable, flanging a tree of nothing but bushed curves bold to its hook." As in a line dance or a trapeze act, or Coleridge's velocity-loving "Line of Descent," movement from stanza to stanza swings from hook to hook, hand to hand, or ring to ring, "pendent lengthening among lift."[14] Even the poet enters the swing: "I am caught by the refuels, the uptwills of a tree's secondary hook" (11).

This rare appearance of a human "I" entering the pattern of sylvan curves and elongations vanishes quickly, allowing all action to stir from tree to tree, "pent but unspent / in ricochet banding around trim" (14). The poet steps back, letting the natural world act on its own, fracturing the hierarchical grammar that fosters human action and destructiveness. While flooding the poem with vocabulary from human disciplines like Botany and Engineering, Larkin mutes his authorial presence. The last burst of short lines in the poem suggests human beings seeking but missing communication. Perhaps the jettisoned human reader wishes to be included: "the plight of / hooklessness/ would be home/ losing height, / flatline missing / the joinal flinch / of dedication / thornless in / hook but shank / piercing tree" (22-23). Does the human observer desire to participate in what Coleridge called "the One Life within us and abroad"? Does he discover that he has been thrust out of the oneness, "flatlined," too late for union? Might this wish hook up with the final line of Coleridge's next entry: —"I have no dear Heart that loves my Verses—I never hear them in snatches from a beloved Voice" ?

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[13] Raimonda Modiano sees the descriptions of trees on the Scottish hike as part of the rivalry with Wordsworth over "the superficies of Objects," *Coleridge and the Concept of Nature* (Tallahassee: Florida State Univ. Press, 1985), pp.32-5: "What captures our attention is that within the same notebook entry Coleridge practises the very doctrine he preaches against, being engaged in an activity which involves intense, some might say obsessive, poring over `the superficies of Objects.'" She notes "a number of revealing links between Coleridge's deteriorating friendship with Wordsworth and his increasing alienation from nature."

[14] See Anya Taylor, "Coleridge and the Pleasures of Verse," *SiR* 40,4 (Winter, 2001), 547-569, pp. 555-6, for Coleridge's insistence on "velocity" in poetic lines.

Through numerous volumes Larkin's experiment involves recording the texture of nature with little trace of himself, an absence of a human self who is nevertheless paradoxically present in a body that is walking, looking, recording.[15] Larkin's poems, in verse and prose, pack together accumulations of nouns and noun phrases, forming one of the most varied conglomerations in contemporary writing. Like a wedge trenched out of earth packed with roots, shells, stones, filaments, each verbal clump compresses words from different substances, times, processes, expanding the range of areas of discourse:

> Filigree patent, then neuro-
> Arborial, a leaf bulk
> Fed urban flanges, tangents
> Enfilade the casuals
> Of woodland striving ("Urban Woods," 65).[16]

Larkin's poems progress by accretion and apposition, often hooked together by commas. They enrich the vocabulary of place and thing, and thus serve through new or forgotten words "to re-enchant the land—to sing it back into being, and to sing one's being back into it," as Robert Macfarlane says of the retrieval of forgotten words for landscapes on the verge of being destroyed.[17] Larkin "re-enchants" angles of branch, textures of woven trunks, and curves of terrain, but avoids declarations, which would enforce a human order through the decisiveness that accompanies a verb structure, whether indicative, subjunctive, or imperative. Human agency in the form of the active verb is effaced. The difficulty in Larkin's writing is how to register the natural world through the senses, how to move in it with a body that is part of nature, see it and name its parts, while at the same time hiding the human activity. [18]

Larkin's intention to withdraw his humanity from the nature he inhabits derives from many aspects of his intellectual endeavors: his activity as a fell walker; his critical reading of Coleridge and Wordsworth who both labor to balance human consciousness with the things in the world; his participation in contemporary poetics, for instance, the poems of Lisa Robertson, whose line—"For a moment, all these figures have been replaced by foliage"—is one of the epigraphs of Larkin's volume *Field of Leaves.* Robertson's "figures" are human figures, and at the same time figures of speech, or figurative language,

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[15] Walking and looking show the entangled physical and mental life of the embodied consciousness in nature. Several studies have examined this conjoined physical and ocular stimulation. See Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein, eds, *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2017).

[16] "Urban Woods," *Leaves of Field* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2006), p. 65.

[17] *Landmarks* (Penguin, 2016), p. 22. McFarlane reviews Peter Larkin's poetry and appreciates his sentence structure, "hovering between the active and the passive," which "can infuse inanimate objects with sentience and so evoke a sense of reciprocal perception between human and non-human" (34).

[18] Walking is central for Larkin as it was for Coleridge. See David E. Cooper, "Meditation on the Move," in Peter Cheyne, ed. *Coleridge and Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2017), on rambling to induce a "rhythmic calm, and an `unselfing' whereby, as Coleridge puts it, `individuality is lost' when immersed in the environments through which one walks."

hushed in the shadowy verdure, vanishing, as Larkin does. He frequently opens his volumes with epigraphs from contemporary eco-poetry that divests human reach.[19] In both poetry and prose Larkin suppresses judgments, feelings, and syntheses to avoid human "dominance and environmental oppression." In *Promising Losses* Larkin sees similarities between Coleridge and Merleau-Ponty in that both "examine [ ] human consciousness, a mind always acting to place its meaning *in* a world." [20] Larkin shows that the mind's meaning is not necessarily the trees' meaning. The question of who has the right to confer meaning or insist that there is meaning is central to the impulse behind eco-poetry.

Larkin's poem "Hooks in Case of Trees" converses with the beginning of Coleridge's poem "Frost at Midnight" (lines 8-23) as well as with Coleridge's notebook entry 1452. In these 15 lines of "Frost at Midnight" human consciousness chafes against nature. The things of nature are silent; the human voice is restive. The poet's consciousness is so keen and intense that the silence interrupts it; the speaker complains that "the strange / and extreme silentness," "disturbs / And vexes meditation" (8-10)." "Vex" is a fierce word for disturbing and even tormenting, a surprisingly strong reaction to a silentness that most of us would yearn for.[21] The absence of response makes the speaker repeat himself to fill up the silence with his acts of naming: "calm", "calm," "silent," "silent," "flutter," "flutter," "Sea, hill, and wood, / This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood." The narrator seems to be calling out, Where is everyone?

Is the repetition of the sequence of natural "things" a nervous stuttering to fill the void or a deliberate and impatient assertion of the human right to name? In the doubling of the words "flutter" and "quiver" the poet emphasizes his own anxiety. His consciousness is quivering and fluttering, vexed by the surrounding inanition, unable to find response from "all the numberless goings-on of life, / Inaudible as dreams!" He is cut off, "hookless." He can tell the names of the things outside of him in a general way and reiterate the telling with ever more emphasis, yet he can't concentrate his mind. Even his softly breathing baby seems to be part of a nature that is non-responsive.[22] Pent up, but not acting with the "merciless ravage" of Wordsworth's speaker in "Nutting," Coleridge's speaker is *vexed* that the inert landscape resists his eagerness to find meaning; the landscape's strange and

[19] Epigraph to "Enclosures" (1983), reprinted in Peter Larkin, *Introgression Latewood (Shelter Partials*), p.132.

[20] Peter Larkin, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Promising Losses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 174. Citing Steven Winspur, Larkin states, "it is not the meanings things might have but their sheer existence that can be highlighted by the poetic" (108). Merleau-Ponty, in his Preface to *Phenomenology of Perception* (1946), believes that "the real has to be described, not constructed or formed."

[21] Wordsworth writes too of "redundant energy/ *Vexing* its own creation" (*Prelude* 1, ll. 37-8), as Raimonda Modiano points out (59).

[22] His irritation with this baby is the subject of Anya Taylor, "'A Father's Tale': Coleridge Foretells the Life of Hartley," *SiR* 3o (Spring, 1991), 37-56.

extreme silentness is an almost sullen refusal to cooperate.[23] The thereness of things vexes. Even the owlet cannot rouse a kindred response.

What is the nature of this nervous, irritated consciousness? It is more like a gas than a flame. The narrator feels "dim sympathies" with the gaseous film radiating above the "thin blue flame [that] quivers not" (ll. 12-13). The poet scrupulously distinguishes the flame that "lies on my low-burnt fire" from the gas that "flutters on the grate." His affinity is with a gas that flutters, quivers, flaps, and freaks; the common ground is that both are "unquiet." The "thin blue flame / Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers **not**." The gas over the grate, "sole unquiet thing", flutters or quivers in the surrounding silence like an alert consciousness or an anxious heart. The idling spirit feels the gap between consciousness and the insistently named and renamed generic phenomena: "Sea, hill, and wood," "Sea, and hill, and wood."

In Coleridge's poem the gap between consciousness and the things it interprets resembles the gap between the invisible poet in "Hooks" and the trees that are hooked together in sensitive inter-animation that he is unhooked from. In both poems "all the numberless goings-on of life" take place in the absence of the human whether the human notices or not. In "Hooks" the consciousness pretends not to speak, while in fact repeatedly naming things. In "Frost…" the human words try to impose their interpretations on "the hush of nature" ("Frost," l.17). In both cases the human speaker is "an idling Spirit" seeking "a companionable form." In both cases the human consciousness feels outcast, unhooked, trying to create meaning. In a later revision of "Frost," as David Fairer shows, Coleridge intensifies this "egoistic," "restless search." The idling spirit interprets according to "its own moods,"

every where
Echo or mirror seeking of itself (ll. 20-3).

The increased solipsism of the human consciousness in the 1829 version fractures unity and creates "infinitely receding images." [24] Larkin, by contrast, claims that "poetry can claim and be claimed for an imitation of non-meaning" (*Promising Losses,* 111).

Any hope for the oneness of "man and bird and beast," or for unity among all things that live, is split at the very hearth in "Frost at Midnight" (l. 14). For the fire feeds on peat, coal, or branches of wood, prehistoric trees or a tree cut down to warm the human father and babe, to allow the father to stay up beyond the natural cycle of darkness, composing his poem at the expense of the tree. A person can make use of a thing not vice versa, as Coleridge writes in *The Constitution of Church and State*: "We plant a tree, and we fell it; we

[23] Beth Lau, email 1/15/18, writes that "By working through memories and imagining a healthy environment for his baby, the narrator may come to a less belligerent isolation at poem's close, as "silent" morphs into a more comforting 'quiet'." See Reeve Parker, *Coleridge's Meditative Art* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), p. 135, for an optimistic reading of the narrator's return to "the currents of reciprocity that were so lacking at the beginning" of the poem.

[24] David Fairer, "Postscript," *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle, 1790-1798* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009),pp. 310-311. Fairer prefers the more playful version of 1798.

breed the sheep, and we shear or we kill it; in both cases wholly as means to *our* ends. For trees and animals are *things*. The wood-cutter and the hind are likewise employed as *means*, but on agreement, and that too an agreement of reciprocal advantage, which includes them as well as their employer in the *end*. For they are *persons*".[25] (15-16). The woodcutter agrees to be used as a means by a willed contract; trees and animals have no such options about being used or not being used. In Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" the fire is not a living but a dying thing, turning to ash for human benefit. The gas is the "sole unquiet *thing*" (l. 16), a loaded word for Coleridge and now in reverse with the rise of "Thing Theory."[26]

Where Coleridge's prose had followed Kant in rescuing persons from being treated like things, in some contemporary poetry things now have their own perspectives and their own dignity, evening out the balance of preeminence, or overtaking the human in sensitivities. Things look back at the person, the hierarchy of person and thing upturned. We are displaced, hovering fragilely in the subject-object continuum. We try to find a "perch." The sensitivities of non-human things can be heard stirring in Larkin's intimately entwining branches, but, curiously, no squirrels, foxes, or birds, or even spear grasses appear. In Larkin the equilibrium tips over to feature the revenge of the long-shunned Thing.

As the Thing gains power and casts its other-than-human shade over the poet's observant consciousness, Larkin confesses in private emails to some fear: "Forest has always been partly broken of course (like everything else). The forest you can never quite fully enter remains the reverie—the forest you can never find the edges of the nightmare…". (10/22/17). Eight days later he adds: "My last sentence—ah well I have to remind myself the forest is not always comforting, sooner or later we have our back turned to it when we think we have merely walked away." (10/30/17). As Coleridge himself felt the need to preserve even a slither of a gap between human consciousness and nature, the "rival Magicians, mind and Nature" (*CL* V 496), so even the eco-poet admits to a fear of engulfment. At this moment of dissatisfaction or even fright a yearning for more troubles the "idling spirit." Charles Taylor calls this "aspiration to be more than human" an essential characteristic of the human person.[27] Coleridge describes this gap as an empty space seeking to be filled,[28]

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[25] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, ed. by John Colmer (Princeton: Routledge and Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), 16-17: "all social law and justice [is] grounded on the principle, that a person can never, but by his own fault, become a thing, or, without grievous wrong, be treated as such: and the distinction consisting in this, that a thing may be used altogether and merely as the *means* to an end; but the person must always be included in the *end*: his interest must form a part of the object, a *means* to which, he, by consent, *ie*. by his own act, makes himself."

[26] Anya Taylor, "Persons and Things," *European Romantic Review*, 1,2 (Winter, 1991), for Coleridge's definitions of persons and things in relation to David Hume and Immanuel Kant, slavery, child labor, dependency, property and agency. See Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003), the springboard for contemporary preoccupations with thing theory.

[27] *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), p. 113.

Peter Larkin describes it as a sacred space for wonder, the "surplus" that humans seek to fill. This narrow gap between anxiety and the thereness of things opens a space for the more than human and thus provides another hook between the two poets.

[28] Anya Taylor, "Coleridge's Self-Representations," in Frederick Burwick ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), pp. 121-3.