This thesis is about two long poems of the Romantic period, S.T. Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1798) and Charlotte Smith’s “Beachy Head” (1807), both of which reflect on the representability of life, the extent to which words (spoken or sung, written or printed) and other signs can convey the basic fact of livingness. It explores the imperative of disclosing life and the equivocation that forms when life is brought into a field of lyrical representation. For the authors treated in this study, life requires signification and must be repeatedly disclosed; however, ambiguity of livingness and non-livingness soon manifests with each sign of life. The final section of each chapter considers provisional or cosmopolitan ethics in relationship to the zones of indistinction that equivocal life creates.
EQUIVOCAL LIFE:
LYRICS OF (NON)LIVINGNESS IN S.T COLERIDGE’S “RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER” (1798) AND CHARLOTTE SMITH’S “BEACHY HEAD” (1807)

A Thesis

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Introduction

This thesis is about two long poems of the Romantic period, S.T. Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1798) and Charlotte Smith’s “Beachy Head” (1807), both of which reflect on the representability of life, the extent to which words (spoken or sung, written or printed) and other signs can convey the basic fact of livingness. As the Mariner’s perpetual “Rime” and the multiple subjects of “Beachy Head” indicate, there is an evasive quality to representing life; both poems explore the equivocal relations between lyric, or biographical, life and the limits of life’s cases. From the supernatural realm that “Rime” traverses to the seaside cliff and rift between the lands of England and France in “Beachy Head,” life, similarly, is represented as both unknown and liminal. Captured and contained, life is framed in motion, at the borders of sea and land, self and landscape, and time and space, while each poem simultaneously limns an elusive life that continuously recedes from its signs.

Although named a lyrical ballad by its inclusion in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), “Rime” features a Mariner’s tale comprised of reflective moments and narrated past actions that, very much like Smith’s poem, utilize a lyrical “I.” A hybrid of poetic form, “Rime” uses the movement afforded by the ballad and the reflective mode of the lyric to emphasize a dynamic tale that perplexes readers further with its plot. Hinged upon a two-line act, “With my cross-bow / I shot the albatross” (81-2), the poem employs a supernatural machinery of over 600 lines to try to make sense of this killing. As though the ends of life could hold a clue to life’s meaning, the Mariner’s tale takes the Wedding Guest beyond the realm of the living to the open sea, where the very basic procedure of representing life, a telling account, makes the Wedding Guest unsure of what is alive or dead, real or unreal. The signification of life enters a zone of indistinction, allowing those who hear, and overhear, the tale to glimpse life, but only for a moment.

At first, “Beachy Head” seems very different from Coleridge’s supernatural tale; however, Smith also takes the reader into a region of indistinction, where life is less than self-evident. Following a convoluted path that, as Theresa Kelley notes, fluctuates between the micro- and macro-levels of historiography, Smith uses longer spans of time and space through a centralized, yet displaced contemplative speaker (302). At the edge of a vast cliff, the speaker recalls the fossilized forms of life underground, remainders of life long extinguished, of a life-in-death much like the “Life-in-Death” figure in Coleridge’s “Rime.” Life is apprehensible within the rock and fossils, but also points to something beyond the speaker, beyond human life. While
the narrator sits on the fossilized chalk of Beachy Head, Smith diverts attention away from a central, lyric subject to wanderers and a hermit as well as other living forms or species like plants, insects, and birds. Life, even focalized by a lyric subject, becomes hard to trace in linear fashion.

The setting of both poems and the figure of the hermit also connect them. At the fracture of land and sea, the narrator atop Beachy Head looks upon the rift that divides two nations, but thinks upon a time when the two lands may have once been connected. The realm of citizenship is further extended with the inclusion of a hermit who saves the lives of shipwrecked mariners. The hermit, “long disgusted with the world” (674), retreats to the cliffs to be apart from society, but, despite this seclusion, he still feels for “human misery” (690). The hermit’s epitaph that is “chiseled within the rocks,” but remains unwritten in the poem, could, arguably, account for life to all “those who read . . . these mournful lines” (726-7). The hermit in Coleridge’s “Rime,” like Smith’s figure, also precipitates the writing of life, the autobiographical or lyrical act. The Mariner in “Rime” returns to the land of the living after his supernatural experience and is pulled from the wreckage by a hermit who, with his question “What manner of man art thou?”, asks the Mariner to prove his livingness. The hermit’s question in “Rime” prompts the Mariner’s narrating of his life and propels the poem, for it is his question that begins the Mariner’s telling of his tale; however, by posing the question to another, the hermit’s life also comes to be accounted for.

The turn of the nineteenth century was a time of not only national and philosophical revolutions but poetic ones as well. From the advent of Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism, to Mary Wollstonecraft’s argument for women’s rights, to Erasmus Darwin’s theories of spontaneous vitality, to a transformation of poetry with the publication of Lyrical Ballads, life became a central concern for poets and political theorists alike. As Alastair Hunt and Matthias Rudolf have noted in a recent edition of Romantic Circles on biopolitics and Romanticism, “Romanticism is a poetic project whose aim is to ‘make live’, and whose very rhetoricity denoted the sovereignty of its animating powers—not a political but a poetic sovereignty, a sovereignty of art on the far side of politics” (15). Life, whether represented in a poem or in society, became a crucial concern for

1 Jacqueline Labbe argues that although the poem might be in an unfinished state, or imperfect state according to the editor of the 1807 publication, the chiseled text “joins the poem and its speakers inside the landmass of Beachy Head” (162).
Romantic thinkers and poets alike. In part of the context for my thesis, I relate the representational problem of life to three historical conditions in this era. First, the period’s preoccupation with natural history, as a privileged way of ordering life, generates new questions about the relations among living species, in time and space, as well as about the ongoing relevance of older vernacular nomenclatures. Second, as Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault have argued, this period sees a radical transformation, which they characterize as “biopolitical,” in the means by which the state represents the livingness of its subjects, evident in new claims about the status of previously excluded beings, including women, slaves, and animals. Third, the rise of the lyric form, focalized around the life of a speaker, raises questions about the temporality of autobiography, the writing of one’s life, as well as the relation of the self to a living world.

Beginning during the mid-eighteenth century with Carl Linnaeus, whom Smith references in “Beachy Head,” classifying and ordering life according to a Linnaean system of binomial nomenclature not only creates an early version of natural history, but also spawns a number of amateur naturalists, one of them being Gilbert White (who is also referenced in Smith’s poem). A clergyman by trade, White documents his observations of animals, insects, and plants in a series of letters that he eventually publishes in 1789, the year the French Revolution begins. While the French revolt against Louis XVI, White’s accounts of new species and migrations of birds in the little parish of Selborne began to exert their fascination over his earliest readers. Life becomes classifiable on a global scale through binomial nomenclature, yet the ever-present colloquial names and idiosyncratic nature of the individual animals that White meets and writes about communicate their significance. As Richard Mabey remarks in his introduction to Selborne, “[White’s] swifts are real, not puppets . . . or links in some taxonomic chain. They are living birds in a living and closely observed situation” (ix). White is able to capture the life behind the Hirundinidae, or swallow, swift, or martin while also depicting their migratory habits. Beyond the taxonomical pairing or binomial nomenclature are the swallows that enter his letters and migrate beyond the town of Selborne, in both the minds of readers and in Linnaean nomenclature.² Local species and variations were identifiable and this enabled their addition to the larger, global system that Linnaeus had created; but, as White shows in his letters, life’s

² Tobias Menely’s essay, “Traveling in Place,” explores the dialectic between the local and the global, specificity and abstraction in White’s Natural History of Selborne.
variations can transcend the binomial system. He writes of his work as a “humble attempt to promote a more minute inquiry into natural history; into the life and conversation of animals” (152). White revises the concept of natural history ever so slightly with his close observations of various forms of species.

The consequences of classifying life become evident in the period’s concern over representing life in the political sphere. In similar fashion to White’s emphasis on variation in *Selborne*, Erasmus Darwin’s posthumously published work *The Temple of Nature* (1803) arranges life into neatly ordered pairs while still attending to its deviations. Although composed in ordered couplet form, *Temple* explores the asexual reproduction of certain species and the spontaneous forms of reproduction. While drawing upon ideas of vitalism and animation that Darwin introduces in his book *Zoonomia* (1794), *Temple* features proto-evolutionary ideas of life with its representation of minute insects and organic forms that arise from decomposition. Darwin’s version of solitary reproduction strikes a biopolitical chord, for, as Foucault writes, “The excess of biopower appears when it becomes technologically and politically possible for man not only to manage life but to make it proliferate, to create living matter, to build the monster, and ultimately, to build viruses that cannot be controlled and that are universally destructive” (*Society Must be Defended* 254). If “the power of reproduction belongs alone to life” and solitary reproduction is possible with certain species, then the state or sovereign no longer has power over the (re)production of life (Darwin 93). Darwin further explores this idea by equating a mushroom with a monarch:

HENCE when a Monarch or a mushroom dies,  
Awhile extinct the organic matter lies;  
But, as a few short hours or years revolve,  
Alchemic powers the changing mass dissolve;  
Born to new life unnumber’d insects pant,  
New buds surround the microscopic plant (383-88)

These lines emphasize the dangerously sacrilegious properties of spontaneous vital production, yet what seems more politically upsetting is that the death of a sovereign life creates new life. While the reception of his work *The Botanic Garden* (1791) was widely positive, *Temple* was criticized harshly for its style (Packham 148). Although Darwin’s form of ordered couplets after the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* may have been perceived as outdated, his ideas were
revolutionary and subversive. Much like the execution of Louis XVI and French Revolution, Darwin’s upheaval and overthrow of a monarch and a miniscule mushroom, through its very revolution, can evolve into new life.

More recent theories of biopolitics concern the problem of representing life within the political sphere, but they also can be applied to the revolutionary period of the Romantic era. The execution of a sovereign figure not only upset the political sphere of France, but also troubled the idea of where power over life and death is situated. Biopolitics, according to Foucault, emerges during these revolutionary times and becomes a power of life in terms of its negation. More specifically, it is the state’s or sovereign’s power “to take life or to let live” (History of Sexuality 136; emphasis in original). The actions of the French people demonstrate a questioning and rejection of sovereign power over life; however, the central regal figure can be seen as a scapegoat for the surfacing problems of citizenship. As arguments for abolition, women’s rights, and even non-human animal rights arose alongside one another, power over life seemed to be dispersed among multiple powers and effected in different degrees. Jeremy Bentham’s seminal text for utilitarianism, An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, recognizes that sovereignty can be substitutable: “Where there is any such person, or body of persons, he or it may, according as the turn of the phrase requires, be termed the sovereign, or the sovereignty” and to “misdirect the operations of the sovereign, as here described may be to impede or misdirect the operations of the several departments of government” (218; emphasis in original). Sovereign power can’t be traced back to a single origin and similarly power over life has no point of origin. The right of protecting life and individual citizenship becomes even more entangled with biopolitics when Bentham observes the link between how “the greater part of the species, under the denomination of slaves, have been treated by the law exactly upon the same footing, as in England for example, the inferior races of animals are still” (311). The idea of equal treatment under the law extends the very concept of citizenship, but the distinction of life can discount whose suffering counts more. Bentham, unable to negotiate what I would argue is the inherent problem behind representing life, an always already deferred meaning, ultimately invokes the future, in that a “day may come” when non-human animals are given the right to live (311; emphasis in original).
In a recent essay, Sara Guyer links biopolitics to the rise of the lyric form during this time, raising questions about autobiography and the relationship among writing, life, and the self. The lyric “I” could be seen as a sovereign figure, Guyer writes,

The lyric subject, at least as it is conventionally characterized, is a resoundingly individual formation, whereas biopower, in Foucault’s account, is administrative and neither oriented towards nor executed by the individual. Moreover, recent critics of biopower, including Lauren Berlant and Eric Santner, also have noted the flawed tendency to correlate the variety of conceptions of sovereignty (personal, political, and theological), a tendency that the correlation between romanticism and biopolitics could even be said to repeat. (3)

As Guyer points out, the “I” in the lyric is no more contained or attributable to a single source than sovereign power. The lives behind both are not individual formations and remain questionable. Although Guyer uses this point to argue how romanticism is a poetics of survival or a biopoetics, I argue that the autobiographical subject, or lyrical “I,” becomes split because of the very impossibility of representing life. Life, bios, separates the self, auto, from writing, graphe, always already preventing a full disclosure of the self in autobiography.

This thesis will explore the imperative of disclosing life and the equivocation that follows in “Rime” and “Beachy Head.” For the authors treated in this study, life requires signification, life must be disclosed and brought into a field of representation; however, ambiguity soon manifests when life is brought into the space of signification. The first chapter will focus on “Rime” and the interpretive barriers to both the poem and life. “Rime” would seem to give narrative form to the ethical imperative embodied in the shared ontological condition Coleridge defines as “one Life.” Yet the idea that all beings share a divine connection becomes as murky as the slime-filled waters where life and death become indistinguishable. In the Mariner’s unceasing imperative to answer the hermit’s question—“What manner of man art thou?”—the lyric impulse is linked to an always deferred knowledge of one’s livingness. The second chapter will use Smith’s posthumously published poem to explore the topographical terrain of life within and upon Beachy Head. “Beachy Head” represents life as it is dispersed across the non-linear long durée of geological history and the vastness of global space. Fossils and relics, birds and insects, the wanderer and recluse whose stories the poem tells, and its own narrator all, in some important sense, reveal the migratory nature of life. In its very non-linearity, life becomes
written, I suggest, in recurrence or reminiscence; similarly, it is only by measuring resemblance that life can be known in its remarkable variation. Smith’s return to the cliffs of Beachy Head, nearly 15 years after she wrote *The Emigrants* (1793), allows her to detect the life whose record is left in those fossilized rocks. Linking Rosi Braidotti’s revision of her concept of nomadic subjectivity, or cosmopolitan idea of becoming-world, to the cosmopolitan ideas of Immanuel Kant and other Romantic-era writers, including Smith’s own experience as an exile, I suggest that “Beachy Head” is concerned with a kind of cosmopolitan life-writing, where no species are truly “foreign” and no people are truly “emigrants.” Each chapter has three sections: the first section focuses on each poem’s version of the lyric subject and also examines the signs of life in each poem; the second considers each poem’s turn to either the supernatural or the deep time of natural history in “Rime” and “Beachy Head,” respectively; the final section considers the provisional (or cosmopolitan) ethics that follow the zones of indistinction, which are created when life is brought into a field of representation.
Chapter 1

“What manner of man art thou?”:
The Supernatural and Ethicopolitical of Life’s Rime

Resembles life what once was deem’d of light,
Too ample in itself for human sight?
An absolute self? an element ungrounded?
All, that we see, all colours of all shade
By encroach of darkness made?
Is very life by consciousness unbounded?
And all the thoughts, pains, joys or mortal breath
A war-embrace of wrestling life and death?
—S.T. Coleridge, “What is Life?”

S.T. Coleridge’s poem “What is Life?” (1804) posits a series of questions. With one question spawning another, the title question remains unanswered. Yet Romantic poets like Percy Bysshe Shelley, Charlotte Smith, William Wordsworth, as well as Coleridge, all addressed the same question in either their poems or prose. As Shelley states in his essay, “On Life,” “we are on that verge where words abandon us” (636); life eludes its very signs. Nonetheless these Romantic writers demonstrate a perpetual desire to keep trying to convey the life of readers and writers alike. Wordsworth notably states in the 1800 Preface to Lyrical Ballads his desire to keep the reader “in the company of flesh and blood” (177). As indicators of life, flesh and blood create a connection between the writer and reader. Yet, as “What is life?” shows, life always already evades such parameters by multiplying signs, like flesh or blood, that attempt to define it, the very frames in which readers can momentarily appreciate its value.

“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” also prompts readers to return to the question of life, whether biographical or lyrical, with the Mariner’s unceasing effort to answer the question, “What manner of man art thou?” There are multiple definitions of life, from animate, producing bodies to a collective notion of a social body, and each separates and classifies life; however, as the Mariner’s act of killing the albatross demonstrates, an imbalance of power can surface with every attempt to distinguish life. As Eugene Thacker writes in After Life, “Life may be named, constructed, instrumentalized, it may itself become a form of power” (5). Discussing the usages of the different concepts of “life,” Thacker identifies the power that life can have, especially over other life, without a conclusive definition of life. Life is a murky concept. Yet in spite of this
lack of clarity, like the Mariner’s moral imperative at the end of “Rime”—to love “both man and bird and beast” (617)—the Wedding Guest and readers are asked to consider life in terms of an ethicopolitical framework. But as the final question of “What is Life?” asserts, life is a “war-embrace of wrestling life and death” (8). Ethics, especially in the political sphere, depends upon an appreciation for life or a positive value of life; however, in modern society no less than modern aesthetics, life can and does often become intertwined with its negative, death. As Anna Barbauld and Coleridge’s debate over the moral in the poem shows, ethical relationships and moral responsibility are, like life, hard to define in terms of the ethics of literature. For life involves the non-living to convey itself and the two become inseparable, but also indistinguishable in their “war-embrace.” In this struggle of signs, life is repeatedly questioned, but also repeatedly answered—like the Mariner’s own attempt to answer the question of life with his autobiographical rime.

From Coleridge’s numerous revisions of “Rime” to the chronological gaps in its plot to the supernatural figures, the poem has presented an interpretive problem for its readers. As Richard Haven writes, “though most critics were unable to make 'sense' of the poem, it was nevertheless read” (366). Yet like Coleridge’s own returns to the poem throughout his life, “Rime” resurfaces repeatedly as a canonical work of Romantic poetry, beckoning readers to consider the Mariner’s message again and again. The Mariner’s imperative—to tell a story that not only atones for his killing an albatross, but also answers the question that can’t be fully answered, about what sort of man he is—haunts both him and the reader. The Mariner’s task, I argue, is not to place before us a riddle that can’t be answered, but instead to prompt us to keep searching for what remains difficult to interpret, what is questioned throughout the entire poem: how can life be signified through narration and how does the endless lyric imperative of the Mariner’s story relay an ethicopolitical problem? As the Mariner tells his tale, the Wedding Guest becomes unsure of whether the Mariner is alive or dead. Not only is the Mariner’s

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3 Unless otherwise noted, all citations of “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” will be from the 1817 edition in the Bedford/St. Martins critical edition.

4 Roberto Esposito’s recent work, *Bios*, revises Agamben’s and Foucault’s theories of biopolitics to argue for a more affirmative biopolitics. Esposito explores how biopolitics can become a thanatopolitics and, by focusing on the Holocaust of the WWII, exposes how the line of demarcation between biopolitics and thanatopolitics is obscure. Politics over life seemingly always already involves death, yet Esposito demonstrates, via a paradigm of immunization, how biopolitics can be more positive if one understands the dialectical relationship between immunity and community.
livingness not evident at times to the Wedding Guest—who interrupts the Mariner’s tale twice in the 1817 edition and editions thereafter, once in editions prior, out of a fear that the Mariner is dead or a ghost—but it is also not evident at times to the Mariner. The Mariner’s struggle to narrate his livingness shows how life poses a problem for signification because life is conveyed as both living and dead, much like the figure of “Life-in-Death” in the poem.

What is remarkable about the Mariner’s moral imperative to love “both man and bird and beast” is that instead of conveying the value of life within a community, the Mariner fails to convey his own life (617). The Wedding Guest’s first interruption occurs at the beginning of Part IV, right after the figures of the spectral woman and spectral man (or Life-in-Death and Death in the 1817 edition of the poem and editions thereafter) are introduced and the other crewmembers die. “I fear thee and thy glittering eye / And thy skinny hand so brown—” the Wedding Guest states (232-33). Although captivated by the Mariner’s story, initially because of the Mariner’s “glittering eye,” the Wedding Guest questions the source of the story: the physical livingness that animates the “bright-eyed” Mariner (20). With this first interruption and the Wedding Guest’s fear, the poem underlines one of the main issues with signifying life: how can it be conveyed by its supposed opposite, a non-living sign? As Thacker writes, “every ontology of ‘life’ thinks of life in terms of something-other-than-life” (After Life x). Life requires signification, but whether it’s blood, flesh, or speech that stands in for life, they, by themselves, are non-living signifiers. At the start of the poem, the Mariner’s life is conveyed when his eyes compel the Wedding Guest to listen, but as he tells his story the non-living forms of signification prevent the possibility of conveying life fully. The Mariner must assure, and reassure, the Wedding Guest that “this body dropt not down” because non-living signs of life reproduce the limits of his livingness (235).

Jacques Derrida’s work, The Animal That Therefore I Am, discusses the limits of the “animal,” and, using his term limitrophy, exposes the limits of livingness: “Beyond the edge of the so-called human, beyond it but by no means on a single opposing side, rather than ‘The Animal’ or ‘Animal Life’ there is already a heterogeneous multiplicity of the living or more precisely (since to say ‘the living’ is already to say too much or not enough), a multiplicity of organizations of relations between living and dead (31; emphasis in original). Life is not positioned against death, but instead life and death’s infinite relationships feed, support, and also obscure one another. In assessing Derrida’s turn to the question of the “animal,” Cary Wolfe finds in Derrida’s work a compelling posthumanist account of “the generative force of the nonliving at the origins of any
human being” (91). Life’s presence always already involves the non-living or dead sign and “Rime,” in its very perplexing and confusing form, stages this conundrum.

If the non-living matter of words and signs can convey life, then, in their very non-livingness, signs expose their inability to convey life as well. Yet the poem’s revisions and repetitive elements also, like the Mariner’s own compulsion to keep telling his story, render the very need to keep trying to communicate life. In “Autobiography as De-Facement,” Paul de Man writes “the interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge—as it does not—but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions” (71). De Man’s point is that writing about life is linked to an always-deferred knowledge of one’s livingness; it requires repetition. Much like writing an autobiography, the lyric subject of Romantic poetry attempts to mediate a relationship between the self and its environment via the lyric form. Similarly, the Mariner becomes a lyric subject because he answers the question “What manner of man art thou?” by accounting and recounting his tale (581). By answering the question, he tries to write his life by telling his story through lyric moments or tropes. The hermit’s question provokes a lyric impulse in the Mariner, one that requires repetition, and his answer features a lyric “I” throughout. The Mariner’s tale to prove his livingness is both complete and unfinished because despite having the “strange power of speech” that he describes near the culmination of the poem (591), the strange power always “returns” (587). Even though, or rather because, the Mariner’s tale is autobiographical, it conveys the very impossibility of closure for the self, auto, or for life, bios, via language.

In the first part of this chapter, I will address moments within the poem where the signification of life makes it less definite. Life is signified through eyes, animation, and blood, but these signs also signify non-life. As if life were always already “alone on a wide, wide sea,” in a zone of indistinction, life is determinable, but also indistinguishable from its negative, or non-value, death (237). Giorgio Agamben defines this zone of indistinction as a paradigmatically biopolitical condition, where “sovereign violence opens a zone of indistinction between law and nature, outside and inside, violence and law” (64). Force exerted over life, much like the albatross’s death, exposes life’s excess, or the point when it bleeds into death and the unknown. The supernatural elements of the “Rime” have long been an interpretive problem for readers; therefore, the second section of this chapter will consider the supernatural elements of the poem
in relation to the problem of conveying life. Like the supernatural figure of “Life-in-Death,” life itself enters a zone of indistinction and a realm of the unknown. As Coleridge writes in Biographia Literaria, his contributions to Lyrical Ballads were to “be directed to persons and characters supernatural” (314). Representations of life produce the supernatural to convey this problem of the indistinguishability of life and death. The final section of this chapter will consider the poem’s ethicopolitical elements in relation to Coleridge’s debate with Barbauld. In his much-quoted response to Barbauld’s criticism that the poem had no moral, Coleridge on the ethics of the poem said that it had instead “too much,” which prevented readers from perceiving the poem as a “work of pure imagination” (Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works 593). If life can never be fully conveyed, then why does the Mariner end his tale with the imperative to love “both man and bird and beast”? The poem creates a state of exception where, as Coleridge writes in the argument to the 1800 edition, “laws of hospitality” govern the transgression of the Mariner (Lyrical Ballads 260). Yet this state of exception, I argue, develops from not only the indistinguishability of livingness from non-livingness, but from the interpretive problem of life. If life has importance, but can’t be fully signified, then it also, in the repeated attempts to signify it, constantly redefines relationships between living beings.

I

The Wedding Guest’s initial interruption illustrates the interpretive problem of the Mariner’s life. The Wedding Guest desires to enter the wedding, but the Mariner’s eyes and speech stop him, so that he stays outside the wedding transfixed by the Mariner’s bodily expression. The Mariner “holds him” with both his “skinny hand” and “his glittering eye” (9, 13). His glittering eye first conveys the Mariner’s livingness to the Wedding Guest, but it also later creates fear when he questions the Mariner’s life, exclaiming, “I fear thee and thy glittering eye” (232). The “glittering eye” becomes a questionable source of life because the eye signifies the Mariner’s life, but, like the Mariner’s “skinny hand,” it also falters. The hand, browned by sun rather than pale or ghostly, lacks enough flesh, thus making the Mariner’s life questionable. The eye conveys to the Wedding Guest the Mariner’s life, for the eye is indeed animated, but because it glitters, or “shine[s] with a brilliant but broken and tremulous light,” it also conveys the vacancy of life in its intermittent moments (“Glitter”). Flesh and the eye convey life, but they are also unreliable and insufficient indicators of it. Life, as both signifier and signified, becomes
uncertain. The wavering condition produces the Wedding Guest’s compulsion to hear the story because of its very ambiguity. Much like the indistinction at work in supernatural tales—where what is natural or preternatural, living or dead, is questionable—he keeps listening, waiting for a clarification that is yet to come.

Similarly, Coleridge’s critique of cause and effect in *Biographia Literaria*, signification of life exposes the dialectical relationship between signifiers of life and life itself. The eyes allow one to recognize life, but they can also be recognized as life themselves. Coleridge writes that the danger of possible paralogisms lies in

mistaking the conditions of a thing for its causes and essence; and the process, by which we arrive at the knowledge of a faculty, for the faculty itself. The air I breathe is the condition of my life, not its cause. We could never have learned that we had eyes but by the process of seeing; yet having seen we know that the eyes must have pre-existed in order to render the process of sight possible. (VII, 221)

Coleridge calls attention to both breath and sight as conditions for life in this section. The eyes are required for perceiving life, but they also, as glittering eyes, signify both livingness and non-livingness. Coleridge addresses not only how the cause or essence of life can’t be determined by conditions of sensory faculties, but also how a dialectical relationship occurs at eye level. Linguistically, if one were to take a phrase like “I see,” the relationship between the signifier and signified collapses. Similarly, breath, as a condition of animation, although often written as originating principle for life, doesn’t determine livingness. Much like the moment in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* when the monster opens his eyes — “by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, [Victor] saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open”— “Rime” also shows how “glittering” eyes fail to fully capture life (34).5

The growing doubt of the Wedding Guest establishes the tension between signs of life, especially when the dead crew becomes reanimated in the Mariner’s retelling. The glittering eyes that previously described the Mariner resurface in the poem when the dead crew looks at the Mariner after he awakens to the two voices, right before the curse is lifted.

5 Frankenstein’s perception of his creation changes at the moment of animation and the creature instead becomes an abomination of life. He is afterwards referred to as the monster, devil, fiend, etc, because of the supernatural, alien life that he seems to represent.
All stood together on the deck,
For a charnel-dungeon fitter:
All fixed on me their stony eyes,
That in the Moon did glitter.

The pang, the curse, with which they died,
Had never passed away:
I could not draw my eyes from theirs,
Nor turn them up to pray. (438-445)

The eyes command in these lines, but, more importantly, they come from a source that is supposedly dead. This scene replays the initial one, where the Mariner’s eyes hold the Wedding Guest, yet here the supposedly dead crew holds the Mariner. The dead or non-living have the same power to convey animacy as the supposedly living Mariner. Life becomes indistinguishable from death with the live Mariner’s eyes and the dead crew’s eyes because, despite the source, they both can hold and convey life.⁶ As Coleridge writes in “What is Life?” life “resembles what once was,” but is “too ample in itself for human sight” (1, 2). Life resembles, but, in its very “ample” representation or excessive signification, it appears much like something that was or is no longer alive.

The distinction between animacy and non-living things such as the dead crewmembers further obscures the signification of life. The 1817 gloss adds to this section that the “ship’s crew are inspirited” or, in the 1828 edition, “inspired” (The Rime of the Ancient Mariner 53).⁷ The crew is animated with a breath of life. In her essay on personification in James Thomson’s The Seasons, Heather Keenleyside describes how the poetic trope, which gives life to inanimate

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⁶ As Coleridge writes later in the Biographia Literaria about Wordsworth’s endeavors to write Lyrical Ballads, the eyes can deceive and empirical evidence also determines non-life. According to Coleridge, Wordsworth’s job was to “excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which, in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand” (XIV, 314). Linking the feeling of the supernatural to customary behavior, Coleridge also points out the difficulty in determining, whether in a supernatural state or not, what we see from what we don’t see. Familiarity might hide more than the supernatural unknown.

⁷ The Oxford English Dictionary defines “inspirit” as “to fill with, or cause to be possessed by, a ‘spirit’ or supernatural being,” which relates to the production of the supernatural in the poem that will be discussed in the second section of this chapter.
things, obscures the idea of what constitutes a person. When inanimate things or even animate non-human animals are personified, the line between animate and inanimate or living and non-living, as well as human and nonhuman, is not clearly marked. As Keenleyside writes, Thomson’s use of personification “associates the instability of both persons and things with issues of agency or animation” (448). What is alive or animate can no longer be clearly disassociated from what is non-living as is the case with the crewmembers and the Mariner’s own confusion in pronouns. He appears inspired, much like the crew, and not fully alive to the Wedding Guest.

In the 1817 edition, the Wedding Guest interrupts the Mariner a second time, reemphasizing the ambiguity of life’s signs in spite of their repetition. The Wedding Guest requires reassurance that the Mariner is indeed alive after the Mariner conveys the story of the dead crew rising and becoming reanimated with their groans.

They groaned, they stirred, they all uprose,
Nor spake, nor moved their eyes;
It had been strange, even in a dream,
To have seen those dead men rise. (335-8)

Although they move and groan, the crewmembers don’t speak or move their eyes; they are still “dead men” (338). Yet when the Wedding Guest hears about “the body of [the Mariner’s] brother’s son,” he interrupts the Mariner, wanting confirmation of the Mariner’s life (345). Again, there is a presence that the non-living signifies. The interruption also occurs after the Mariner’s perplexing change in pronouns: “They raised their limbs like lifeless tools – / We were a ghastly crew” (343-4; emphasis added). The Wedding Guest requires reassurance at this point because he can neither distinguish life from death in the Mariner, nor the Mariner from the dead but animate crew.

The second interruption by the Wedding Guest in the 1817 edition marks the insufficient nature of the Mariner’s prior confirmation of his life: “Fear not, fear not, thou Wedding-Guest! / This body dropt not down” (234-5). The repetition of the Wedding Guest’s fear is much like the repeated telling of the Mariner’s tale: it is forever incomplete. Life requires the non-living to convey its very livingness, but, because of these non-living factors, every attempt to communicate life raises questions about life. The Mariner’s repeated questioning of his own life supports this very paradoxical situation. Unsure if he is alive, he must bite his arm and suck the
blood as the spectral figures of the woman and the man approach: “I bit my arm, I sucked the blood, / And cried, A sail! A sail!” (160-1). One of the entries for “life” in Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* states, “Blood, the supposed vehicle of life” (“Life”). Referencing Alexander Pope’s use of the word, blood as a vehicle, Johnson’s entry states that blood alone doesn’t suffice for life. It’s merely a medium to which another substance must be added to represent life. Here, the Mariner uses his blood as a vehicle to communicate, to give himself liquid to speak, but in doing so he is sucking his own blood, like a vampire. In order to speak, he must become like a horrific, non-living creature: a living dead.

The Mariner again questions his life after the curse has been lifted and the albatross drops from his neck. Waking from his trance, saturated in rainwater—viably a life source itself—he still doubts his livingness.

My lips were wet, my throat was cold,
My garments all were dank;
Sure I had drunken in my dreams,
And still my body drank.

I moved, and could not feel my limbs:
I was so light—almost
I thought that I had died in sleep,
And was a blessed ghost. (305-12).

He thinks, like the Wedding Guest, that he has died. He requires the weight of limbs to determine his own livingness, but because they feel too light, too insufficient; they instead, like phantom limbs, make him think he is a non-living specter. He must confirm his life repeatedly and each repetition raises awareness of the very non-living forms that must be utilized to do so.

The nonhuman sounds of life in the poem also indicate how life is not self-evident or conclusive. Like the water snakes, the “happy living things! / no tongue their beauty might declare” (286-7), the birdsong also demonstrates how language fails when it comes to signifying life. As the “sweet sounds rose slowly through their mouths, / and from their bodies passed” (356-7), and the breath of life leaves the reanimated crew, birds are given their song of life.

Sometimes a-dropping from the sky
I heard the sky-lark sing;
Sometimes all little birds that are,
How they seem to fill the sea and air
With their sweet jargoning. (362-366)

Sounds of life are transferred from the dead crew to the sky-lark, but, notably, the sky-lark changes from one to many. Daniel Tiffany’s analysis of the word “jargon,” traced etymologically in the *Oxford English Dictionary* to the word “birdsong,” shows how the voice of birds in poetry cannot be traced back to a singular source, especially in the woods or at sea, and becomes anonymous. The sky-lark multiples into “little birds” and, as Tiffany points out, “anonymity as a human (and lyrical) condition has its origin therefore in the transference of a bird’s ‘voice’—an alien tongue—into human language. The character of birdsong thus prefigures the nature of lyric anonymity: a bird’s song is a proper name of sorts, an impersonal signature expressing the singular fact of existence ad infinitum” (151-52). Not only does life as a categorical aim of lyrical expression become more anonymous and therefore harder to place, but it, too, must be repeated continuously. Rather than confirm life, the bird’s signature and the Mariner’s autobiographical tale are emptied of their singular existence. The autobiographical account, like the birdsong, becomes representative of a life beyond the self:

Early in the poem, the ship’s entrance into a zone of indistinction, a state of exception, a realm in which the non-living appear to speak and the living may be silent, is signaled when the sea ice is heard to growl like a living creature. Due to the storm that carries their ship off course, the mariners find themselves in a place devoid of life.

Nor shapes of men nor beast we ken—
The ice was all between.

The ice was here, the ice was there,
The ice was all around:
It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,
Like noises in a swound! (57-62)

There is nothing living around the crew, neither “men nor beast,” and the ice seems to stand here for the non-living. Human and non-human animal life is absent until the ice cracks and is given “beastly” language that growls, roars, and howls. The cracks split the non-living ice into something that can be interpreted as living further obscuring what constitutes a sign of life. If the
non-living can be interpreted as the living, then life is always already disclosed by ambiguous signs, wrapped in its own timely death. Life doesn’t self-evidently or conclusively signify because of its very dependence on non-living signs, even ones frozen in time.

The Wedding Guest’s fear and interruptions disrupt the narrative of the poem, but they also show how the interpretive problem of life disrupts its own narrative. Raimonda Modiano keenly observes that “the poem tests the limits of man’s power to convey through language the inner life of self which is intrinsically mysterious, prerational, and muted” (“Words and ‘Languageless’ Meaning” 42). Modiano makes a distinction not only between inner and outer life of the self, but also between language and experience. The Mariner loses his ability to speak after the albatross is killed, but his speech eventually returns and with it, according to Modiano, he reconstructs a supernatural tale that doesn’t quite match his experience. Although the temporality of experience and the temporal restrictions of language inhibit the signification of life, the problem of representing life begins, I suspect, with this categorical notion of life. If life is always a question, then how might we see life as perpetually evading both human and non-human parameters? The poem complicates a notion of life’s signification through the various moments of tension between language/signification and experience because, as Coleridge noted, the problem of signification in words alone, or the “inadequacy of Words to Feeling, of the Symbol to Being,” occurs not just in alphabetic speech or writing, but in non-living forms (Coleridge Notebooks, II, 2998). Life is an unknown that harkens to the supernatural with its ambiguity.

II

From the “spectre-bark,” to the figures of “LIFE-IN-DEATH” and “DEATH,” to the death and reanimation of the Mariner’s crew, the poem creates a supernatural machinery unlike any other major poem in the period (206, 193, 187). Wordsworth critiqued the poem in the 1800 edition as having several “great defects,” the first being that “the principal person has no distinct character, either in his profession of Mariner, or as a human being who having long been under control of supernatural impressions might be supposed to partake of something supernatural” (Lyrical Ballads 289). Although the poem offers a rich ground for exploring its symbolic and allegorical aspects, we must still ask: why does this excessive supernatural machinery comprise most of the poem? Why is the Mariner’s humanness or livingness not distinct? To answer these
questions, I will draw on Eugene Thacker’s arguments in *After Life* and *In the Dust of this Planet* about how ontologies of life create supernatural horror. Thacker explains how supernatural horror provides a medium for exposing the impossibility of answering the question “What is life?” Supernatural horror provides a “way of thinking the world as unthinkable, and the limits of our place within that world” (*In The Dust of This Planet* 99). In the realm of the supernatural we approach the “hiddenness of the world,” or the unhuman forms that are constitutive of humanness itself (96). The existence of supernatural horror illustrates how the question of life can never be fully answered; it creates a paradigm to showcase the unexplainable, the unknown, a life beyond. The supernatural elements that create interpretive barriers for “Rime” mimic the interpretive barriers to life. To Thacker, the dialectics of subject/object and life/death don’t produce clear-cut distinctions of either term; instead, these dialectical relations produce the supernatural. “Rime,” I argue, employs the supernatural with its spectral figure of “LIFE-IN-DEATH” and the Mariner’s non-distinct character to expose the very limits to knowledge of a living, human world.

In the 1817 edition of “Rime,” Coleridge adds an epigraph by Thomas Burnet that references the invisible or hidden world beyond human knowledge. This epigraph replaces the 1798 and 1800 edition arguments that each describe the ship’s course and how its path deviates from the “line” or, in the 1800 argument, “equator” (*Lyrical Ballads* 50, 260). In the 1798 argument the supernatural events are described as “the strange things that befell,” but the 1800 edition’s argument places the events in relation to the Mariner’s act of killing the albatross and how “he was followed by many and strange Judgments” (*Lyrical Ballads* 50, 260). By 1817, these arguments concerning the “strange” events are replaced by an epigraph that eliminates discussion of the ship and moral paths.

I can easily believe that there are more invisible natures than visible ones among the entities in the universe. But who will explain for us the family of all these beings? And the ranks and relationships and distinguishing features and qualities of each? What they do? What places they inhabit? The human intellect has always tried to approach knowledge of these matters, but has never touched it. (27)

The epigraph implies that there is something external or beyond human knowledge and perception: invisible natures that are supernatural. Similarly, in *Biographia Literaria,*
Coleridge’s justification for “Rime” employs invisible supernatural elements: he remarks that the emotions are to be “real in [the] sense that they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency” (314). Delusions and reality, visible natures and invisible ones, life and death in “Rime” all become indistinguishable.

In the 1798 edition of the poem, the spectral woman and her mate are both described: her mate as “fleshless” and “black” (*Lyrical Ballads* 180, 182), and she as “white” and “far liker Death than he” (*Lyrical Ballads* 188-89). Neither the spectral woman nor the spectral man is named as “LIFE-IN-DEATH” and “DEATH” respectively in editions prior to 1817. In the 1817 version, all descriptions of “DEATH,” as he is named in the gloss, are removed from the poem’s lines and “Rime” describes the feminine spirit as “The Night-Mair LIFE-IN-DEATH” (193). “DEATH” disappears and “LIFE-IN-DEATH” remains. Although the gloss and poem distinguish them as two separate figures, the 1817 edition poses questions: “Is that a DEATH? And are there two? / Is DEATH that woman’s mate?” (188-90). As mates, the two spectral figures are hard to discern from one another. “LIFE-IN-DEATH” isn’t named in the first edition; however, when she is, her naming effaces the description “DEATH.” Life and death, named or unnamed, aren’t distinct from one another in all versions of the poem.

The 1817 edition change that names the figure “LIFE-IN-DEATH” occurs, I propose, to highlight the idea that supernatural agencies manifest at the point of indistinguishability between life and death. The revision of the name “LIFE-IN-DEATH” reflects Coleridge’s ideas on the breakdown between thesis/antithesis and subject/object as he defines his Dynamic Philosophy in *Biographia Literaria*. He writes:

> This principle, and so characterised manifests itself in the SUM or I AM; which I shall hereafter indiscriminately express by the words spirit, self, and self-consciousness. In this, and in this alone, object and subject, being and knowing, are identical, each involving and supposing the other. In other words, it is a subject which becomes a subject by the act of constructing itself objectively to itself; but which never is an object except for itself, and only so far as by the very same act it becomes a subject. It may be described therefore as a perpetual self-duplication of one and the
same power into object and subject, which presuppose each other, and can exist only as antitheses. (XII, 297-8)

Largely influenced by (and possibly plagiarized from) Friedrich Schelling, Coleridge argues that the self comes into being because of the presence of its antithesis.\(^8\) As in other post-Kantian German philosophy, the tension between two poles, whether subject/object or thesis/antithesis, creates a dynamic or “self-moving and self-sustaining” system (Abrams 172-3). In *Natural Supernaturalism*, M.H. Abrams highlights the revolutions and circuitous systems in German philosophy as well as in Coleridge’s thought during this time. To Abrams, Coleridge “describes all division as death” and “against lethal division, in all areas of human perception, intellection, and invention, Coleridge sets the concept of ‘life’” (267). Coleridge demonstrates that the subject or object requires the other and writes this dialectical relationship in terms of life and death.

Much like the figure of “LIFE-IN-DEATH,” the two ideas are perpetually intertwined to the point of hyphenation. Abrams writes, “Coleridge conceives that all living process, in the realm of the mind as well as in the realm of nature, moves along a circular and ascending course” (271). Quoting Coleridge’s essay in *The Friend*, Abrams argues that Coleridge is trying to reconcile a division of the self from nature that occurs in thought: “We think of ourselves as separated beings, and place nature in antithesis to the mind, as object to subject, thing to thought, death to life” (*The Friend, I*, 520). Geoffrey Hartman, in his influential essay, “Romanticism and Anti-Self-Consciousness,” similarly writes of the concept of division of the self in the time period: “The Romantic poets do not exalt consciousness per se. They have recognized it as a kind of death-in-life, as the product of a division in the self” (183). The point to which both Abrams and Hartman draw attention in Coleridge’s thought, but don’t exactly state, is that, to Coleridge, life is no longer self-evident or self-conclusive. In order for life to be present, death, or life’s absence, must also be present. As Derrida writes, “Death is the movement of différance to the extent that that movement is necessarily finite. This means that différance makes the opposition of presence and absence possible. Without the possibility of différance, the desire of presence as such would not find its breathing-space” (*Of Grammatology* 143). The presence that seemingly occurs alongside life, or the presence that occurs with each breath, is fleeting with

\(^8\) Thomas McFarland’s book, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition*, addresses the complexities behind accusations of plagiarism regarding *Biographia Literaria*, but does state: “much of the twelfth chapter of *Biographia* is translated from Schelling” (27).
each breath. In each moment between the movements of breath difference is marked and, like a breath being held indefinitely, the presence of death, or absence, also occurs. Without a clear foundation of either life or death, they no longer are distinct parts, but rather questions that arise when trying to explain the other.

The indistinguishability of life and death represented in the supernatural figures of “DEATH” and “LIFE-IN-DEATH” also shapes the Mariner’s character. Right after “DEATH” takes the crewmembers and their bodies drop, the Wedding Guest interrupts the Mariner for the first time. Although the Mariner reassures the Wedding Guest that he is still alive, there remains a non-living sense about him. Life and death do not seem as distinct, for although the other crewmembers died and the Mariner tells the Wedding Guest his story, his life is doubted, giving him a life-in-death perceivable to the Wedding Guest. Later in the poem, as he stands on the deck with his reanimated crew, unable to draw his eyes from theirs, right before they return to their lifeless, corpse state, the Mariner looks out on the ocean as the curse is finally lifted. Yet in this moment, he still feels like a person being followed.

Like one, that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round, walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows, a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread. (450-55)

The fear of a “frightful fiend” following him haunts the narrator even in the moment that, as the gloss notes, “the curse is finally expiated” (446). Foreshadowing the Mariner’s future of perpetual penance, this odd description could mean that the fiend is a figure for the Mariner’s guilt, which will follow him throughout his life, but the evil spirit is described only as “frightful.” Like an apparition, death could be following close behind; however, there is no indication of what, if anything, the Mariner actually sees. Walking along or living seems to involve a nameless, frightful shadow of living or non-living, or, perhaps, an evil spirit that haunts life. As Thacker writes, “while this form of life is often named, more often than not it represents the very horizon of human thought to think about this third form of life at all” (After Life 2). Thacker determines this form of life to be a “nameless thing” because “the very terms of human thought fail to encompass” it (After Life 3). The Mariner, with an unthinkable fiend always
following him, thus becomes much like the supernatural figure “LIFE-IN-DEATH” as there is a spectral non-living sense about him that makes his life questionable. With skinny hands and vampiric acts, the Mariner signifies both life and death, making them indistinguishable from one another.

With its supernatural machinery, or as Paul Fry writes, with each “subsequent installment…that seem to thwart each other’s purpose” (The Rime of the Ancient Mariner 16), “Rime” ultimately shows how life can’t be conveyed because it always already involves the non-living. As the poem describes the snakes as “happy living things,” it follows up this observation to assert that “no tongue / Their beauty might declare” (286-7). A series of events premised on the unrepresentability of “living things,” the poem shows how the supernatural, with its invisible and ambiguous agencies, its affects of terror and dread, is the appropriate mode for describing a world in which life is never fully available to representation. As Thacker writes, “supernatural horror is one of the paradigms for the concept of ‘life’ today—not because of the fear of death, and not because of the crises that populate life, but because of a furtive, miasmatic unintelligibility that inhabits any ontology of life: the idea of ‘life’ that is not simply an anthropomorphic, human-centric idea of life” (After Life 268). Like the “howling” ice or the figure of LIFE-IN-DEATH, there is an evasive quality to life that both requires and creates the supernatural realm because an ontology of life evades not only human parameters, but also parameters of genre. The supernatural becomes a mode, much like the mode of lyrical autobiography in the Mariner’s tale, that tests the supposedly rigid limits of writing life. The unhuman or “Life-in-Death” in the poem might lead the Mariner, the Wedding Guest, and readers to an interpretive problem resulting from its supernatural elements, but the supernatural exists as a reminder of the questions of life that continue to haunt. The Mariner is haunted not only by the dead and by the non-living, but by life itself.

III

In response to Anna Barbauld’s criticism that his poem lacked a moral, Coleridge wrote in Table Talk that it had “too much” of one (Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works 593). Although we don’t know the precise nature of Barbauld’s critique, it does appear odd that a poet
by no means blind to the plight of non-human animals herself would find no moral in this poem. The Mariner’s moral message to the Wedding Guest—“He prayeth well, who loveth well / Both man and bird and beast”—invokes a theological imperative, but it also is strangely specific. Instead of referencing life in general, the poem instructs the Wedding Guest to pray and love man and beast, while the bird or albatross acts as a connection between the two life forms. In the next stanza, the Mariner refers to a more general idea of life: “All things both great and small” (619). As Patrick Keane writes in Coleridge’s Submerged Politics, “the all is essential. The crucial love is that for ‘man,’ [even] though the poem itself pivots on ‘bird and beast’” (132). Yet, contrary to Keane’s argument, the Wedding Guest turns away from the bridegroom’s door, the door of human kinship and community, in the final lines of the poem, thus illustrating a turn to life, nonhuman animal life, which occurs outside the theopolitical sphere of the Church. In other words, the albatross is significant to the poem’s ethicopolitical goals. The edited argument that appears in the 1800 edition of Lyrical Ballads states: “how the Ancient Mariner cruelly and in contempt of laws of hospitality killed a Sea-bird” (260). As David S. Miall points out, the argument does “not give a motive,” but does Bestow a moral notion of crime and punishment (638). Although Miall addresses the notions of guilt that surface from this crime in his essay “Guilt and Death,” what becomes more perplexing is how to define this crime in relation to the excessive supernatural machinery that is produced from the indistinguishability of life and death in the poem. Is this poem just about a crime against “nature,” and, if so, what are these “laws of hospitality” that define the Mariner’s transgression and protect a bird?

As recent theorists like Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, and Eric Santner have discussed, life, in modern biopolitical regimes, becomes a concern of the state. Drawing upon Michel Foucault’s earlier definition of biopower, they also consider how the protection of life, biopolitics, has the potential to transform into its very opposite, a thanatopolitics. Sovereign power and violence, to Agamben, is the excessive force which is required to perceive bare life, or the biopolitical body where natural or biological life, zoe, becomes indistinguishable from political life, bios. Agamben writes: “the fundamental activity of sovereign power is the

9 Barbauld’s “The Mouse’s Petition” (1773) is her most famous on the plight of small creatures after she visited Joseph Priestley’s house and saw his experiments on live mice. She was reluctant, though, to consider it as a plea against animal cruelty (Barbauld 67). Yet her other poem “The Caterpillar” (thought to be 1816) reflects on minute forms of life and features lines quite similar to “Rime”: “Making me feel and clearly recognize / Thine individual existence, life, / And fellowship of sense with all that breathes” (25-27).
production of bare life as originary political elements and as threshold of articulation between nature and culture, zoe and bios” (181). Agamben develops the idea of a state of exception, where sovereign life, much like bare life, or zoe, is both inside and outside the law. Similarly, Coleridge’s poem signifies life in terms of the living and non-living and the human and non-human; it also shows how life can be considered to be both inside and outside the political sphere. A notion of political inclusivity might depend on “laws of hospitality,” but as Barbauld’s contention illustrates, the supernatural elements of “Rime” impede the gravity of the moral message (Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works 593). However, Coleridge’s use of supernatural horror mimics the states of exception that occurs in the political world. The lives of both man and bird, or the Mariner and the albatross, are given consideration, but all of this occurs in a state of exception: at sea, and then, again, in a story that interrupts a wedding. The poem’s biopolitical narrative—its staging of a law that manifests in the state of exception, and so exceeds sovereign authority—constitutes an ethicopolitical dimension that Barbauld misses. The debate over not enough and too much is precisely what occurs in the state of exception, where bare life, or not enough life to be deemed a full citizen, is indistinguishable from what seems to exceed the limit of law, sovereign life.

In the “Rime,” sovereignty is first represented as a storm. At the onset of the Mariner’s voyage, a storm blows the ship off-course and, crucially, in the 1817 edition, Coleridge adds nine lines that personify the “storm-blast” as “tyrannous and strong” (41-2). Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano connect this storm to the historical context of the 1790s, when the “storm was commonly used . . . to describe the French Revolution and the violence of the people” (Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose 63). Although these lines about the “tyrannous” storm didn’t appear in the original 1798 version, Coleridge’s metaphor for sovereignty does not change. In his 1795 essay, “On the Present War,” he blames the monarchs and ministers for the “Death of Thousands,” and, quoting Joseph Addison and The Poems of Ossian, describes the sovereign figures as responsible for the storm, not the people: “They with all that majestic serenity, which the sense of personal safety fails not to inspire, can ‘Ride in the whirl-wind and direct the storm,’ or rather like the gloomy Spirits in Ossian, ‘sit on their distant clouds and enjoy the Death of the Mariner’” (Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose 257). The quote from Ossian refers to all mariners, not just the Mariner in “Rime,” as subject to a supernatural or excessive force. The sovereign figures or ministers and monarchs, representatives of both church and state, invoke a
state of exception. If “they succeed,” Coleridge writes, they “call the Massacre Victory” (257). As Coleridge observes here, the force to uphold law and thereby uphold the protection of life requires violence and a destruction of life. Coleridge’s idea predates this very paradox of sovereignty and the state of exception of which Carl Schmitt and Agamben will later write. For, to Agamben, “sovereign violence opens a zone of indistinction between law and nature, outside and inside, violence and law” (64). The Mariner’s ship, blown too far south due to a sovereign storm, enters into this same zone of indistinction, where what counts as a life or a citizen is uncertain, exemplified by the Mariner’s killing of the albatross.

The sovereignty of the storm remains absolute when, in Part VI, the two voices discuss the power behind the ship.

What makes that ship drive on so fast?
What is the ocean doing?

Second Voice.
Still as slave before his lord,
The ocean hath no blast; (416-19)

Despite the sea being a medium for imperial conquest, it remains a slave before not only the storm, but also the moon. The origin of sovereign power becomes harder to locate as it is dispersed across multiple powers. The disassembling of sovereign power creates a state of exception that is everywhere, for power is no longer attributable to a single source. J.B. Ebbatson and William Empson have addressed the guilt and crime of the Mariner in relation to the slave trade, where the sea represents a notion of imperial power and expansion, yet the voices argue here that the ocean is itself a slave to the storm and moon. The sea, as representative of both sovereign reign and nature, becomes a state of exception. As Agamben writes, “The state of nature and the state of exception are nothing but two sides of a single topological process . . . the state of exception is thus not so much a spatiotemporal suspension as a complex topological figure in which not only the exception and the rule but also the state of nature and law, outside and inside, pass through one another” (37). In this state, much like the watery sea, life and death pass through one another to the point that what counts as life is no longer finite or containable.

Like the indistinguishability of life and death in the poem, bare life and sovereignty become harder to discern from one another at sea, especially in a state of exception. One would
think that the albatross’s death, that of a non-human animal life, would be inconsequential; however, the albatross’s death is punishable by the cosmological and supernatural machinery and the Mariner must atone for this act. If the etymological meaning of “atone” is to be “at one,” then he must tell his story about how he recognizes a form of zoe that is shared among all beings and thus his atonement gives the albatross an ethicopolitical status. Coleridge’s concept of “one Life” and his later politics, when combined with the Mariner’s act of atonement, address the very ambivalence of zoe and bios and indistinguishability of life and death, or rather a life-in-death. Although published much later in Coleridge’s life (1829), his essay on the constitution of both church and state bestows a supernatural quality to humans: “Those powers and instincts which constitute the man, at least separate him from animal, and distinguish the nobler from the animal part of his own being, will be led by the supernatural in themselves to the contemplation of a power which is likewise super-human” (On the Constitution of the Church and State 45; emphasis in original). In this section, Coleridge writes of a supernatural element, an external, almost alien quality to humans that distinguishes them. By trying to separate humans from their “animal” parts, Coleridge must utilize the same term, human, and in doing so he obscures the concept of human even more. Instead he resorts to the supernatural or the unexplainable. Even in the realm of the church and state, there is still something unhuman about the human, much like what the supernatural world works to uncover.

Coleridge’s views of the church and the state changed throughout the course of his life, but because he worked on “Rime” up until the end of his life, the ideas of political theology brought up in his later essay on the constitution of these social and political institutions directly speak to the biopolitical elements in his poem. The supernatural qualities of both the poem and the human evolve into a force or excess that the death of the albatross elucidates. Although in the “mid 1790s, Coleridge had been hostile to all Church establishments, particularly to the Church of England,” he would later, by 1802, come to see the church and the state as essential components of one another (Morrow 642, 649). Modiano writes in Coleridge’s Concept of Nature that “Coleridge became more and more prone to entertain theories that emphasized ‘man’s dependence on some thing out of him, on something more apparently and believably subject to regular & certain Laws than his own Will & Reason’” (21; emphasis in original; qtd. from Coleridge’s Notebooks, II, 2672). These conflicting notions of how the church and/or state
offer a form of community or connection with all life, both bios and zoe, can be seen at the end of the poem, where the moral of the poem seems to be most evident:

    O Wedding-Guest! this soul hath been
    Alone on a wide wide sea:
    So lonely ’twas, that God himself
    Scarce seemed there to be.

    O Sweeter than the marriage-feast,
    ’Tis sweeter far to me,
    To walk together to the kirk
    With a goodly company!—

    To walk together to the kirk,
    And all together pray,
    While each to his great Father bends,
    Old men, and babes, and loving friends,
    And youths and maidens gay!

    Farewell, farewell! But this I tell
    To thee, thou Wedding-Guest!
    He prayeth well, who loveth well
    Both man and bird and beast. (601-617)

The Mariner finds being alone at sea, being at one with himself, godless and stateless. He prefers community and “goodly company,” for this gives him a sense of connection and also of completion. Geoffrey Hartman writes of the poem being in many ways “about the way the human in us is emptied out . . . the plot first separates the protagonist from society and then restores him to it via a larger communitarian consciousness of ‘man and beast and bird’” (“The Question of Our Speech” 324). The Mariner prefers “the kirk” to “the marriage-feast” because it reminds him of the connection to life and the sense of community seems to affirm his life. However, the Mariner’s interruption of the wedding contradicts this very lesson of kinship. Instead of allowing the Wedding Guest to go in to the wedding, he stops him and tells his tale.
And even more strangely, the Wedding Guest, upon hearing the tale, turns away from the “bridegroom’s door” at the end of the poem and, although “wiser” the next morning, seems to be immune to the Mariner’s message (628, 625).

The church and state, or the community, offered by the Mariner’s story are not sufficient. The only thing that is sufficient, however momentary, is the Mariner’s imperative to tell his story. His “strange power of speech” always returns at “some uncertain hour” and it’s the repetition of his tale that defines his purpose and moral (591, 586). After the hermit asks him, “what manner of man art thou?” the Mariner’s tale begins.

Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched
With a woeful agony
Which forced me to begin my tale;
And then it left me free.

Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns;
And till my ghastly tale is told,
This heart within me burns.

I pass, like night, from land to land;
I have strange power of speech;
That moment that his face I see,
I know the man that must hear me:
To him my tale I teach. (582-594)

He must speak to relieve himself of the agony, and also to confirm his life, to feel “free.” He doesn’t find the Wedding Guest inside the church. The face of the other person, or the audience required for this telling, doesn’t appear in the church, but outside of it, either before a hermit while adrift at sea or outside the wedding. His life or tale can never be fully written or confirmed within a theopolitical space. The Mariner as the lone survivor exhibits a life-in-death that is always on the outskirts of human selves and human society. A version of an ethics of exception, an ethics that cannot be fully and completely articulated in a simple moral summation, the
Mariner’s tale wavers between too much and too little, its insufficient nature marked by what will always return.

Representing life, especially when translated into the theopolitical sphere, is difficult because the signification of life always already requires something other than life. “Rime” uses the supernatural realm, but also an abstract idea of excess or state of exception. The supernatural elements of the poem are produced by the indistinguishability of life and death and this indistinguishability mimics the ethicopolitical problem. What is notable about the poem is that the Mariner’s telling of his story, which begins in the biopolitical space of imperial exploration and conquest, interrupts the wedding, wherein the state attempts to control the reproduction of life. The Mariner’s interruption of public institutions, such as the church in this case, where the law is sustained, essentially defines a state of exception, where, as Agamben defines it, the force to uphold law is at odds with sustaining life (38). The discrepancy between Barbauld and Coleridge over whether or not the poem has a moral echoes the very interpretive problem of life, or rather its constant indistinguishability from death, but the ongoing debate of the poem reminds us of the need to keep returning to the interpretative problems of both life and the poem. Much like the Wedding Guest, who turns away from the bridegroom’s door, readers also turn from the poem, knowing that a “life-in-death” or a “nameless” ontology of life taunts us with the sense of an ending, but, tomorrow, we will awake with the question of life still to be answered.
Chapter 2
Beyond Species and Nation:
Writing Life and Land in “Beachy Head”

Written near the end of Charlotte Smith’s life and posthumously published in an “imperfect” state according to the 1807 editor, the poem “Beachy Head” struggles to convey life (The Poems of Charlotte Smith 215). Life seems fragmented and imperfect even when the poem is able to convey moments of it. As the poet-speaker sits at the top of the cliffs of Beachy Head, the sounds and silence interrupt her thoughts, with each sound conveying the life around her. Terns, hulls, and tarrocks, “inmates of the chalky clefts” (20), shriek their “shrill harsh cry” (21), signifying to her the life of various species of birds. Yet, like Coleridge’s “Rime,” “Beachy Head” also reveals the problem of signifying life. For each time life conveys itself and answers the question of livingness, in the very instant life is conveyed, it also begins another question about its very livingness. Life seems to become “more remote” in each representation (110). As the poem continues, other birds’ cries are heard amidst the quiet of the cliff’s edge, where “all breathes repose” and silence pervades the speaker’s surrounding environment (112)—“but now and then the sea-snipe’s cry / just tells that something living is abroad” (113-4; emphasis added). The sea-snipe’s cry signifies life, but a life “abroad,” external to the poet-speaker and always just beyond her. However, this life is recognizable, in parts, a mere just that falls over the enjambed line and also, separated by breaks of silence, at the beginning of each representation of life. Invoking, too, a temporal notion of “now and then,” these broken lines exhibit how the poem as a whole represents life in a series of fragments that hang by their temporal threads (113).

Moving from a lyric “I” to other speakers and species, “Beachy Head” becomes autobiographical in the broadest sense: its lyrical impulse resides at the intersection between bios (life) and graphe (writing). Smith was criticized by some of her contemporary reviewers for being too autobiographical in her works, for putting too much of her own life into her poems and novels.10 Not only does the poem alter the self or the I, as Stuart Curran has notably addressed in his essay “The ‘I’ Altered,” but the poem also alters how life, or bios, interrupts the relationship

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10 In response to Smith’s earlier poem, The Emigrants, which also features the location of Beachy Head, an anonymous reviewer from the Critical Review wrote “[Smith], and not the French emigrant, fills the foreground; begins and ends the piece; and the pity we should naturally feel for those overwhelming and uncommon distresses she describes, is lessened by their being brought into parallel with the inconveniences of a narrow income or a protracted lawsuit” (299-300).
between the self and writing, or, more literally, *auto* and *graphe*. Christophe Bode offers a perspective in his essay “The Subject of Beachy Head”: the subject of “Beachy Head” is “Beachy Head” itself. The poem, according to him, is “auto-referential” (59). Bode also observes that “the subject of ‘Beachy Head’ is not confined by any limitations of time or space” and that “‘Beachy Head’ does not demarcate the *limitations* of human subjectivity but highlights the fact that human subjectivity can encompass everything” (63, 67-8; emphasis in original). Written at the same location, the cliffs of Beachy Head, the poem “Beachy Head,” like *The Emigrants*, features a poet-speaker; however, fossils and relics, wanderers and hermits, and the flora and fauna—life in all its varied forms—displace a central lyric subject.

In her letters, Charlotte Smith writes of “Beachy Head” as a “local poem,” which “embraces a variety of subjects” (*The Collected Letters of Charlotte Smith* 740, 705). Although described by Jacqueline Labbe as a loco-descriptive poem, excepting its title, the poem wanders from its specific location (8). In an attempt to address both the individual and collective experience, the poem, written as Smith was dying, strives to depict life in all its varied forms. As the poem shows, the very subject of life accumulates with each variation exposing the gaps, whether temporal or spatial, of its depiction. Following Theresa Kelley, I believe that “Beachy Head” differs from Smith’s earlier works and is not simply the work of an “autobiographical female poet-speaker who uses an elegiac voice to dun her readers” (289). Although the poem does feature a lyric poet-speaker or self, the poem also invokes many life subjects, thus expanding the concept of self in autobiography. The many subjects of “Beachy Head” are, in a sense, autobiographical, because they concern life, *bios*, and *graphe*, or life as it is represented through various forms of signification. Yet this notion of life as I am referring to it, with *bios*, is not an affirmation of what Rosi Braidotti defines as the Aristotelian-based “hierarchy that privileged *bios* (discursive, intelligent, social life) over *zoe* (brutal ‘animal’ life)” (“Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others” 530). Instead the poem creates the possibility of perceiving life as migratory and imbued with a non-linear spatiotemporality; a life that also addresses the politics of nativity.

In this chapter, I will address the lyrical elements that, like the Mariner’s answer to the question “What manner of man art thou?,” emphasize an immediacy to this question of representing life. There is a lyrical imperative, but the poem also expands the limits of the lyric subject and the conditions in which the self accesses life via the written form. The poem
privileges contemplation, a repetitive, mulling, thoughtful experience that enables the lyrical subject to cross far distances in time, a geologic “deep time,” and perceive, for example, the life of the fossils within the chalky cliffs. By displaying a keen sense of natural history that was progressive for Smith’s time, “Beachy Head” also recognizes how temporality complicates seemingly static and classified life. The final section of this chapter will consider how the poem’s migrant species and figures expand a dominant, yet limited notion of citizenship and allow for a more cosmopolitan view of life. Even at prospect heights, life becomes nomadic via the poem’s wandering species and representable only through bouts of time that are felt both locally and globally.

I

Discussion of the many subjects of “Beachy Head” often center on the poet-speaker, the self in autobiography. Its lyric form complicates the poem’s narrative structure since the “I” simultaneously denotes a reference point while also denying it. “Beachy Head” uses the poet-speaker intermittently, but this “I” is de-centered by other voices and subjects, like the wanderer’s short poem and, in the poem’s final moments, the hermit’s unwritten epitaph. In trying to locate the “I” of the poem Labbe observes, “Smith’s parade of speakers in ‘Beachy Head’ work to call into question the viability of an authoritative, disengaged ‘I’ . . . Her devolution of the Self into myriad constructed selves dramatizes the difficulty of sustaining the Self through poetry” (153). In fact, Labbe’s reflections on the subject of lyric poetry’s dialectical “I,” unannounced by her, touch upon what Theodor Adorno discusses as the dialectical situation of the individual in lyric poetry. As a defining trait of the genre, lyric poetry features a self or lyric subject that is solitary and distinct from society, but, as Adorno argues, also immersed within society because of language. For Adorno, “the paradox specific to the lyric work, a subjectivity that turns into objectivity, is tied to the priority of linguistic form in the lyric . . . for language is itself something double” (43). What Adorno suggests is that the dialectic of the subject and object of lyric poetry is caught within language, which seems to originate from a single subject, but this language is also a medium that is used to connect the subject’s experience with a more collective one.11

11 Adorno’s meaning of the doubleness of language is best described through the dialectical relationship of the self/the singular, and society/the collective. He writes “through its configurations [language] assimilates itself
By trying to convey a sense of life, both collective and singular, the lyric speaker in the poem is also caught within the limits of language. In a discussion of happiness, the lyric speaker in “Beachy Head” poses the question “Ah, who *is* happy?” that is answered with a “Yet *they* are happy who have never asked” and an “I once was happy” (255, 259, and 281; emphasis in original). The italicization of both “I” and “they” emphasizes the dialectical relationship between the individual and collective experience. In an effort to capture the life seemingly beyond the speaker, and not be merely autobiographical—as in only relating to the life of the self—she turns to language to communicate experience of both the “I” and the collective “they” while also pointing out its flaws: “Happiness! A word / That like false fire, from marsh effluvia born, / Misleads the wanderer” (255-7): like Death, which the boy playing on the river “knows not” (262), “happiness” represents, but not completely. Language’s variable meaning captures the tension between the experience of the individual and the collective.

As the speaker attempts to convey the life both within and beyond her, she is confronted with the abutting landscape before her: the concussion of land created, as Smith states in her footnote, by a “convulsion of Nature” (*The Poems of Charlotte Smith* 217). In this same footnote Smith confesses that she “never could trace the resemblance between the two countries [England and France]” (217). Smith takes issue with a linear and superficial tracing of the geographical while also noting a convulsion that took place in a distant past. There are breaks in time and experience that make life all the more difficult to convey. Although fragments of life are accessible through experience and repetition, the poem draws attention to these gaps in time. The poem begins at morning with a view of a mariner at sea; by line 29, “the high meridian of the day is past.” Yet after these lines we are unable to chronologically track the speaker’s day at Beachy Head or whether or not the poem is occurring at a certain time and place. Unlike *The Emigrants*, “Beachy Head” doesn’t feature a notation of a specific scene and time.\(^\text{12}\) The poet’s

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\(^{12}\) The first book of *The Emigrants* begins with a notation of a scene: “on the Cliffs to the Eastward of the Town of Brighthelmstone of Sussex;” and a time: “a morning in November, 1792” (135). The second book begins with a similar notation, but changes the scene to: “on an eminence on one of those Downs, which afford to the South a View of the Sea; the North of the Weald of Sussex;” and time to: “an Afternoon in April, 1793” (149).
gaze follows a ship toward distant lands and “orient climates, where the sun / Matures the spice” (45). In these “afar off” lands, life is seen by its “seasons” and rotations (100). Time is marked through the maturation of a spice or, for the fishermen, “daily task[s]” and “night tides” (102, 104). The change in seasons, the variance of light in day versus night, or the ripening of a spice depict time passed. Noting the revolutions and repetitions in chronological time, the poem also interrupts its own narrative, and the speaker’s thoughts, with the “loud clamours” of a ship’s crew before her and the sounds of the sea-snipe’s cry (108, 113). The life of the speaker begins to extend beyond her as the poem considers life in other places and in other species, fragmenting not only the poem, but also the lyric subject as well.

The fragmented speaker parallels the rift between lands, but also the difference between how memory and contemplation record the landscape. From the poem’s first few lines, the speaker is at odds not only with the “rock sublime” that surrounds her, but also with her own experience. “Fancy” complicates the speaker’s authority: “I would recline; while Fancy should go forth” (1, 4). There occurs, much like the concussion between the lands of England and France within the speaker’s view, a split between the speaker’s physical body and her memory’s ability, highlighting the conflicting tension of authority in the poem. As Labbe observes, Smith’s “desire to destabilize a unified subjectivity means that in the poem authority is ceded to variety” (159). The speaker becomes fragmented because of how she is able to both account for her past as well as present experience and also access other fragmented subjects of life. “Fancy” and “contemplation” are what allow the speaker to access the topographical terrain and history of the geographical location of Beachy Head, and contemplation is itself an extension of the life of the poet, through its very personification: “Contemplation here, / High on her throne of rock, aloof may sit / And bid recording Memory unfold” (117-9). Contemplation bids and sits, yet it can sit “aloof.” Life is extended to contemplation and while it comprises the poet-speaker’s experience, it also can escape the life of the poet-speaker as well as the poet-speaker’s desires or commands. The poem invokes “memory” at this point, contrasting it with contemplation, implying a difference; memory records, like a version of linear history, but contemplation sits above it.

Walter Benjamin, who saw in Baudelaire’s poetry the ability to convey a heightened form of experience, which he terms *Erfahrung*, would arguably be able to find this same recurrent form of experience, one “that accompanies one to the far reaches of time,” in Smith’s poem (Benjamin 331). Benjamin’s concept of *Erfahrung* provides access to a longer time that “is
possible only within the realm of the ritual” (333). Erfahrung requires repetition and more time, much like contemplation does, and gives one access to remote, longer times: a new kind of history or record of life that can’t be achieved by linear memory alone. This longer sense of time may be accessible through repetition within place, very much like Smith’s return to the cliffs of Beachy Head to write another poem almost 15 years after The Emigrants. She recalls her moments of solitary youth at the same location: “I once was happy, when while yet a child, / I learn’d to love these upland solitudes” (282-3). Returning to the location of Beachy Head, she not only looks back on her life and childhood, but also recognizes its non-linear presence: “Haunts of my youth! / Scenes of fond day dreams, I behold ye yet!” (297-8). Like the sublime scene before her, she also sees her childhood before her—she is experiencing the past and the present at once. “An early worshiper at Nature’s shrine, / I loved her rudest scenes,” the speaker returns to Beachy Head, contemplating its marked scenes in her ritual at “Nature’s shrine” (346-7). Her return to this location, especially after she references her status as a “guiltless exile” in France (287), marks the ritual and allows her to experience a time beyond a static past or present.

The returns of the ritual and Erfahrung echo notions of a non-linear geologic “deep time” that were surfacing through an emergent understanding of natural history during Smith’s time. “Natural history embraced the description and classification of all kinds of natural entity, including even the celestial” (Rudwick 54; emphasis in original). All forms, whether animal, vegetable, or mineral, were classified, yet, Rudwick also writes that “orders, families, genera, and species” were terms that “had no necessary association with living things, still less any evolutionary connotations” (54). Natural history classified life to distinguish individual species, but the connections between forms of life weren’t emphasized. Life was an imperfect compilation of various rocks. In contrast to this version of natural history, “Beachy Head” instead constructs a natural history that connects life both locally and globally through its use of both immediate and “deep time.”

II

Unlike Coleridge, who turns to the strange ontology of the supernatural in an effort to convey life in “Rime,” Smith turns to the spatiotemporal knowledge given by natural history. As Kelley observes, “Beachy Head” moves between the macro- and micro- levels of historiography:
it “is committed to a grand historical narrative, but this commitment is undermined by a parallel attention to human and natural particularities that are insistently local” (288). Although Kelley writes that these particulars undermine the larger historical narrative, I argue that the particulars are precisely what accumulate, allowing one to perceive a grander, deeper time scale of life. In the same way that temporality affects one’s experience, allowing it to be perceived, while exposing its gaps, theories of natural history or geology during Smith’s time were disrupting the traditional timescale that centered on human history and thus changing the perception of both human and non-human life. Denis Diderot’s Encyclopédie (1749) classified human knowledge into three categories: memory, reason, and imagination. Each correlated to a type of science: history, philosophy, and poetry, respectively (Rudwick 49). However, “Beachy Head” uses memory, reason, and imagination, to show how, like the very amalgamation of rock on the cliffs on the beachhead, all three allow one to access a longer, more global experience of contemplation.

Much like Gilbert White’s version in A Natural History of Selborne, “Beachy Head” utilizes an immediate and localized sense of natural history that accumulates and accesses a deeper sense of time. White, whom Smith references in a footnote, is “an advocate of prolonged firsthand observation” (Menely 53). White records the daily life of various species in the small parish of Selborne, capturing life’s presence and immediacy. Yet his descriptive letters sent to fellow naturalists also accumulate to eventually comprise a volume, or natural history, of the parish that reaches a global audience. This version of natural history is both immediate and representative of a “deep,” longer time. In “Beachy Head,” the speaker also juxtaposes immediate time with deep geological time. Prior to the speaker’s thoughts that wander to the ancient fossils beneath her, she relates the instantaneous act of respiration: “I breathe your pure keen air; and still behold / those widely spreading views” (369-70). Like the prior mention of breath in the poem, where “all breathes repose,” the localized experience of each inhalation, or pause between exhalations, creates undulations in the poem’s temporality. For following these lines that concern each present breath, the poem unearths a time long ago, an unfamiliar, yet recognizable time when and where petrified forms once lived.

“Beachy Head” utilizes this “time remote,” a non-linear time, as a way to connect the life that both appears and lies hidden within the rock (406). Two lines after the poetic speaker records her breath of the “keen air,” she thinks of the life beneath her feet, “still, observing
objects more minute” (372). They seem “strange” and “foreign” (373), yet they are “seeming of resembling substance” (375). Life is “foreign” or “abroad,” but recognizable. When other species are brought under the poem’s lens, the focus is always inquisitive, especially in regard to time: “What time these fossil shells, / buoyed on their native element were thrown / among the embedding calx” (384-6; emphasis added); or “What time the huge unwieldy elephant / Auxiliary reluctant, hither led / From Afric’s forest glooms and tawny sands, / first felt the northern blast, and his vast frame / Sunk useless” (412-15; emphasis added). These times are not contained within the space, but the land and spatial objects project a non-linear trace of life that results from the version of natural history that the poem creates. The poem imagines “buoyed” shells and the death of an elephant, a moment where cold air connects with the elephant’s body, but it is only through this imagination or fancy that one can attempt to trace. Like the atemporality of a dream, this poem recognizes that space is tied to time, but not in a linear fashion; the only thing that’s traceable is a life that can be buoyed or a life that can feel “unwieldy” and “reluctant” (412, 413). Kevis Goodman argues that “for Charlotte Smith, natural history, particularly geology, is always more than a timeless taxonomy, because its material shapes – like these ‘strange and foreign forms of sea shells’ mingled with the ‘calcareous soil’– direct attention to the multiple trajectories that once produced their aggregate forms: the heaving of hills, buoying of shells, etc” (6). Natural history is “timeless,” a “recording memory” where seemingly linear elements unfold in various sequences, but can still convey a non-linear trace of life.

The poem uses natural history’s temporal fluctuations to show how contemplation also allows one to perceive a nonlinear life that can expand notions of citizenship. Smith confides in her footnote to line 375 that she “has never read any of the late theories of the earth” and contends that the ones she has read are unsatisfying in their “attempts to explain many of the phenomena which call forth conjecture” (The Poems of Charlotte Smith 232). Yet Smith very much recognizes a temporal element to the fossils, remarking in the same footnote that some appear “more recent” (232). Connecting life within the rock to time, Smith writes her own version of natural history: one that is not a linear tracing or history centered on human form. For under the shepherd:

rests the remains of men, of whom is left
No traces in the records of mankind,
save what these half obliterated mounds
And half fill’d trenches doubtfully impart
To some lone antiquary who on times remote
Since which two thousand years have rolled away,
Loves to contemplate. He perhaps may trace,
Or fancy he can trace, the oblong square
Where the mailed legions under Claudius reared
The rampire or excavated fosse delved (402-11)

The tracing of life, for the antiquarian, becomes a “perhaps,” because life can’t be accessed in a linear fashion and is also neither hierarchical nor bound to place. Positioning the lowly shepherd, whose only care is “the kindly change of sun and shower” (397), on top of a mound that houses, unbeknownst to the shepherd, possible remains of famous legions of Claudius, the poem juxtaposes the present with a notorious, but forgotten, human history. The life beneath is accessible through the contemplation of an antiquarian, but that doesn’t mean life is any more definite than citizenship. The expansion of empire by Claudius changed citizenship by conquering people and lands. Yet the juxtaposition of what the shepherd doesn’t know and what the antiquarian “perhaps may trace” on the same spot of land demonstrates, like England’s own history of ever-changing citizenship through the conquests of Roman, Anglo-Saxon or Danish empires, that nativity doesn’t determine citizenship.

The poem’s use of both colloquial and Linnaean nomenclature also demonstrates a local and global situation of species life. Linnaean nomenclature was a form of Enlightenment cosmpolitanism because of its efforts to globalize taxonomy, but there were still individual and local traits that had to be accounted for. As Smith notes in her renaming of the species Ophrys muscifera (fly orchis): “Linnaeus, misled by the variations to which some of this tribe are really subject, has perhaps too rashly esteemed all those which resemble insects as forming only one species, which he terms Ophrys insectifera” (The Poems of Charlotte Smith 236). Smith takes issue with the “rash” decision to attribute uniformity to different species of life. Language, via classification, can name a species, but there are also colloquial names that individualize them. She directs her readers to the local variations as well as migration patterns of species with the references in her footnotes. As is the case with her footnote on the Fern Owl or Goatsucker, she realizes her error in not knowing a species’ “name or history” at the time she wrote of the same bird two decades earlier in her sonnets (The Poems of Charlotte Smith 239). In the poem, life is
variable and the “vain” conquest of “Science” is to decree with certainty “from whence these fossils are seen” (390, 394). Life, even with natural history, is variable and unknowable; it also migrates and has potentially cosmopolitan implications.

III
Cosmopolitanism during the 1790s underwent several revisions. Immanuel Kant’s essay on perpetual peace saw cosmopolitanism in the way a local transgression becomes global: “Because a (narrower or wider) community widely prevails among the Earth’s peoples, a transgression of rights in one place in the world is felt everywhere” (18; emphasis in original). In an effort towards perpetual peace, Kant creates a universal purpose of cosmopolitanism that connect all nations. Yet, as Esther Wohlgemut writes in her book, Romantic Cosmopolitanism, these abstract notions of community or nation, or a “non-unified model of nation,” create confusion for other British writers, like Edmund Burke who, in contrast, defines a more insular sense of British patriotism (5). To Burke, wanderers, with seemingly no ties to the local or the national, are dangerous aberrations (127). “Beachy Head” demonstrates a keen awareness of variations of life, where space and time, land and life, are accessed through fractured moments along a non-linear temporality and through a heightened form of experience, Erfahrung. The “concussion” of land creates a spatiotemporal division between England and France, but it also occurs within the subject as well (6). The poem demonstrates how gaps in both experience and time as well as within living bodies position life along a non-hierarchal ladder, a positioning that doesn’t discount wanderers or hermits as exiles. Is this a more refined notion of how the local can become global? Or does Smith’s poem call for a rethinking of cosmopolitanism that goes beyond national land boundaries or naturalized citizenship to encompass a non-linear temporality as well, where an enfleshed memory can be held accountable through time?

As one of the editors of a recent anthology entitled After Cosmopolitanism, Rosi Braidotti argues for a notion of cosmopolitanism that is a “becoming-world,” one that recognizes a “planetary interrelation” while also denying a liberal unitary subject (8). This form of cosmopolitanism slightly revises her earlier construct of a nomadic subject. Elsewhere Braidotti defines this subject as “physiologically embedded in the corporeal materiality of the self, but the enfleshed intensive or nomadic subject is an in-between: a folding-in of external influences and a simultaneous unfolding-outwards of affects. A mobile entity, in space and time, and also an
enfleshed kind of memory, this subject is in-process but is also capable of lasting through sets of discontinuous variations, while retaining extra-ordinarily faithful to itself” (“Ethics of Becoming-imperceptible” 135). Acknowledging time and space, Braidotti’s version of cosmopolitanism and nomadic subjectivity recalls Smith’s privileging of the wanderer and hermit in her poem.13

The final third of the poem suggests that we turn to “a more attractive study” of wanderers and hermits, but also to other species.

But from thoughts like these,
By human crimes suggested, let us turn
To where a more attractive study courts
The wanderer of the hills…(439-442)

The speaker turns to the study of the wanderer and the hermit because they seem extrinsic to human crimes. Yet she takes two subjects, the wandering shepherd and static hermit, to show how they are as dialectically related to one another as the lyric subject and natural history. The wandering shepherd’s life is nomadic, not only through his wandering, but also because he exemplifies a life that is not bound within a linear structure.

While the fresh night-wind let the moonbeams in
Between the swaying boughs, just saw him pass –
And then in silence, gliding like a ghost
He vanished, lost among the deepening gloom!
But near one ancient tree, whose wreathed roots
Formed a rude couch, love-songs and scattered rhymes,
Unfinished sentences, or half-erased,
And rhapsodies like this, were sometimes found. (570-76)

He vanishes “in-between” the moving limbs, somewhere in-between a started sentence and a finished one, yet the words, albeit “half-erased,” are what ostensibly sustain him in time. His wandering nature is glimpsed through movement across time, and language is only half able to

13For Braidotti, nomadic subjectivity can lead to a becoming-world, as she discusses in Transpositions, a becoming-world that is not anthropocentric and rewrites life, or bio, in terms of bioegalitarianism. She also writes in another published essay: “In philosophical nomadism this mode of becoming is rather linked to a sense of interconnectedness which can be rendered in terms of an ethics of eco-philosophical empathy and affectivity which cuts across species, space and time. Bio-centered egalitarianism is an ethics of sustainable becomings, of affirmative qualitative shifts which de-center and displace the human” (“Ethics of Becoming-Imperceptible” 156).
capture him. Smith’s wanderer becomes spectral, amorphous, leaving only words behind, but these words, the words of his poem, are what the peasant girls and the readers “even now” (529) remember. This poem within the poem locates his nomadic self where the words fix him to a linguistic location despite his ambling nature.

The hermit also comes to represent a nomadic subject because of his fixed home. His spatiotemporal location, although static, is compromised because he saves drowning sailors, nomadic mariners whose lives are adrift at sea. The hermit, “long disgusted with the world,” commits actions that defy this very belief, actions that allow him to connect with other life despite his “outrage” over “human crimes” (675, 690-1). His compassion for nomadic, shipwrecked mariners is exemplified in the line “his heart/Was feelingly alive to all that breathed” (687-8). Much like the hermit in “Rime,” who asks the Mariner a question about what “manner” of man he is, the hermit in “Beachy Head” also seeks for answers about species identity or livingness. Yet, unlike Coleridge’s hermit, the hermit in “Beachy Head” doesn’t ask questions. Instead, by saving nomadic lives, he realizes his interconnectedness to other life. He becomes not only representative of a dialectical relationship between the local or singular subject with the global, but he also exemplifies a nomadic subjectivity or “becoming-world” as Braidotti defines it.14 She writes, “The nomadic vision of the subject as a time continuum and a collective assemblage implies a double commitment, on the one hand to processes of change and on the other to a strong sense of community—of ‘our’ being in this together” (“‘Becoming-world’” 22). The hermit’s actions affirm the interconnectedness of life and allow him to transcend his fixed location in the lives that he saves. He loses himself to become-world. Both the wanderer and the hermit portray their dialectical relationship revolving around placement in time, representing one who meanders and one who stays fixed, while simultaneously denoting the other.

The poet-speaker’s turn in the poem is also away from human crimes to other migrant and nomadic species that exist in the poem. The poem observes bluebells and orchids, bees and flies, moles and “timid” birds—all smaller forms of life. Man-made traps “scar the turf,” but the Shepherd exists in sharp contrast. It is the wandering shepherd who “protects the social bird,”

14 Kari Lokke writes on the dialectical compassionate actions of the hermit: “on the one hand, Smith’s hermit seems an embodiment of absolute compassion, outside of space and time, and instantiation of utopian possibility. On the other hand, his feeling is an active compassion that seeks expression in a particular historical and phenomenal moment and that abandons the distance and physical safety upon which the canonical sublime aesthetic response is predicated” (53).
who in turn exists “in fellowship among” the sheep (466-7). Life is just as much connected to all things in its spatiotemporal environment. The wanderer and hermit become privileged, but not because they are human; they are privileged because they represent subjects of life that are in-between time, who are both local and global, who are mobile and fixed. Their anonymous states, or bodies-in-time, both act together to allow them to become-world, of all life worlds.

Cosmopolitanism has the power to both require and reject that subjects be bound to a certain location. These subjects can be defined by bios or zoe or they can be expanded, where no species are foreign, where no species are emigrants. Adriana Craciun argues in her book that Smith’s form of cosmopolitanism goes “beyond naturalization and nationalism” and “articulates a cosmopolitan feminist alternative to British nationalism” (154). Craciun finds within Smith’s novels “a rejection of British, or even English, distinctness, whether in terms of genealogy, geography, politics or virtue” and “a refusal to be bound by convention or prejudices specific to place” (154). Via its nomadic subjectivity, “Beachy Head” further broadens these notions of cosmopolitanism to encompass a rejection of species distinctness whether in terms of geography or genealogy. Life might be embedded within the rocks of Beachy Head, but the discursiveness of poetic tropes reveals life’s passing temporality. The geologic rock that holds the various species, where “All, with the lapse of Time, have passed away,” is still able to recall life via the poet speaker’s contemplation (434). The life beneath is excavated, however fragmented, in the speaker’s ability to access a longer, non-linear geological time with a return that allows one to record variation. Yet life is also “unremember’d,” a forgetting that depends upon the repetitive return (428). The poem calls for a reconfiguration of cosmopolitanism, where a wanderer is not a transgressive figure juxtaposed with natural-born citizenship, but a reminder of the fleeting temporality that connects life. Propelled from a rupture of time, an age of revolution, “Beachy Head” and the location’s idiosyncratic cliffs reminds us that citizenship is tied to space and time, where life erodes citizenship and the very borders that define it.

The dialectical relationship of the self, the wandering shepherd and hermit, the shepherd’s poem within the poem, all, through their very dialectical nature, demonstrate the variations and striations that occur within geological rocks and life. They also demonstrate how the local can become the global and vice versa if cosmopolitanism is transformed by these dialectical relationships where there is not a homeland or a cave to return to, but rather a recognition, as the hermit sees through his compassion, of unprivileged life. The poem seems to
also point us in this direction of de-centering human life amidst the “data of prehistory,” as Benjamin says, amidst the geological rock of Beachy Head’s location (334).

Much like the poem’s versions of life, the concept of cosmopolitanism is still in an unfinished state. Perhaps a more nomadic form of cosmopolitanism is needed that would change as frequently as the world changes since, like Smith’s poem, we are constantly writing and rewriting our spatiotemporal location: both within Beachy Head and the rest of the world, within the local and global. In other words, we are constantly (re)writing life. “Beachy Head” points to language’s ability to capture or really only half-capture these nomadic ideas, subjects, and variations of forms of life. However, by wrestling with an indistinguishability of life and death, of a life unknown, “Beachy Head” also demonstrates how a poem of the past can still impart concepts that readers are wrestling with in the future. Smith’s poem lay buried for roughly a century, but its recent excavation compels, as Percy Bysshe Shelley says in his influential “A Defence of Poetry,” “future generations to contemplate and measure the mighty cause and effect in all the strength and splendour of [its] union” (680). Although we can never write cosmopolitanism’s epitaph, just as Smith never wrote, nor possibly could ever write, the hermit’s, we can still keep trying to account for nomadic subjects and contemplate life’s various constituents. If a “poet is a nightingale who sits in darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude,” then, life, too, reminds us of its future jargon (Shelley 680). With non-linear history and the recognition that the signification of life always already requires repetition, with one foot always within the land of the future, one can contemplate poems of the past to keep writing life today.
Works Cited


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