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**THE SYMBIOCENE IN “ODE TO THE WEST WIND”:
READING ROMANTIC POETRY THROUGH AN ECOCRITICAL LENS**

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Introduction

Ecocriticism is a field in the study of literature where texts are analysed through the prism of ecology. Its advent was a response to the devastating destruction of the earth, or as Glenn A. Albrecht calls it, “tierracide” (2019: 11). The early 1990s gave a clarion call of global warming posing the biggest *irreversible* threat to life on Earth. The rapid increase in the temperatures now had a terrifying name and promised an even more disturbing future. Hence, it is no surprise that the first book to address this problem was draped in themes of grief and lamentation. Jonathan Bate’s *Romantic Ecology* (1991) focused on the widening divide between the past and the present Nature by shifting the focus away from anthropocentric concerns. Bate’s work allowed new engagements with the non-human Nature.

The primary concern of the early eco-theorists was to link the two disparaging areas of studies—ecology and literature—to express a life that goes beyond the orthodox “economic growth and material production” (Bate 9). Bate’s *Romantic Ecology* set out formulations of a life which looked beyond the capital gains of the society. Bate in his text speaks in a tone reminiscent of the very Romantic traditions. The heavy notes of grief play out in his text on the loss of Nature in the wake of progress (Bate 82). Nearly three decades later, Timothy Clark in his *The Value of Ecocriticism* (2019) revisits Bate’s claims and goes on to

add how such an analysis helps in identifying the “contradictions, absurdities or injustices” Romantic ecocriticism reveals (2019: 7). The works of Jonathan Bate, Timothy Clark, and recently, Kate Rigby and Glenn A. Albrecht reimagine the cultural significance of a unified (human and non-human) life by focusing on Romantic poetry (Albrecht 2015). The cultural revival of Romantic poetry through ecocriticism offers a second chance to understand the unfamiliar language, thought and sensations of the non-human experiences. Percy Bysshe Shelley in his verse “Ode to the West Wind” harkens to these perceptions and sensations by centering the non-human entity, here the West Wind, and distancing the human speaker’s self. Such a phenomenon of ‘environmental’ or ‘nature’ poetry is what Clark terms as “ecophenomenological poetry” (2019: 63-64).

This article aims to investigate the integrated relationship between the human and the non-human agencies through an ecocritical lens, particularly in “Ode to the West Wind” by Percy Bysshe Shelley. The paper will simultaneously examine the challenges and reparations of undertaking such a study to counteract the ongoing environmental challenges, including reflections on how the verse represents a Symbiocene relationship between the human and the non-human. It will also shed light on the future prospects of such a relationship.

Romantic Ecocriticism and the Symbiocene

Timothy Clark observes that the revival of Romantic poetry under the guise of ecocriticism is a “reimagination” of various socio-cultural practices. He expands on the idea that the recent trend imitates the Romantic belief where the “environmental destruction can be remedied by cultural means” (Clark 2015: 19). Clark’s criticism is crucial in identifying the patterns noticed in the works of Jonathan Bate, the first scholar who pioneered the study in Romantic ecocriticism, with his ‘reimagination’ of Wordsworth’s poetry with the concurrent ecological concerns. By inserting a non-human component in the poetic genre usually associated with the anthropocentric bias characteristic of

the Anthropocene, the new wave of critics allow a redemption arc for Romanticism. Most of the Romantic ecocritical studies, thus, focus on the necessity of balance for a seemingly perfect constitution, advantageous to the human and non-human agencies, as depicted in the “Ode to the West Wind” by Percy Bysshe Shelley.

The Romantic ecocritical scholarship focused primarily on the benefits a relationship between the human and the non-human agencies would reap and how the past, when contrasted with the present, highlights the increasing dominance of the former over the latter. Works by Jonathan Bate and James McKusick advocated a symbiotic relationship between the two agencies by offering a utopian future. Ergo the criticism levied against the scholars as “idealist” and “conservative” speaks about the substantial lack of any practical solutions presented by them to vet against the critical state of the environmental affairs (Davies 5). However, their ideas revolutionized the ecocritical studies as it inspired critics like Timothy Morton and Ian Bogost to develop upon the ideas of Bate and McKusick. Similarly, David Abram and Glenn A. Albrecht also recognize the potential cohabitation of the two disparaging agencies of the human and the non-human. Their works investigate the alternative where the humans address the non-human and collaborate closely with them to revitalize the planet and protect it against further destruction. The idea of preservation was further developed by the theoretical concepts of Deep and Dark Ecology. These ecological theories signify the opposing views on the ways one can attempt to protect the planet. Deep Ecology acknowledges the involvement of humans as “it recognises that neither physically nor psychologically can we live without the green things” (Bate 40). On the other hand, Dark Ecology shuns the involvement of humans as their efforts have affected the planet with additional damage. Critic Emmanouil Aretoulakis, while adopting a Dark Ecological stance, agrees that “as soon as we stop talking about nature, we will paradoxically cease to objectify, exploit, and thus pollute it” (173).

Kate Rigby in *Reclaiming Romanticism: Towards an Eco-poetics of Decolonization* (2021) presents her views on the process of colonizing Australia by invading foreign agents (people and the non-native flora and fauna) which posit interesting inquiries in ecocritical scholarship. Rigby's work offers a post-colonial perspective on ecology that is a quintessential part of the Australian ecosystem. By aligning the human with the non-human components in her text, Rigby echoes the ideologies of the abovementioned Romantic ecocritics and the Romantic poets through their representation of the *repressed* non-human entities by proposing a "sympathetic re-evaluation of key aspects of European Romanticism" (2021: 3). Shelley in his verse conceptualizes a similar undertaking when he projects his mortal emotions on an ephemeral wind. Through this representation, Shelley gives the centre stage to the wind instead of his human poetic persona. Elsewhere, Kate Rigby in "Ecocriticism and Modernism" agrees that the mortal constraints of humans find an identification in the Freudian idea of the repressed "romantic unconsciousness" where the poet is "aware and in control only of a limited part of what moves and motivates" him (2014: 68). Expanding on the idea of the Romantic unconscious, Bate argues, similarly, that the Romantic poet is aware of his repressed feelings and expresses them in the elemental nature which "brings with it all the thoughts and feelings" one had previously experienced (53). The self-awareness of the limitation broadens the use of natural elements as an expression for the repressed unconscious thoughts. Nature, by extension, becomes, then, animated and a tool for expression. The active reprisal of Romanticism is an assertion of the multifaceted genre of poetry and its actualization in ecocriticism.

Percy Bysshe Shelley presents the formidable West Wind as expressing the speaker's desired power and freedom. The want of freedom, experienced by individuals limited by the society's inhibitions, is the preliminary verbal expression for the use of the non-human-others in Romantic poetry. For the Romantics, poetry, as Bate argues, is expressed both by language and nature and becomes a means of "emotional communication between man and the natural

world" (17). "Ode to the West Wind" personifies this communication between the human, mortal, and non-human, immortal, agents of change. The critical works of Jonathan Bate, James McKusick and Glenn Albrecht attempt to consolidate the two components as did Shelley in his verse. Their works adopt object-oriented ontology highlighting that humans are alike all the non-human entities instead of being the primary or the sole contender. The critics theorize Shelley's verse in a new setting; instead of placing his poetic persona at the forefront, Shelley exalts the West Wind. Glenn Albrecht in his work coalesces the two forces—non-human and human—in a new setting, a setting which he calls the 'Symbiocene.' The term refers to the harmonious amity of Nature and humans in building a companionship proffering both, as is represented in the verse. Thus, Shelley's verse can be situated in Albrecht's Symbiocene context.

In certain ways, poetry grants one the liberty to achieve the unattainable by creating a false reality, such as the perfect communion of the human and non-human. In a sense, Shelley's Ode is an augmented reality which overlooks the destruction of Nature, yet it is this augmented and fractured truth that connects Shelley with Bate, McKusick and Albrecht's proposed Symbiocene. The aforementioned Romantic ecocritics ascertain the non-human to be the expression of the mysterious artistic creativity and one's deepest desires that are only manifested in dreams, visions, and poetic diction, therefore justifying Shelley's employment of the West Wind (Bate 17). Shelley manifests an unusual reality marked by its idealism, thereby welding the 'ideal reality' as conferred by Romantic ecocritics.

Furthermore, the knowledge of irreversible time and impending death magnifies the mortal constraints that Shelley recounts in his verse repeatedly culminating not only in the idealism of the West Wind but also its symbolism of the liaison of human and the non-human element. Through his veneration of the West Wind, Shelley challenges the authoritative stance of humans towards the non-humans, henceforth, satisfying the object-oriented ontology. To substantiate the previous statements, the poetic persona recounts the storm he

came across whilst living in Florence, Italy, at the beginning of the Ode. He describes the storm as a violent tempest of hail and rain underlying the authority of the wind. The verse cancels out the dominance of humans over the non-human by representing the speaker, human, as inferior to the West Wind. Through the anthropocentric descriptions of the West Wind, the poet displaces the abstract puissance of the Wind with something that humans can only mildly comprehend. Thus, the speaker effectively designates the power of a “maenad,” drunk high on its power, a mythical being but with descriptively anthropomorphic actions and behaviours (Shelley, II. 21). Aretoulakis argues that in “Shelley’s poetic vision especially there is a vacillation between the momentary identification with the ‘natural’ other and subsequent presentation of that other as completely at odds with, perhaps even inimical to, humanity” (182).

Shelley revamps the traditional idea of the Symbiocene with his fusion of the Deep and Dark Ecology through his acceptance of the human vulnerabilities in light of the superior, mighty non-human, West Wind. The verse shows respect to the splendour of the Wind while scaling down the anthropomorphic concerns, particularly in the fourth canto emphasizing the overwhelming difference between the poetic persona, human, and the West Wind, non-human. The poetic persona reflects on the powerlessness of his mortal and infinitesimally weaker body whereas the puissance of the West Wind is described with such expressions as “Wild Spirit,” “congregated might,” “Atlantic’s level powers,” “uncontrollable,” one with “skiey speed,” and “tameless” (Shelley, I, 13; II, 26; III, 37, IV, 47, 50, 56). His representation of the non-human West Wind intimidates the existing nomenclature as well. By presenting the non-human as an independent being, the poet and the ecocritics, likewise, destabilize the concurrent values of what constitutes ‘normal.’ By establishing the dominance of the West Wind over the humans, Shelley presents an altered understanding of the world by questioning the ‘accepted’ power in the relationship between the human and the non-human elements. Many ecocritics along the lines of Timothy Morton, Ian Bogost, and Kate Rigby investigate the vestiges of what the ‘Natural’ would signify in the

context of the human and the non-human agents. Placing Shelley's West Wind in the supposed context of authority ought to place the human over the non-human, but the opposite dynamics of the verse heighten the fact that Nature exists beyond the human comprehension and affairs (Clark 2019: 33). Shelley, however, embarks to bridge the gap between the two. The fifth canto is a vision with the conjoined forces of the two elements for a brighter future. The concluding canto effectively follows after the four cantos affirming the undefeated West Wind and concludes the poetic vision. The beseeching tone of the fifth canto allows Shelley to (i) unify the non-human and the human forces, (ii) accentuate their differences that set them apart and the similarities that make them infallible together, and (iii) carry out the poetic vision for the progeny. The incongruent power relation in the verse reveals insidious effect of the Anthropocene in cleaving "culture and nature, fact and value, and between the human and the geological or metrological" (Clark 2015: 9). Akin to the human's supposed dominance over Nature, the recent studies in ecocriticism challenge the preconceived cultural notions and practices. Shelley as well questions the legitimacy of the supposed human authority with his West Wind.

Shelley's Symbiocene

The speaker in the Ode aspires to merge with the "Spirit fierce" of the West Wind and echoes his passion for a possible communion (Shelley, V. 61). The recurrent hunger in the fourth canto reiterates his incapability of accessing the treasure chest that would grant him such a mighty power and unquenchable freedom. His invocation of the strong West Wind to play him like a "lyre" as it does to a "wave, a leaf, a cloud" serves as an acknowledgement and acceptance of his incapability to acquire that puissance (Shelley, IV. 53; V. 57). Shelley, through his speaker, accepts his limited accessibility to divine power which brings several binaries to the reader's attention. The elementary thematic concern of the verse deals with mortal constraints and immortal abundance, followed by several other conflicts between the self and the external world. Time is a daunting foe that reiterates

humans' fragility and the brief stay they are granted on earth. Shelley builds upon this temporality of the humans and their inability to "outstrip" the speed of the West Wind to heighten the conflict between the immortal West Wind and the "chain'd and bow'd" mortal (Shelley, IV, 50; IV, 55).

The imbalance that Shelley paints in his Ode through the rendition of a weak poetic persona allows for the realization of the cycle of life. The verse emulates the aesthetics of Autumn with its dead leaves which are "driven like ghosts" and the Wind promises the winter's "grave" (Shelley I, 2-8). It is followed with the incoming "dirge" of the "dying year" (Shelley II, 23-24) and an indication of a desolating Winter striking fear in the blooming "azure moss and flowers" causing their spoil (Shelley III, 35). The series of deaths the Autumn wind carries with it is akin to the despair of the brief human life. Shelley, through his verse, draws a depressing image of life with its long moments of desolation, to be swept away only with a gust of Spring. The anticipated arrival of Spring is mentioned in the first canto and again in the concluding one reiterating Shelley's attempt to colour the dull mortal life with hope. The deathly mighty Wind is only defeated by the incantation of the prophetic Spring. Thereupon, the "Ode to the West Wind" is a representative fragment of the human life that affirms the inevitability of death while also ensuring the continuation of life. The fifth canto's portrayal of a beginning and an end is reflective of the inescapable death of the poetic persona at the promise of posterity. The death of human life is like "winged seeds" that lie "cold and low" in the Winter and only awaken with the "trumpet" of Spring (Shelley I, 7: V, 69).

The perspective Shelley offers in his verse can also be argued to represent a symbiosis of two divergent entities in a perfect semblance or the Symbiocene, where the human and the non-human entities—like Nature—form a compatible relationship with each other. The abovementioned adjectives solidify such a relationship through the anthropomorphic characteristics of the non-human. Shelley makes the readers aware of the metaphorical Nature and how congruent it is with the human life through personification. The submission and the

eventual acceptance of human fallacies support the concept of the Symbiocene. Instead of showing them as equal, Shelley describes an imbalanced relationship by placing the West Wind, a non-human element, owing to its unimaginable power, higher on the scale than his human poetic persona. The potent West Wind is untouchable and remains untainted in this asymmetrical hierarchy created by the poet. This asymmetrical relationship aligns with contemporary ecocritical studies, particularly the post-humanist Deep and Dark Ecology. With the two polarizing views on how to safeguard the ecology and neither of the two theoretical concepts offering viable solutions, a more hybrid discipline is necessitated. Shelley is receptive to the imbalanced structures, as described in the verse where the first three cantos exude the exuberant power of the West Wind, followed by the admission of the speaker's weak, mortal, constitution which is unable to compete against it in the last two cantos. He presents a hybrid form of dark and deep ecological perspective, as Aretoulakis claims. Shelley in his verse accepts the West Wind to be far superior to his mortal self by continuously contrasting its humanoid poetic persona with that of a "leaf," a "cloud," or a "wave" (Shelley IV, 43-45). This admission is taken further with his request of being used as an instrument and played according to the whims of the Wind. Such a contrasting role reversal of the human and the non-human provides the ground for the hybrid actualization of Dark and Deep Ecology. Shelley creates a picture where the non-human element *needs* humanist descriptions to 'disturb' the balance of the dynamic relation between humans and non-human agents, while also simultaneously *not needing* them to survive. Through the verse, Shelley creates a magnificent image of the independent West Wind.¹ However, it is to be noted that while Shelley attributes liberty to the Wind, he is in no way alluding to its self-reliance; while the Wind is autonomous in all its right, it also needs the human intelligence for recognition of that supreme power. The role reversal is crucial in the understanding of the ecocritical nuances which the contemporary theories offer as it seeks for balance of the two diverse forces.

Another important factor to consider historically was the increasing commercialisation of natural habitats during the 19th Century. Wordsworth's fight to preserve the sanctity of his beloved Lake District sanctioned the commercialisation of the district into a tourist spot in the later years (Bate 88). Timothy Clark, in his book *Cambridge Introduction to Literature and Nature* (2011), applauds Bate's attempts in showing how the Romantic poets assess the importance of the beautiful Natural world and encourage environmental engagement but at the risk of "over-idealising premodern and capitalist ways of life" (Clark 2015: 19). Glenn A. Albrecht also shares a similar concern when he states that the emotive associations the Australian aboriginals made with their homelands and the eventual nostalgia they experienced on parting with it, "solastalgia"², consecrated their authority over it (2019: 10). The grief and the lamentation they share on their dissociation from the familiar land also premeditate the fundamentals of capitalism, for it allows altered autonomy of nature in the form of tourist parks and national reserves.

The mysterious West Wind crumbles the preconceived dominance of humans over non-humans by presenting the various incapacities of the former ever to achieve the latter's greatness. In that respect, Glenn Albrecht (2019) facilitates active engagement with the non-human and redefines the relationship of humans with their Nature. The Symbiocene asks for participation of the humans to revive the planet but also to accept the autonomy of the non-human(s), here the West Wind. Kate Rigby, too, opens up a similar thread of inquiry when she offers her observation how nature can be a "matter of negotiation rather than mastery" and can assist in the creation of more "life-sustaining patterns of interrelationship" between the man and its multiple non-human others (2014: 68). Albrecht and Rigby, as ecocritics, and Shelley, as a poet, honor the individuality and independence of non-humans in their respective works. Despite their contextual differences, the thoughts of Albrecht and Rigby echo Shelley's, particularly in depicting the two divergent elements, human and non-human, at harmony with each other rather than at war. Their respective works

seek alignment by giving due cognizance to the silent yet existing non-human elements.

Conclusion

Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" brings into conversation several notions of the interrelationship of the human and the non-human agencies by presenting alternate views of the Symbiocene. Nature continues to remain intangible and incoherent to the human understanding which Shelley celebrates in his Ode. While Romantic ecocriticism demonstrates a nuanced perspective to the study of Romanticism while contemporaneously introducing concepts to combat the degeneration of the planet, it is also subjected to rudimentary claims of its apparent failure in offering pragmatic and immediate solutions, as Timothy Clark points out. Yet Clark also believes that *only* through the investigation made by recent scholarship in the field of ecocriticism can considerable changes be made (2015: 19). Percy Shelley's optimistic conclusion aligns with the continuing contemporary scholarship of ecocriticism that involves a hybridisation of various studies and divergent disciplines.

Endnotes

1. This statement is not true of the concurrent condition of the planet. While the non-human will persevere, they will also perish if not recognized and catered to by the humans for their preservation.
2. Solastalgia: a term coined by Glenn A. Albrecht (2019) to denote the emotional distress, grief, suffering experienced by people owing to the changing climate conditions for the worse as it negatively impact one's home environments.

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Abstract

In the last thirty years, Romanticism has been approached from various nuanced lenses, and ecocriticism is one such perspective. The recent scholarship allowed a redemptive arc for the early 19th-century poetry, which was earlier disregarded because of its promises of aestheticism and overtly exaggerated fantasies. Most criticism of Romantic poetry focused on its anthropomorphic imagery. As a result, it delineated the peripheral non-human entities as mere embellishments or expressions.

Ecocritical studies of the early nineteenth century, while acknowledging the non-human entities in the poeses of the Romantics, inevitably fell short in accounting for the dualities and concerns of both the agents by effectively erasing the human component from their discourses. The earlier Romantic ecological studies reminisce and idealize the past glories of nature without accounting for the desolating present and their altruistic view in disparaging the human agency.

This paper will attempt to place the above conflicting ideas by presenting the "Ode to the West Wind" in a 'Symbiocene,' a term coined by Glenn A. Albrecht to denote a new era countering the damaging Anthropocene. Additionally, it brings together the two

seemingly divergent scales of investigation of human and non-human agencies in ecocritical studies. The paper will also discuss Percy Bysshe Shelley's famous ode in the modern-day context of the deteriorating earth.

W ciągu ostatnich trzydziestu lat badacze literatury zaczęli przyglądać się literaturze okresu romantyzmu z nowych, dużo bardziej zniuansowanych perspektyw, takich jak, między innymi, ekokrytyka. Najnowsze badania przedstawiają dziewiętnastowieczną poezję, do tej pory pomijaną i lekceważoną ze względu na duży nacisk na estetyzm i nadmierną fantazyjność, w nowym świetle. Większość opracowań krytycznych poezji romantycznej w dość ograniczony sposób skupiało się na jej antropomorficznych wyobrażeniach. W konsekwencji, ukazały one występujące w poezji tego okresu byty nie-ludzkie jako zaledwie dodatki o charakterze estetycznym.

Chociaż ekokrytyka lat 90. XX wieku dostrzegła istnienie bytów nie-ludzkich w poezji Romantyków, nie udało jej się jednak uwzględnić w swoich rozważaniach współistnienia obu rodzajów bytów ze względu na usunięcie z dyskursu czynnika ludzkiego. Wczesne rozważania ekokrytyczne poświęcone poezji romantycznej idealizują wspomniałą przeszłość natury, kompletnie pomijając zarówno jej obecną degradację jak i swój własny altruistyczny pogląd polegający na dyskredytowaniu i lekceważeniu ludzkiej sprawczości.

Celem tego artykułu jest umiejscowienie i osadzenie tych sprzecznych idei poprzez omówienie „Ody do wiatru zachodniego” (Ode to the West Wind) w kontekście Symbiocenu, terminu stworzonego przez Glenna A. Albrechta w celu wyznaczenia początku nowej ery przeciwstawiającej się wyniszczającemu Antropocenowi. Dodatkowo, artykuł połączy dwa pozornie rozbieżne sposoby badania ludzkich i nie-ludzkich sprawczości istniejące w ramach ekokrytyki oraz omówi odę Shelleya we współczesnym kontekście ciągle pogarszającej się kondycji Ziemi.

Zainab Faiz is a scholar based in India. She has recently completed her Master's from the University of Delhi, India. She is interested in the post-humanist understanding constitutive in our life. Her Master's dissertation was on the effects of grief on human life as presented in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*. Zainab is currently working on another paper publication which looks at the weaponization of works of fiction under a totalitarian regime. Simultaneously, she is working on Kazuo Ishiguro's works from a larger framework of memory studies and associated identity. Her research interests include memory studies, post-humanism, ecocriticism, and post-colonialism.