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Book Section:

Higgins, DM (2016) Stewardship and Plenitude: William Bartram, the Lake Poets, and Romantic Ecology. In: Hutchings, K and Miller, J, (eds.) Transatlantic Literary Ecologies. Routledge, pp. 42-57. ISBN: 9781472450203.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315598352>

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CHAPTER TWO

Stewardship and Plenitude: William Bartram, the Lake Poets, and Romantic Ecology

David Higgins

The idea that human beings should understand themselves as stewards of the environment is likely to be familiar to anyone with an interest in ecology. Mike Hulme suggests that it is common to several religious traditions (148),¹ and it can also often be found in more secular environmentalist texts. Naomi Klein, for example, has recently distinguished between stewardship, “which involves taking but also taking care that regeneration and future life continue” and extractivism: “a nonreciprocal, dominance-based relationship with the earth, one purely of taking” (169). As an ecological concept, however, stewardship clearly has its problems. It might be seen to underpin an assumption of human power over the nonhuman world and therefore paradoxically to endorse the exploitation against which it is meant to guard (Mabey 108-9). This essay will analyse the relationship between the North American natural historian William Bartram and the British Romantic poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in order to explore a similar problem with the idea of environmental stewardship: its imbrication with a discourse of plenitude that imagines the world as an infinitely abundant creation of divine providence.

Bartram’s *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida* (1792) is Wordsworth’s principal source for the depiction of North America in “Ruth” and echoes have also been found in *The Prelude*, *The Excursion*, and *A Guide to the District of the Lakes*. A number of substantial passages from the *Travels* are transcribed in Coleridge’s Gutch notebook; it is explicitly cited in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” and

¹ See, for example, the long list of quotations in ‘A Scriptural Call for Environmental Stewardship’ on the *Christian Ecology* website.

is a significant source for *Osorio*, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” “Christabel,” “Lewti,” and particularly “Kubla Khan.” These connections were extensively documented in the early twentieth century by John Livingstone Lowes and Nathan Bryllion Fagin, and Bartram is occasionally mentioned in more recent literary studies such as Tim Fulford’s *Romantic Indians* and Robin Jarvis’s *Romantic Readers and Transatlantic Travel*.² The last three decades have also seen considerable scholarly interest in Bartram as a natural historian.³ After the American Revolution, the development of the sciences independent of Europe, and particularly “the identification and naming of American species by Americans,” was seen as crucial to the independence of the new republic. Bartram is recognised as a key figure in the emergence of America as “a nation-state with its own scientific community” (Magee 2). Strangely, however, despite the recent critical focus on Romanticism as a transcultural and transatlantic phenomenon, and growing awareness of the significance of Bartram as an ecological writer, there has been no attempt to analyse the relationship between the complex ecologies described in the *Travels* and those represented in the poems that he influenced. Crucial here is the tension between Bartram’s emphasis on the infinite plenitude of the colonial landscape and his representation of animals as complex, feeling entities whose lives have a distinctive value. His book is indeed profoundly ambivalent in form and ideology: rhapsodic descriptions of the sublimity of nature exist alongside lists of scientific classifications, and the discourse of improvement so often associated with colonial travel writing is problematised by what Thomas Hallock has described as Bartram’s “veneration for wilderness” (113).

As Kevin Hutchings has argued, the first phase of Romantic ecocriticism, with its “desire to bracket political and historical realities, including the politics of environmental activism itself” (7) is slowly giving way to an ecocriticism that is more sensitive to the

² Bartram’s influence has been observed in a range of other Romantic texts, by writers including William Lisle Bowles, Thomas Campbell, Felicia Hemans, and Charles Lamb (Fagin).

³ Bartram was also a very talented natural history artist (Magee).

ideological or discursive construction of “nature.” In addition to significant work by Hutchings and Alan Bewell on colonial ecologies, Timothy Morton has critiqued the role of “nature” as an impediment to properly ecological thought. At the same time, recent debates in postcolonial studies have focused on the limitations of discussions of colonialism and global inequality that do not address environmental contexts and consequences (Baucom, Chakrabarty). As a result of these developments, we are well placed to move beyond the emphasis on localism that has been so important to the construction of Romantic ecology by developing a better understanding of its transnational contexts and of its rhetorical and political complexities. Analysing Bartram’s complex impact on Wordsworth and Coleridge complicates pastoral versions of Romantic ecology by drawing attention to the ironies and evasions that characterise how all three writers represent the natural world, and the impossibility of deriving simple moral truths from complex ecological realities. In particular, I will challenge James McKusick’s influential reading of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” in *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* by positioning the poem in relation to Bartram’s contradictory attitudes to colonial hunting.

McKusick’s ground-breaking work on the relationship between British Romanticism and later American environmental writing is certainly not blind to political and social contexts. However, his tendency repeatedly to find a fairly simple environmental ethic in his texts does not always register their complexities, as I will show towards the end of this essay. He is also not entirely successful in his attempt to move away from a linear model of influence and to envisage “the genial flow of conversation and mutual exchange of ideas that commonly occurs within a community of writers” (13). The story that he tells so well in *Green Writing* is in fact one-way: how the “emergence of ecological understanding among the English Romantic poets [...] offered a conceptual and ideological basis for American environmentalism” (11). One of the aims of this essay is to offer something of a reversed

prequel to this narrative by examining how Bartram's ecological understanding was mediated and re-imagined in the work of Wordsworth and Coleridge. This revised history of Romantic ecology, in which Bartram's ideas can be seen to feed into later American environmentalist writing through the British Romantics, supports recent trends in transatlantic studies around the idea that "the transatlantic traffic in ideas moved from west to east as well as east to west, and in circulatory patterns that complicate vectors of transmission" (Manning and Cogliano 6).

Several scholars have emphasised Bartram's ecological credentials. Michael Branch, for example, notes his "appreciation for the wonderful intricacy of natural systems," his ability to celebrate "the fabric of interrelationships [...] in the wilderness", and his "strain of radical nonanthropocentrism" (288). Matthew Wynn Sivils describes how Bartram's "descriptions of biological processes [...] illuminate a living landscape – a landscape ripe with vigorous ecological communities" (57). And Hallock identifies the "deep biocentricism" of the *Travels* (114). There is no doubt that Bartram's natural history contained some original elements, but he was also a product of his time, and the *Travels* evince ways of thinking that run entirely counter to modern ecology. Writing just before the idea of species extinction began to gain wide scientific currency through the work of Cuvier and others, Bartram was working within a well-established tradition of providential natural history that effectively saw the organisation of the natural world as static and its plenitude as infinite (Barrow).⁴ The sense throughout the *Travels* is of a landscape that, despite Bartram's awareness of the history of Native American settlement, is effectively new from a colonial perspective and embodies the beneficence and bounty of God's creation: a landscape that is substantively unchanging and atemporal, and cannot be denuded. Sustainability is therefore not an issue. This emphasis on plenitude is evident even on a cursory reading of the book; but a more

⁴ Bartram's Quakerism gave this providential natural history a particular empiricist and intuitive inflection that differed from that of more deistical natural theologians like William Paley (Clarke).

precise sense of how Bartram achieves this depiction can be gained through an electronic search of the 1792 London edition of the *Travels* in *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*, which reveals the following number of incidences (not including the detailed contents pages): “abundance” (31); “incredible numbers” (9, with one additional use of “unspeakable numbers”); “infinite” (20); “innumerable” (14); “multitude” (10); “plenty” (16); “sublime” (20); “vast” (132). Coleridge’s description of the book as “not a Book of Travels, properly speaking; but a series of poems, chiefly descriptive [...] a *delicious* Book; & like all *delicious* Things, you must take but a *little* of it at a time” (qtd. in Jarvis 32) may not recognise Bartram’s scientific rigour, but it does recognise how he represents North America as an infinite landscape to be consumed by the colonial traveller.⁵ It hardly needs to be stated that the subsequent history of that environment shows this fantasy to have been hugely damaging.

Bartram’s sense of North American environmental plenitude, and therefore the freedom of the traveller to consume as much as he wishes, is complicated by his belief in the moral and affective capacities of animals. He exemplifies the trend by which towards the end of the eighteenth century “animals came to be seen as different in that they exist as independent from humankind, rather than its mere tools or adjuncts; but they were also perceived as similar, in so far as they have the ability to behave, to feel and perhaps to think like human beings” (Kenyon-Jones 2; see also Thomas). Bartram’s Linnaean view of the taxonomic economy of nature (Regis 54) existed alongside a strong Christian sense of the importance of Man’s dutiful stewardship of the Earth: “a glorious apartment of the boundless palace of the sovereign Creator” (viii). The introduction to the *Travels* emphasises how the remarkable range and beauty of the natural world exemplifies the “almighty power, wisdom, and beneficence of the Supreme Creator and Sovereign Lord of the universe” (xvi). As Regis points out, the general movement of the introduction is “towards elevation – the plants

⁵ Kathryn E. Holland Braund has argued that the *Travels* is, among other things, a “gustatory tour.”

Bartram mentions are animal-like; the animals are humanlike; the savages are not savages at all” (48). If, he asks, the “material part” of “animal creation” is so

admirably beautiful, harmonious, and incomprehensible, what must be the intellectual system? that inexpressibly more essential principle, which secretly operates within? that which animates the inimitable machines, which gives them motion, impowers them to act, speak, and perform, this must be divine and immortal? (xvi-xvii; my emphases)

Bartram’s language, here, attempts to give form to the harmonic animating principle that it describes through repeated sounds that gesture towards rhyming poetry. However, working against this harmony is his uncharacteristically confusing syntax and punctuation. The strained rhetorical questions suggest a degree of anxiety about the suggestion that animals have souls; nonetheless, this is what Bartram believes, and in this belief he is going beyond the fairly conventional critique of the Cartesian view of animals as unthinking mechanisms that we see earlier in the introduction.

Bartram’s harmonious view of the natural world did not necessarily cause him to idealise it. Although there are elements of pastoral in the *Travels*, he undertook careful observation of his environments and was well attuned to the violence inherent in ecological communities. In one brilliant set piece, he describes a lagoon in which

young broods of the painted summer teal [...] were frequently surprised by the voracious trout; and he, in turn, as often by the subtle greedy alligator. Behold him rushing forth from the flags and reeds. His enormous body swells. His plaited tail brandished high, floats upon the lake. The waters like a cataract descend from his opening jaws. Clouds of smoke issue from his dilated nostrils. The earth trembles with his thunder. When immediately from the opposite coast of the lagoon, emerges from the deep his rival champion. They

suddenly dart upon each other. The boiling surface of the lake marks their rapid course, and a terrific conflict commences. (116)

Here we view a voracious food chain with the alligator at the top. The alligator here is not only sublime, but apocalyptic; a chthonic force of nature like an earthquake or a volcanic eruption. At this point in the text Bartram is travelling alone, and witnessing the battle leaves him “highly alarmed”; understandably so, as his personal safety is threatened by the large number of alligators who congregate in the lagoon. Potentially, he is reduced to the trophic level of the “teal” or the “trout.” But the mode of the *Travels* is sublime astonishment, rather than Tennysonian horror at “nature, red in tooth and claw”. Bartram described himself as a “vindicator of the benevolent and peaceable disposition of animal creation in general, not only towards mankind, whom they seem to venerate, but always towards one another, except where hunger or the rational and necessary provocations of the sensual appetite interfere” (264). As Sivils notes, he also views “the violence of predation as key to the continuation of the ecological cycles that tend to preserve communities” (66), perhaps adumbrating the modern ecological concept of the trophic cascade, by which predators are seen to play an important role in the sustainability of ecosystems.

As a colonial traveller, Bartram himself participated in violent predation through the hunting required to sustain him and his companions. This caused him some uneasiness due to his belief that individual animals were feeling agents, but this uneasiness was mollified by his sense of the infinite abundance of the American wilderness. In East Florida, Bartram and his companions encounter the “great soft shelled tortoise” (175) and consume a “large and fat” specimen that

I at first apprehended we had made a very extravagant waste of, not being able to consume one half of its flesh, though excellently well cooked: my companions, however, seemed regardless, being in the midst of plenty and variety, at any time

within our reach, and to be obtained with little or no trouble or fatigue on our part; when herds of deer were feeding in the green meadows before us; flocks of turkeys walking in the groves around us, and myriads of fish, of the greatest variety and delicacy, sporting in the crystalline floods before our eyes. (176-7)

The “extravagant waste” of the tortoise’s carcass is nullified by the apparent extravagance of the landscape surrounding them (“extravagant,” perhaps, in Samuel Johnson’s sense of “roving beyond just limits”). If Bartram’s self-consciousness about the “waste” of God’s creation is initially contrasted with his companions’ complacency, the end of the passage suggests that this anxiety is a fleeting one. Using typically rich language, he represents an Edenic space where birds and animals virtually offer themselves up to be consumed; as in Andrew Marvell’s garden or Ben Jonson’s Penshurst, the colonial traveller hardly has to lift a finger. An instrumental and an aesthetic appreciation of the nonhuman coexist fascinatingly in this passage, with the “crystalline” water offering a sort of shop window in which the delicious food can be viewed.

The rich plenitude of the North American landscape, as represented by Bartram, clearly had an impact on the Lake Poets, but not always a positive one. It becomes a dangerously corrupting force in Wordsworth’s poem “Ruth” (1800).⁶ The “Youth from Georgia’s shore,” a white American who is disturbingly difficult to distinguish from a Native American (“from Indian blood you deem him sprung”), woos Ruth with tales of wonders:

He spake of plants divine and strange
That every day their blossoms change,
Ten thousand lovely hues!
With budding, fading, faded flowers

⁶ Fulford (178-82) and Jarvis (143-7) both provide useful discussions of “Ruth” and the *Travels*, and pay particular attention to Wordsworth’s allusion to a well-known scene where Bartram and his companions are titillated by a lush rural scene of “young, innocent Cherokee virgins” (355) gathering strawberries.

They stand the wonder of the bowers
 From morn to evening dews.

He told of the Magnolia, spread
 High as a cloud, high over head!
 The cypress and her spire;
 Of flowers that with one scarlet gleam
 Cover a hundred leagues and seem
 To set the hills on fire.

The Youth of green Savannas spake,
 And many an endless endless lake
 With all its fairy crowds
 Of islands that together lie
 As quietly as spots of sky
 Among the evening cloud. (Wordsworth 193-4)

Wordsworth provides a footnote to “flowers” in the second quoted stanza: “the splendid appearance of these scarlet flowers which are scattered with such profusion over the Hills in the Southern parts of North America is frequently mentioned by Bartram in his Travels” (194). But more significant than the particular details that the poet has gleaned from the book is his reflection of Bartram’s tropes and particularly of his hyperbolic language. North America is magical (“strange,” “wonder,” “fairy”) and profuse (“ten thousand,” “high as a cloud,” “one hundred leagues”).⁷ As in so many colonial representations, this new landscape inverts and confounds European expectations: plants change their blossoms every day; the

⁷ In some later versions of the poem, Wordsworth also refers to the “boundless range” of the flower’s “hues” (193).

hills are apparently in flames; and the lake islands resemble “spots of sky.” The repetition of “endless endless” nicely summarises Bartram’s representation of the infinite productivity of the landscape: an excess of language mirroring the apparent excess of the environment.

The youth imagines Ruth as a “sylvan huntress” who will join him to “drive the flying deer”: a phrase repeated in successive stanzas (Wordsworth 195). This not only registers the rich plenitude of the landscape – its capacity to sustain life – but also its magical or even mythological atmosphere (Latin *silvanae*: goddesses of the woods). After they are married, though, this “dream and vision” (195) quickly collapse, and the youth returns to America without his bride. However, the poem does not present the youth’s tales as fantasy. The problem is that the profusion of the American landscape is all too real:

But, as you have before been told,
This Stripling, sportive gay and bold,
And, with his dancing crest,
So beautiful, through savage lands
Had roam’d about with vagrant bands
Of Indians in the West.

The wind, the tempest roaring high,
The tumult of a tropic sky
Might well be dangerous food
For him, a Youth to whom was given
So much of earth so much of heaven,
And such impetuous blood.

Whatever in those climes he found

Irregular in sight or sound
 Did to his mind impart
 A kindred impulse, seem'd allied
 To his own powers, and justified
 The workings of his heart.

Nor less to feed voluptuous thought,
 The beauteous forms of Nature wrought,
 Fair trees and lovely flowers;
 The breezes their own languor lent,
 The stars had feelings which they sent
 Into those magic bowers. (Wordsworth 195-6)

As Robin Jarvis has noted, Wordsworth emphasises that “the climate and environment of the southern states is at least partially responsible for the youth’s degeneracy” (47). Like the landscape, and the Native Americans with whom he has travelled, the youth is wayward, capricious (“sportive”), and “savage.” The tumultuous climate and “irregular” wonders have fed his mind with “voluptuous thought”; by overloading the senses, North America turns its inhabitants into sensualists. Even the landscape’s more sober “beauteous forms,” the flora described in so much detail by Bartram, threaten the self with a dangerously enchanting “languor.” Rather like Coleridge’s view of the *Travels*, Wordsworth views North America as dangerously “delicious.” By implication, this corrupting richness contrasts with the more rigorous environment of Cumbria, which in *The Prelude* develops the wayward and “savage” imagination of the boy into the more sober contemplations of the adult Wordsworth.

Where Wordsworth departs from Bartram, therefore, is in linking the plenitude of the landscape to luxury and its corrupting effects. It is clear from the *Travels* that Bartram did not

view Native Americans as in any way corrupt, and it is in fact often white colonists who come off worse in his narrative. At times he distinguishes between different Native American groupings, but in general he notes that “as moral men they certainly stand in no need of European civilisation,” for “they are just, honest, liberal and hospitable to strangers; considerate, loving and affectionate to their wives and relations; fond of their children; industrious, frugal, temperate and persevering; charitable and forbearing” (487-8). They may well benefit in some ways from colonisation, and in the introduction Bartram suggests rather unconvincingly that they are “desirous of becoming united with us, in civil and religious society” (xxiii), but they do not need moral improvement. In fact, they are much less corrupt than the “ill, immoral” white people around them, for “they have been able to resist the continual efforts of the complicated host of vices, that have for ages over-run the nations of the old world, and so contaminated their morals” (489). Their capacity to be hospitable to outsiders is crucial for Bartram. At one point, he describes being received with “the most perfect and agreeable hospitality” (348) by a Native American chief and his sons. He encounters “hospitality disinterested, native, undefiled, unmodified by artificial refinements” (349); that is to say, Bartram’s hosts have nothing to gain by offering him sustenance and protection and evince no trickery or guile. This is in contrast with the “dishonesty and violence” (351) that Bartram claims are inflicted by white traders, who are in effect abusing not only the hospitality of Native Americans, but that of the whole rich country in which they find themselves.

Towards the end of this essay, I will argue that the idea of hospitality as problematic and fraught is crucial to an ecocritical reading of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1798) and that the poem needs to be read in conjunction with the *Travels*. In order to get to that point, however, we need to start with another poem strongly influenced by Bartram: “This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison” (1800). Crucial in both poems is the connection between birds

and human observers. In its final verse paragraph, “This Lime-Tree Bower” turns away from the prospect experienced by Coleridge’s “friends” to focus on the bower itself, which has by now become consolatory rather than imprisoning. This shift inward is figured by the image of “the last Rook” flying “homewards,” thus connecting Coleridge to Charles Lamb by being gazed upon by both men:

My gentle-hearted Charles! when the last Rook
 Beat its straight path along the dusky air
 Homewards, I blest it! deeming, its black wing
 (Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light)
 Had cross’d the mighty Orb’s dilated glory
 While thou stood’st gazing; or when all was still,
 Flew creaking* o’er thy head, and had a charm
 For thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom
 No Sound is dissonant which tells of Life. (Coleridge 353-4)

Just as in the “Rime,” the key moment of connection comes through a blessing: a performative utterance that represents an opening out, or a letting go, of selfhood into the environment. This is not simply a matter of seeing the rook, but of hearing it, and the importance of this is apparent from Coleridge’s footnote to “creaking”:

Some months after I had written this line, it gave me pleasure to observe that Bartram had observed the same circumstance of the Savannah Crane. “When these birds move their wings in flight, their strokes are slow, moderate and regular; and even when at a considerable distance or high above us, we plainly hear the quill-feathers, their shafts and webs upon one another creek as the joints or workings of a vessel in a tempestuous sea.” (354)

“Creeking” is onomatopoeic, a form of poetic mimicry that connects Charles and Samuel, the rook to the crane, the poem to Bartram’s *Travels*, and England to North America. To use McKusick’s term for the archaic language of the “Rime,” it forms part of the poem’s harmonious “ecolect” (44). In his editorial remarks on the poem, J. C. C. Mays notes that “Beat its straight path along the dusky air” (353) also echoes an earlier description of the crane in Bartram, which suggests that Coleridge had probably read at least part of the book before composing the poem (354). Although Lowes provides a detailed discussion of Bartram’s influence on Coleridge in *The Road to Xanadu*, he does not recognise the importance of the allusions in “This Lime-Tree Bower,” and neither do more recent critics. Thinking about the footnote in relation to the *Travels* brings the poem into the ecological and colonial contexts that we traditionally associate with Coleridge’s more “exotic” poems. More specifically, it connects “This Lime-Tree Bower” to the “Rime” through its interest in the relationship between a bird and a ship.

Bartram first describes the savannah crane as populating the “green meadows” east of the St. Juan River in Florida. Flying together with “musical clangor,” “they spread their light elastic sail” (the ship image again) and wheel through the air in “squadrons” – “they all rise and fall together as one bird” – before landing on the lakeside and agreeing with other groups where they should “confederate and take possession” (144-5). Later he is able to describe “this stately bird” in more scientific detail when the party’s hunters shoot a specimen (218). This lengthy naturalist’s description directly precedes the passage about the sound of the bird’s wings that Coleridge quotes. After this passage, Bartram notes that the bird “made excellent soup; nevertheless, as long as I can get any other necessary food, I shall prefer their seraphic music in the ethereal skies, and my eyes and understanding gratified in observing their economy and social communities” (219). In a single sentence, he moves from the practical and gustatory, to the spiritual, to the scientific. The cranes feed the hungry colonial

traveller; the music of their wings is angelic and heavenly (“ethereal,” in this context); and the interactions of their “communities” provide intellectual edification for the naturalist. This idea of birds and animals as forming complex social bonds and as capable of negotiation and self-organisation is crucial to the *Travels*. Throughout, Bartram emphasises how they are not simply motivated by the “mere mechanical impulse” of “instinct,” but are active agents exhibiting “premeditation, perseverance, resolution, and consummate artifice” (xviii). (He describes birds specifically as “social and benevolent creatures; intelligent, ingenious, volatile, active beings.”) Furthermore, “their parental and filial affections seem to be as ardent, their sensibility and attachment as active and faithful, as those observed in human nature” (xvii). He exemplifies this point with an account in the book’s introduction of how, when travelling with a hunter in Florida, he witnesses the shooting of a female bear and the agonised reaction of her cub:

not seeming the least moved at the report of our piece, [the cub] approached the dead body, smelled, and pawed it, and appearing in agony, fell to weeping and looking upwards, then towards us, and cried out like a child. Whilst our boat approached very near, the hunter was loading his rifle in order to shoot the survivor [...]. The continual cries of this afflicted child, bereft of its parent, affected me very sensibly; I was moved with compassion, and charging myself as if accessory to what now appeared a cruel murder, endeavoured to prevail on the hunter to save its life, but to no effect! for by habit he had become insensible to compassion towards the brute creation: being now within a few yards of the harmless devoted victim, he fired, and laid it dead upon the body of the dam. (xviii)

What disturbs Bartram most about this event is that the cub expresses its “agony” as he imagines a human would do. The move from similitude (“like a child”) to equivalence (“this

afflicted child”) suggests the traveller’s changed perspective. As a result, the quotidian act of hunting resembles a “cruel murder.” In that moment of “compassion,” Bartram is much closer to the bear cub than he is to his human companion, who is “insensible” through habit. Bartram’s attitude to birds and animals is not based on a lazy or sentimental anthropomorphism, but rather reveals an understanding that the boundaries between humans and animals are blurry and that, if animals are feeling agents, then they can potentially be the victims of a crime, rather than simply resources to be harvested. In addition to the fellow-feeling with the cub, it may be that Bartram’s sense of culpability also derives from the fact that the bear was not shot for food – for “we had plenty and variety of provisions in our bark” – but for “the skin and oil.” This shooting is gratuitous rather than “necessary” predation.

Given Coleridge’s assiduous reading of Bartram in the late 1790s, it is plausible that the naturalist’s ecological concern for animals and birds, including the sense of guilt and complicity expressed in the above passage, informed “The Ancient Mariner.”⁸ We have seen that Bartram also feels uncomfortable about being party to the killing of the savannah crane, which is like the albatross in two important ways. First, it is associated with a ship (through the creaking of its wings); secondly, it is akin to spirits (“seraphic”/ “ethereal”), just as the albatross is imagined as “a Christian Soul” (376) who is “lov’d” by a “spirit” “who ’bideth by himself / In the land of mist and snow” (402). With all this in mind, Mays’s suggestion that the footnote to Bartram in “This Lime-Tree Bower” “deflects attention from the discordant rook” seems to misunderstand the poem’s ending (354). The rook’s apparent discordance is actually emphasised in order to make the point that to those, like Lamb and Coleridge, who comprehend the philosophy of “One Life,” it is fully part of Nature’s harmony: “no Sound is dissonant which tells of Life” (354). The rook’s call, in its own way, is as “seraphic” as the savannah crane’s or the albatross’s and, in their respective texts, some attempt is made to

⁸ Lowes argues that Coleridge had read Bartram as early as 1794-95 (468-71).

acknowledge and value each bird as a nonhuman agent.⁹ As Donna Landry puts it with respect to “This Lime-Tree Bower,”

The poet’s eye follows the rook as a man taking aim with a gun – or a crossbow – would. But instead of bonding through the ejaculation of gunpowder and falling birds, the poet joins with his friend in keeping a bead on the rook’s singular flight against the sun, creaking across the eye of eternity. They are united not in manly rituals of bloodshed but in appreciating the dissonance of the rook’s call. (229)

Just as the rook connects Coleridge to Lamb, the footnote connects the speaker’s local experience of Nether Stowey to Bartram’s colonial experience of the savannah thousands of miles away by emphasising the creaking wings shared by both birds. It is fitting, too, that the connecting metonym is a ship that figuratively crosses the transatlantic gulf between the two experiences. The poem’s awareness of the value of different modes of being, and the metonymic connection made in the footnote, open it up to a transatlantic context, without negating the local and specific. The final clause of Coleridge’s footnote, too, emphasises this context by potentially reminding the reader of the “fair bark” seen in the Bristol Channel by Coleridge’s friends earlier in the poem.

It is tempting to use this account of Bartram’s role in “This Lime-Tree Bower” to support a reading of the “Rime” in terms of the harmonious relationship between humans and the non-human. However, the latter poem is more complicated than such a reading might suggest, and here my argument departs from McKusick’s analysis in *Green Writing*. McKusick connects Coleridge’s ecological consciousness with his organicist approach to language and brilliantly argues that the “Rime” develops a distinctive “ecolect” that “enhances the poem’s ecological themes through its conservation of lexical diversity” (48).

⁹ As critics have noticed, Coleridge’s poem optimistically rewrites Wordsworth’s apparently misanthropic “Lines Left Upon a Seat in a Yew-tree” (1798), which notes that “he, who feels contempt / For any living thing, hath faculties / Which he has never used” (49-50).

However, his reading of the poem's moral is rather more conventional: "by blessing the water-snakes, the Mariner is released from his state of alienation from nature [...] [He] has learned what the Albatross came to teach him: that he must cross the boundaries that divide the natural world, through unmotivated acts of compassion between 'man and bird and beast'" (47). With this claim, McKusick effectively endorses the Mariner's concluding moralisation of his own story, which some other critics, and apparently Coleridge himself, have found overly straightforward and didactic in relation to the grotesque events of the poem (Tee 71-2; Bostetter):

Farewell, farewell! but this I tell

To thee, thou wedding-guest!

He prayeth well who loveth well

Both man and bird and beast.

He prayeth best who loveth best,

All things both great and small:

For the dear God, who loveth us,

He made and loveth all. (418)

It is clear from the *Travels* that Bartram would not have demurred from this connection between love for the natural world and love for the divine, which draws on the idea that human beings are stewards of God's creation. At one point, he addresses the "sovereign Lord," and prays that since humans have been given "dominion over all creatures," we should be "warmed and animated with a due sense of charity" and "perform our duty towards those submitted to our service and protection, and be merciful to them, even as we hope for mercy" (99). Evident here is the unequal power dynamic intrinsic to the idea of stewardship: a "mercy" that is only enabled by human "dominion."

In any case, what we often see in the *Travels* itself are ecological communities brought together not by “mercy,” but by violence. Naturalists from Bartram onwards have rarely seen such communities as operating through “unmotivated acts of compassion” – which is not necessarily to suggest that such compassion is impossible. Bartram’s teal, trout, alligators, and humans form an ecosystem whose component parts are connected by violence within an environment that seems to offer infinite sustainability and plenitude. The problem arises, of course, when one species becomes very successful; the history of human exploration and colonisation has also been a history of large-scale predation, generally with catastrophic ecological consequences. But any reading of Coleridge’s poem as a straightforwardly moralistic account of colonial ecocide misses its concern with the difficulties inherent in encounters between different members of an ecosystem, and particularly between the human and nonhuman. For a start, is the Mariner’s crime his shooting the albatross, or his shooting it gratuitously? Is it possible to make a clear distinction between these two things? Bartram is troubled by colonial hunting because it jars with his sense that birds and animals are in many respects akin to humans – the bear-cub is “an afflicted child” (xviii) – and yet this fact is easily forgotten in face of the “necessary” desire for survival and even the less “necessary” desire for personal gain. Coleridge’s seafarers initially treat the albatross as akin to them by “hail[ing]” it as if it were “a Christian soul” (376), perhaps because it suits them to believe that it presages their escape from the ice and fog. The mariner’s act rejects that sense of fellowship, for less apparent reasons.

However, what matters is not so much why these fictional characters react as they do to the albatross, but what their reactions tell us about the fraughtness of interactions between human and nonhuman. When Coleridge added the marginal gloss in 1817, he emphasised that the issue is *hospitality*: the bird “was received with great joy and hospitality” (377), before the “ancient Mariner inhospitably killeth the pious bird of good omen” (379). The adverb

“inhospitably” may seem somewhat out of place to a modern reader; however, it gets right to the heart of the poem. Above all, as Bartram implies in his portrayal of Native Americans, the process of hospitality concerns our treatment of strangers and our recognition of kinship with them. And yet, as Jacques Derrida has argued, hospitality is inherently troubled: “it as though the laws (plural) of hospitality, in marking limits, powers, rights, and duties, consisted in challenging and transgressing *the law* of hospitality, the one that would command that the new arrival be offered an unconditional welcome” (77). Or, to put it another way, the distinction between host and guest that is necessary to the process of hospitality threatens to undermine the unconditionality of the process. The host, theoretically at least, has the power to renew or discard the power that the hospitality supposedly abrogates.. Such paradoxes have a particular charge when considered in relation to human-animal interactions. Perhaps the problem with the sailors’ apparently unconditional welcome of the albatross is that the condition of this welcome is that its otherness be forgotten so that it can be placed within a narrative of providential escape from danger. In that respect, the Mariner’s act of violence also involves a recognition: albatrosses are not Christians, nor are they human, and any ethic that tries to pass over the problem of difference is likely to fail. This may be what Timothy Morton is implying when he terms animals “strange strangers”: “One task of the ecological thought is to figure out how to love the inhuman: not just the nonhuman (that’s easier), but the radically strange, dangerous, even ‘evil’” (92). The implication of his argument seems to be that the first step in this figuring is to recognise the inhumanity of animals, as well as the inhumanity in ourselves.

From this perspective, he offers some insightful remarks on the “Rime:” “The moral of *The Ancient Mariner* can’t possibly be not to shoot albatrosses. The moral is about the traumatic encounter between strange strangers” (46). I agree entirely that a straightforwardly “green” moral does no justice whatsoever to the poem’s richness and complexity, and that the

poem's ethical framework is inherently fraught and traumatic. However, even Morton goes on effectively to endorse the simple ethic promoted by the mariner to the wedding guest, albeit in a more oblique fashion than McKusick: "The ecological thought needs to develop an ethical attitude we might call 'coexistentialism'. The Mariner hails the albatross, then the sailors 'hullo' it like a hunting dog, then the Mariner shoots it like prey. There is a descent in this progression" (47). This idea of "a descent" actually endorses the simplistic moral to which Morton is earlier so resistant. Perhaps the most disturbing thing about the poem is that the shooting of the albatross may be the logical outcome of its original welcome. By "hail[ing]" the albatross "in God's name" as if it were "a Christian soul" (376), the sailors are – in an Althusserian sense – seeking to interpellate it into a form of providential ideology.¹⁰ Such an interpellation itself might be seen as a form of violence, and this essay has considered how dangerous providential assumptions about infinite plenitude can be in a colonial environment. The crew's false assumption of kinship actually makes it *easier* for the mariner to shoot the albatross; through the act of "hailing," its individual strangeness is no longer acknowledged, and therefore it becomes a disposable part of the infinitely rich providential web of the universe. A "Romantic ecology" that hinges on the pious claim that "he prayeth best who loveth best" (418) is inadequate, not only in that it simplifies complex and ambivalent literature, but also because it is not necessarily a helpful way of addressing problems of sustainability. A properly robust ecology must divest itself of any notion of loving Christian stewardship, which is too much imbricated within a dangerous discourse of infinite plenitude, and face up to ecological dissonance, violence, and lack, as well as more harmonious connections.

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¹⁰ Althusser discusses how, through the process of interpellation or hailing, ideology transforms individuals into subjects and thereby propagates itself (1355-57).

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