BYRON THE ELEMENTALIST: EXPLORING BYRONIC ECO-ETHICS FOR THE LATE ANTHROPOCENE IN MANFRED

by

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B.A., University of Toronto, 2018

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(English)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

December 2020

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Byron the Elementalist: Exploring Byronic Eco-Ethics for the Late Anthropocene in *Manfred*

submitted by Shalini Poornima Madushani Nanayakkara in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English

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Abstract

In a world becoming increasingly “postnormal” (Sardar 435), I aim to investigate how human-nature relations in Lord Byron’s 1817 dramatic poem Manfred provide an unconventional but enlightening environmental ethics in the late Anthropocene. Questioning existing perceptions of Byron as a purely socio-political writer in the vein of emerging eco-Byron scholars, I consider how an ecological reading of this intensely Byronic text can provide critical lessons to accept negative emotions, identify hypocrisy, and investigate why, with simultaneous sympathy and judgement, systemic change is so difficult to enact even as global ecocatastrophe ensues.

Byron’s perceived and potential positions in Romantic nature poetry will be considered in the context of current inefficacies of reading nature in positive and moralistic modes, as individuals experience what is now called eco-anxiety (Ray 6). To understand how Manfred irones “green thinking,” close readings will be presented of the titular hero’s disastrous attempts to exploit the elemental Seven Spirits through the lens of elemental ecocriticism and philosophy (Cohen & Duckert; Macauley). Manfred complicates critical tenets of elemental thinking in its depictions of human and elemental subjects as fundamentally incompatible. Byron's contempt for hypocrisy unexpectedly complements Indigenous critique of capitalism (L. Simpson 76-77), pointing towards where some critical Indigenous perspectives and Byronic contrariness align in critiquing the limitedness of Western environmentalism.

Manfred’s self-perception as an elemental conflict of “lightning” spirit and “clay” body (Byron 1.1.155; 157) and his quest for “self-oblivion” (1.1.145) will be explored as a grim blueprint for what I call the “a/Anthropocentric individual” – those in the late Anthropocene who experience eco-anxiety from the conflicted understanding that everyday life contributes to a “web” of unethical relations between human and nonhuman entities (Barad 384). This thesis will posit that Manfred reflects the ethical conundrum of living in the Anthropocene, but that the text cannot present solutions. Reading Manfred ecologically through Byronic understanding of constant self-evaluation and criticism signifies the gaps between Indigenous, academic and public understandings of human-nature relations that enables the mainstream perception that the environment is ultimately "supplementary" (Rajan) to the prosperity of human beings.
Lay Summary

In *Ecology without Nature*, Timothy Morton asks, “The time should come when we ask of any text, ‘What does this say about the environment?’” (5). I believe it is now time to consider Lord Byron’s 1817 dramatic poem *Manfred*, precisely because few scholars consider *Manfred*, or its author, for their discourses on nature, the elements, and environmental ethics. Mainstream environmentalism understands eco-action as moralistic and tied to the joy we feel when we experience nature, understandings that were founded in Romantic poetry. But how do we read Romantic poetry – and indeed, nature itself – when nature makes us feel guilt, anger, and fear, in conditions now popularly known as solastalgia, climate anxiety, or eco-anxiety? I propose that “Byronic nature” considers how negative emotions inform our perceptions of nature, our complacency toward and complicity in global webs of exploitation, and our inability to create systemic environmental change.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author Shalini Nanayakkara.
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Acknowledgements

From researching since the third year of my undergraduate degree to writing this thesis during the COVID-19 pandemic, I have many people to thank for their support, patience, diligence, and belief in me to see this thesis to fruition.

I first thank my supervisor Dr. Miranda Burgess and my second reader Dr. Scott R. MacKenzie for wholeheartedly supporting this thesis from its early conceptualizations to its completed state. I am very grateful for their encouragement and very generous feedback, and for challenging me to stretch my academic and environmental understandings to the level this thesis reflects.

I thank my parents, Dr. Gunapala and Sandaseeli Nanayakkara, and my brothers, Dhanushka and Tharindu, for their endless support in helping me find my own manifestations of success. This work is for you.

To my undergraduate research supervisors, Dr. Liza Blake and Dr. Chris Koenig-Woodyard, who first taught me to dream big in academia and how to actualize those dreams – thank you.

Thank you to my colleagues and the managerial staff at UBC Botanical Garden. Your dedication to sustainability education and climate action inspired the practical valences of this thesis.

Thank you to my friends all over the world for talking me through the hard times and showering me with unconditional love. Special shoutout to my dear friend and colleague Nicole Dingle, without whom thesis-writing during COVID-19 would have been a dreary endeavour.

Most of all, thank you to my partner, Morgan, who helped me finish this thesis with grace and self-kindness.

As I journeyed deeper and wider into this thesis, my supervisor Miranda suggested that in discussing current states of “environmentalism,” I should also address Indigenous perspectives and how they interplay with what I perceive as Byronic views of nature. Following her suggestion, I realized the cruciality of Indigenous studies and Indigenous ways of knowing to understanding the heart of this project. I thank my supervisor for nudging me in this direction and for encouraging me to learn and think about it as much as I can. While doing so, I realized that reading and thinking is not enough. And so, I offer my sincerest thanks to my talented colleague, Karlene Harvey, for providing me insightful feedback on Indigenous theory as it related to my work. Thank you for being so open to thinking through and discussing my thesis with me and for considering the exciting possible avenues this research might take. I look forward to the time when I can return your generosity.

This thesis is more than a component of a Master’s degree to me: it is a significant academic venture of what I hope to contribute to public conversations on environmental issues. I consider this thesis as an archivable milestone that I can pick up again in future years to consider how far my understandings of environment have come and what I might have forgotten along the way. I thank you for reading this thesis and coming on this journey with me.
Introduction

Lord Byron begins his 1817 dramatic poem *Manfred* with a famous quote from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: “‘There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy,’” a statement that evokes how earth and air – the elements – may harbour knowledge that the human mind cannot access (Shakespeare 1.5.187-188). Throughout the text, Manfred refers to his existence as a cursed conflict of “lightning” and “clay” (Byron 1.1.155; 157) and demands from elemental spirits “self-oblivion” in order to escape his mortal sins (1.1.145). Elemental philosophy and ecocriticism, recent areas of scholarship that revisit the non-anthropocentric cosmology of earth, air, fire, and water first posited in Western thought by the Presocratic scholar, Empedocles (Cohen & Duckert 2-3; Macauley 103), help us investigate an evident but unexplored field of Byron’s view of nature that involves the elements. Through three chapters exploring *Manfred*’s naturality, elementality, and futurity, I consider how this dramatic poem, written by one of the only “Big Six” Romantic poets who is perceived as uninterested in the natural world, employs and complicates current understandings of nature in Romanticism, elemental ecocriticism, and Western mainstream environmentalism. I propose that *Manfred* presents unhappy but resonant lessons in cultivating realistic eco-ethics as we begin to see the effects of global ecocatastrophe and attempt to mitigate and adapt to a changing planet.

*Manfred* ostensibly explores the limitations of Man’s body and his infinitely capable mind. This dramatic poem follows Manfred on his quest for death, since a curse prevents him from dying by suicide and transcending the mortal “clay” that masks the “lightning of [his] being” (Byron *Manfred* 1.1.157; 155). Manfred, a misanthropic nobleman who is both magician and scientist, summons the elemental Seven Spirits. The Spirits, formless but aurally present, are unable to grant Manfred’s wish for oblivion. After Manfred disparages their usefulness, the Seventh Spirit punishes him by transforming into his supposed sister-lover Astarte, whose death Manfred hints at being responsible for and causes the basis of his existential turmoil. At play’s end, Manfred confronts a demon Spirit, who appears to take him to Hell. Manfred rebels and takes his own life, claiming his right to self-judgment in the face of his crimes (3.4.139-140).

Byronic eco-ethics sees the human self as central to the construction of “nature,” as we construct its use-value and importance on this planet. Chapter 1 develops the basis of Byronic eco-ethics in *Manfred* while Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 will explore the text through close reading.
and consider its implications. Chapter 1: Naturality will consider existing understandings of Byron as a social and political but not ecological writer (McGann 239) and how scholars already demonstrate Byron’s interest in nature and the Anthropocene subject. For example, Manfred is described as “powerfully powerless” (Twitchell 614) against nature and that the Byronic hero’s tragedy centers around “the absurdity of man’s finite nature filled with infinite longings” (Thorslev 181; Hubbell “Our Mix’d” 6) – both describe the conflict between human imagination versus capability that is central to the environmental conundrum we face today.

This chapter posits that Manfred, the quintessential Byronic hero, models what this thesis calls the a/Anthropocentric individual. An explanation of this thesis’s term “a/Anthropocentric individual” necessitates first a justification for using the term “Anthropocene,” the commonly used term for Earth’s current era. The Anthropocene for this thesis defines the era in which technological and exploitative practices have accelerated since the Industrial Revolution, which is understood to have begun in the early 1800s (Stromberg), around the time of publication of Manfred. I consciously use the term “Anthropocene” (as opposed to Capitalocene, for example [Haraway 30]) as I wish to highlight how the eco-ethics presented in Manfred specifically critique human (anthropos) behaviour – though this thesis agrees with the idea that ecocatastrophe is rooted in capitalist practices, not in a nihilistic sense of human nature’s inevitable corruption of the planet (Moore). I use this frame to highlight how certain modes of anthropocentric thinking – namely capitalism, imperialism, and general social prioritization of (often privileged) humans before other forms of life – has caused the extreme ecological deterioration of this era. Thus, the a/Anthropocentric individual describes those who understand that we live in a precarious era due to our own anthropocentric behaviour but, due to social, political, and capitalistic barriers, still enact that behaviour. The a/Anthropocentric individual would include myself, and most likely you, the reader.

Barad posits that “ethics is about accounting for our part of the entangled webs we weave” (384) which includes webs woven by capitalism that enable everyday routines through gross exploitative practices. Consider that even buying a coffee involves pulling at many unethical strings in this web: agriculture, one of the most significant economic sectors contributing to climate change (OECD); transportation, another climate culprit (EPA); and waste at production and customer levels, particularly if served in paper cups – which also may not be
recycled properly. Why do we still participate in these webs, even as we understand and suffer due to their unethically? If Byron is a writer of the Anthropocene, the Byronic hero speaks to this awareness and conflicted participation. I emphasize the a/Anthropocentric model as fundamentally critical to assert that critique is crucial to ecocritical scholarship.

Chapter 2: Elementality considers how Manfred explores aestheticization as a way to cultivate elemental thinking through the utopic Seven Spirits and its conclusive rejection of this avenue by demonstrating how human ego and subjectivity can always warp moralistic ecological depictions. Instead, Manfred’s simultaneously judgmental and sympathetic framing of its tragic hero suggests that change begins in self-awareness. Indigenous understandings of nature and critiques of new materialist scholarship (which includes elemental ecocriticism) will be discussed in its tensions and unexpected alignments with the eco-ethics presented in Manfred. I incorporate North American Indigenous sources to contextualize Byron’s relevance to contemporary environmental discourse, in light of such conversations continuing to profit from Indigenous thought and action while not reading, citing or crediting them (Todd 18; Rosiek et al. 334; Asselin & Basile 646; Tuck et al. 2). The first half of Chapter 2 discusses Indigenous critique to frame how close readings of Manfred’s hypocritical engagement with elemental spirits point towards this concurrence: that Western environmentalisms, as they existed in the nineteenth century up until now, are inadequate in the face of ecocatastrophe.

Chapter 3: Futurity will consider Manfred's lack of ethical commitment through an elemental materialist reading of his quest for “self-oblivion.” This chapter will consider Manfred’s quest for death as a rest from the pain of e/motional existence – that is, life in the material world in which one’s actions (motions) causes suffering. Manfred models a grim map for the a/Anthropocentric individual’s conflicted battle between daily self-preservation and idealistic eco-action and how we can move forward with such understandings within a capitalistic system. Reading Byron’s ecology as an extension of his core conceptual and rhetorical agendas may provide us with a fuller understanding of eco-Romanticism; the hypocrisies engendered by modern environmentality; and an eco-ethics that points not to an insubstantial utopic future, but the dire realities of our present situation. This thesis will conclude in considering the role of ecocriticism in being part of the transformative change needed to address our complicity in jeopardizing our planet’s declining ability to sustain life as we know it.
Chapter 1: Naturality

Thus far, Lord Byron’s works have been little explored in ecological terms despite the expansion of ecocriticism into realms beyond what is typically considered “nature.” In these “postnormal” times (Sardar 435), the divisions between conventional human society and the natural world are collapsing due to ongoing and imminent ecocatastrophe (Morton Ecology without Nature; Nichols). Chapter 1 will present four arguments for Byron’s current and potential impact as an ecological writer. The first section will explore Byron’s current position as an ecological writer and how Romantic ecocriticism often builds “green” standards for nature poetry that tend to exclude Byron from discussions of environmentalism. His negative visions of nature are seen to critique traditional Wordsworthian ecology, which is often read to view nature solely as a source of joy and moralistic guidance (Hubbell Byron’s Nature 166). 1 “Darkness,” Byron’s most ecologically-read poem, will briefly be explored to examine his critique of Wordsworthian ecology’s view of human emotional stability as dependent upon nature.

Such readings, however, still render Byron’s ecological impact contingent on the standards of canonical Romantic poetry. The second section will position Byron’s Manfred as a unique text to explore current ecological stakes. Manfred, I contend, thrives in the negative like “Darkness:” specifically in the negative space of meaning, where understanding of anything, including of nature, is subjective (Bernhard Jackson 808). Thus, this thesis posits that Byron’s interest in nature, and nature writing, resides in the psycho-social relationships humans hold with the natural world. The third section asserts the importance of Byron’s conceptual and rhetorical styles of critique, contrariness, and anger as essential to developing a Byronic ecology that complements, rather than contradicts, his identity as a cosmopolitan writer. Byron’s nature, I contend, allows for attitudes towards nature that are not positive but entrenched in fear, guilt, hopelessness, and anger (Morton “Byron’s” 165), emotions that, once accepted, might allow readers to develop more realistic eco-ethics as environmental issues become increasingly distressing and unavoidable.

1 In this thesis, “Wordsworthian ecology” will be considered in its popularized sense in order to discuss how eco-Byron studies have emerged in stark contrast to this reading of Wordsworth. “Traditional environmentalism” or “mainstream environmentalism” will connote the Western-settler environmentalism that grew out from the ecological thinking of American Transcendentalists and their Romantic in/aspirations (McKusick 28).
The fourth section returns Byron to the context of Romantic nature poetry by positioning his nature against more established nature poets, William Wordsworth and John Clare. The implications of their respective perspectives of nature will be analyzed by their tense and tensions. While Wordsworth views nature in the past tense and Clare in the past and present (Bewell), Byron speaks nature in the present and future. Clare and Byron’s natures in particular will be compared to demonstrate how Byron’s cosmopolitan nature possesses the memory and ability to respond to the absence of memory in Clare’s rural nature, rooted in Clare’s pained observance of the quickly urbanizing countryside. Manfred recalibrates the loss of nature by reimagining nature not being rooted in place, but in one’s consciousness. This chapter concludes that while Byron did not find home in nature, he found other uses in portraying it: namely, to explore humanity’s relationships to nature, which are arguably more important than nature itself during a time of ecological apathy, eco-anxiety and hopelessness to our collective attempts to regenerate our planet’s health. Despite, and perhaps because of, Byron’s conceptual, rhetorical, and emotional approach to nature misaligns him from the well-known Romantic nature poets, an ecological reading of his work presents unique eco-ethical insights. Manfred presents a valuable text to consider what it means to be eco-ethical in the late Anthropocene.

1.1 Introduction: Byron’s Nature in Scholarship

To contextualize the scope of Byron’s current and potential contribution to eco-ethics, we must first understand the existing perception of Byron as a canonical Romantic poet who does not write nor think much about nature. Romantic scholars study Byron for the quintessential topics that accredit Byron’s self-stylization as “the Romantic Poet” (McGann 36): these include irony, hypocrisy, neoclassicism, revolution, sexuality, the Orient, and the tragically self-aware Byronic Hero (Natarajan 197-198). In mainstream scholarship, Byron has not been considered seriously for his depictions of nature in a systematic way that could be usefully catalogued as “Byron’s nature” (Hubbell Byron’s Nature 1). Rather than seeing nature occurring diversely throughout Romantic writers, an idealistic concept of “nature” is used alongside abstract concepts such as “imagination” and “myth” as ideological functions to categorize the Romantics. René Wellek outlines precepts for defining Romantic nature writers that do not encompass Byron, since nature is hardly in his “view of the world” and, as McGann extrapolates, Byron’s “style is
predominantly rhetorical and conversational rather than symbolic or mythic” (Wellek 147; McGann 239). Scholars highlight the entangled political aspects of Byron – his iconic persona as an aristocrat who slipped in and out of aristocracy and low society, as a vitriolic satirist, and as a heroic expatriate who self-exiled to Greece in his belief of democratic independence – but preclude meaningful consideration of a Byronic nature (Hubbell “Byron’s Cultural” 184). This preclusion occurs because firstly, Romantic nature is still not fully considered as a political arena or, in McGann’s terms, a “conversational” arena; and secondly, because Byron’s political worldview does not deal with a traditional, symbolic view of nature.

Some consider the Romantic era, with its literary dedication to nature and its affects, as the root of traditional environmentalism, and indeed ecocriticism, in the forms of “Romantic ecology” and “green Romanticism” (Carducci 632) and so understanding the biases within Romantic nature appears fundamental in furthering the environmentalist project. Ashton Nichols identifies the diverse ecologies found in canonical Romantic poets, from the zoology of Blake’s imagery to the botany of Wordsworth’s, to the human-like sexuality of plants depicted in Erasmus Darwin, and posits that science and poetry have always been merged with the natural in Romantic literature, thus formulating key tenets of modern “environmental sustainability” (xix). James McKusick reminds us that while the tensions between city and nature have always existed, the Industrial Revolution generated stark “new dimensions” (1) to the relationship between metropolis, the countryside, and the wild, changing the meanings of living in one and not the others. Romantic poetry was the perfect wellspring to consider these increasingly severe differences due to its fixations on time and place, being and dwelling, memory and environment, leading Jonathan Bate to ponder, “this could be why so many major Romantic poems are weather poems” (Song 109). Green Romantics, spanning from the British Romantic writers to American Transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson (McKusick 30-31), wrote of the wild as place of contemplation and freedom away from the “frivolous consumption” of the city (20). Thoreau and Emerson are considered to be foundational thinkers for Western-settler modern environmentalism as a moral and political consciousness and were inspired by Wordsworth (11). The Romantic tradition has helped shape modern environmental ideologies which have, for example, fuelled support for the conservation of national parks and “pristine”
wilderness, raised awareness of endangered megafauna, fought against poaching, and helped found massively influential organizations like Greenpeace.

Despite Romanticism’s general refutation of consumerism, however, as Carducci notes, late capitalism has easily subsumed Romantic aesthetics of “beautiful nature and individual rights” into the imperial and capitalistic frameworks of national parks, ecotourism, and the questionable concept of “ethical consumption,” which center human needs and desires over environmental and planetary wellbeing (643). Thus, green readings of Romantic nature poetry can fall into the complicated scenario of “greenwashing.” For example, Ottum and Reno posit that the affective joy and love exuded by the poet-narrator in William Wordsworth’s poem, “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” helps readers affirm a cognitive allegiance to nature.2 “To love daffodils,” for Ottun and Rano, is “to love nature” and to think “critically about the environment” (1). The way nature fulfils us emotionally should automatically engender thoughts and acts of consideration, care, and protection. However, this conclusion reflects the emotional imperative that mainstream environmentalism harnesses, which centers around the individual “feeling good” about their small contributions – whether you are taking action or just thinking about it. While positive affect can produce valuable connections to eco-action, happiness and joy in relation to the general state of the natural world is quickly becoming scarce. Can other, more commonplace emotions of the Anthropocene – fear, horror, sadness, guilt, anger – work to generate valuable outlooks for individuals wanting to help address climate change, biodiversity loss, and other environmental issues? How do we act eco-ethically when we look at the natural world not with joy, but with worry and anticipatory panic? How can we incorporate an understanding of the mental health issues such as eco-anxiety into Romantic discussions about human-nature relations? This thesis does not seek to depreciate green Wordsworthian ecology and its own genesis of helpful eco-ethics. Rather, it seeks to establish a Byronic ecology that speaks to and rebukes earnest ecocritical readings that may be susceptible to subsumption into the very frameworks of capitalism and complacency that cause ecocatastrophe, which render such readings unconstructive in addressing the roots of these issues.

2 Many scholars do read Wordsworth differently from Green Romanticists as a poet invested in social concern, nonhuman materialism, and more (Levinson “A Motion”; D. Simpson; Bewell) to arrive at Wordsworthian understandings incompatible with green Wordsworthian ecology.
The irony of green Romanticism’s subsumption into capitalism is likely not lost on readers of Byron. Byron thrives in the negative space of nature – its faults, its weaknesses, and its absence. It is well-known that Byron wrote against the Romantic ideology of championing the supposed spiritual value inherent in “wilderness,” to be preserved against urbanization at all costs, an ideology based on the nostalgic ideals that readers perceived in Wordsworth and other nature poets (Hubbell “A Question” 14; Morton “Byron’s” 166; Meritt 355; Sheley 51; McGann 182; Melaney 468). In fact, scholars cite Manfred’s most eco-erotic scene – Manfred’s encounter with the Witch of the Alps, wherein he lovingly describes her elemental beauty and ends up cursing her when she seeks to enslave him – as a direct ironization of Wordsworthian ecology (Hubbell Byron’s Nature 166; Morton “Byron’s” 164).

The apocalyptic poem “Darkness,” often considered Byron’s most ecological work (Bate Song 102), expresses nature through its absence after ecocatastrophe. Karam frames “Darkness” as Byron’s hallmark employment of “negative Romanticism,” (4) a genre of Romanticism that aestheticizes emotions based on unhealthful lack – “guilt, despair, and cosmic and social alienation” (Peckham 20). In The Song of the Earth, Bate describes “Darkness” as “most directly responsive to the global climatic change of the Romantics’ own time” (102) due to this very negativity: it envisions the planet as “seasonless, herbless, treeless, the rivers, lakes, and oceans silent” (98; Byron “Darkness” line 71). Further, Byron depicts the lack of nature directly linked to human catastrophe and corruption: war and famine is caused by the “mad disquietude” of nature’s absence, further instigating “selfish prayer” (“Darkness” line 29; line 9). “Darkness” challenges the green Wordsworthian standard by implying that environmental thinking should not center around human needs, as nature may not always be present to provide emotional and spiritual sustenance. The stability of the human world in “Darkness” depends upon the natural world, demonstrating Byron’s understanding that our dependence on nature for emotional stability and moralistic guidance allows for its lack to engender human degradation. As urbanization rips away pristine wilderness and what we consider “natural,” Byron’s refutation of green ideology becomes valuable in rethinking our relations to a rapidly changing planet.

Scholarly considerations of a Byronic nature typically end at its oppositionalism to Wordsworth. I argue that Byron’s negative attitude towards nature (“negative” both in terms of spatial and emotional, as in, the lack of presence and lack of care or hope for the environment)
affirms its own eco-ethics. As Wellek and others state, Byron did not exude a sense of “at-homeness” as Wordsworth and other Romantic poets did (165; Petersen 15). Simone Weil states that “[t]o be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul” (40), and an apparent requirement to be considered a nature poet in its invitation to be situated enough to ruminate on the local and the particular. The concept of dwelling and roots have also become symbols in contemporary discussions of the finitude of our planet Earth, our home. Ecology, after all, derives from oikos, Greek for “house” or “place to live” (Pimm & Smith).

For Hubbell, Byron exhibits a “cosmopolitan rootlessness,” which undermines the traditional green standard for Romantic poetry. Hubbell argues that Byron’s nature is not simply a reaction against the homeliness of Wordsworth. Byron’s ecology holds its own value, since “wandering is just as much an ecological epistemology as dwelling” (“A Question” 16), implying that Byron and Wordsworth use equally valid approaches to nature writing. As ecocatastrophe and other global ills displace populations, there is greater understanding that our roots are not singular, local nodes but those connected to networks, massive webs of relations between human and nonhuman existence (Deleuze & Guattari; Silko 1006). Byron, cosmopolitan man that he was, did not find home in nature. I propose that in the face of being unable to relate to nature, yet still drawn to its hold on humanity, Byron foregoes discussing spaces of nature to instead consider how humans interact with the emotional and cerebral realities of nature. That is, Byron writes about what we think about our home rather than the experience of being in it.

In my reading of Manfred, I consider how Byron’s indirect attention to nature through emotions such as “wrath, despair, remorse” (Wilson 289) reveals the very instability of separating what we consider as “natural” from human experience. There is no nature without emotions, including “negative” emotions such as spite, irony, “depression” and “horror” (Morton Dark 160-161). From his avoidance of waxing platitudes about nature to writing anti-heroes who “celebrate the same kind of world-weary, alienated, homeless, wandering life” (Hubbell “Byron’s Cultural” 184), Byron writes nature in its truest form: as a living memory, entangled in our desires, fears and anxieties about living in a human world that both mimics and excludes the natural world. The question as to why a misanthropic anti-hero wandering through the wild and interacting with elemental spirits cannot be considered as nature poetry remains tied to the nature/culture divide still existent in environmental ideologies.
1.2 Why *Manfred*?

Scholars have already identified the deliberately anti-Wordsworthian premise of *Manfred* in its depiction of nature’s failure to aid the protagonist in finding existential solace after committing the social and biological taboo of incest (Melaney 465; Morton “Byron’s” 162). This section offers an overview of ecocriticism in *Manfred* and attempts to parse out *Manfred*’s nature beyond Wordsworth and the green standard Byron is constantly compared to. While “Darkness” has already been widely considered, and Hubbell offers that *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and lesser-known works are “Byron’s first *ecopoesis*” (“A Question” 17), I contend that *Manfred* is a beneficial space in which to consider Byron’s nature because the play itself is so quintessentially Byronic. The misanthropic anti-hero undergoes a quest for “self-oblivion” in a claustrophobic closet drama in which all characters, human and nonhuman, attend obsessively to his greatest desires and fears. *Manfred*’s underread elemental Seven Spirits seem to posit a relational eco-ethics that entangles new materialist ecologies that only further highlights Manfred as a model of the tragically self-aware individual living in the Anthropocene who wishes to escape “response-ability,” Haraway’s term for “collective knowing and doing” to repair damaged relations in times to unprecedented global crisis (34). *Manfred* appears to iterate the self-absorbed perception of nature presented in “Darkness,” where humankind indulges in “selfish prayer” in the absence of emotional stability from nature, an eco-ethics which I consider also motivates Manfred.³

As a brief overview, I will now consider the propositions presented by J. Andrew Hubbell and Timothy Morton, who are among the few scholars to directly address ecology in *Manfred* and unequivocally dive into its eco-ethics. Both identify that Byron is subjected to the standards of Wordsworthian nature, and, since found lacking, is often shunned from eco-Romantic conversation (Hubbell “‘Our Mix’d’” 5; Morton “Byron’s” 155, 164). Hubbell in particular comprehensively identifies the ecological insights that Byron offers, specifically regarding the interdependence between human and nonhuman systems. He refutes the long-standing idea that Manfred’s death proves that Byron, like Manfred, believed the mind to be more valuable than matter. He states, “Manfred represents the consequences of dualistic thinking: he is unable to

³ Byron began writing *Manfred* in 1816 (Yale), the year after the “year without a summer” that occurred after the 1815 eruption of the volcano Tambora, which is also thought to have inspired “Darkness.”
imagine an interconnected world where he can belong, where his spirit can dwell in his clay” (“Our Mix’d” 7). Byron seems to use Manfred as a straw man to discuss the insanity of the proposition of splitting the mind from the body. Hubbell suggests that Manfred comes to the conclusion that his mortal and godlike elements are “too finely mixed to be separable” and that his suicide is a sign of Manfred’s dismissal of the hierarchical thinking between reason/mind and passion/body (“Our Mix’d” 15). While I will contest parts of Hubbell’s conclusions later, his reading of Manfred’s dualism is crucial to my reading of Byron as a writer of the Anthropocene, a time during which the dissolution of mind/matter and nature/culture binaries is paramount.

Morton highlights the epistemological uses of Manfred for reinvigorating ecocriticism. Since Manfred is “a piece of ‘mental theatre,’ impossible meaningfully to embody on stage” (“Byron’s” 155) and created for the imagination, the dramatic poem allows us to consider how nature, no matter how helpfully or inconveniently it operates in our physical lives, simply remains a construct of the mind. Morton considers how Manfred, an iteration of the “dark ecology” concept he has coined, offers irony as not simply an aesthetic, but an eco-cognitive “ethical leap” (167) to consider nature’s elusiveness. Morton also helpfully discusses climate alarmism and the inability to act due to the incomprehensible nature of climate change, positing that now, collectively, “our genuine ecological awareness has more in common with Manfred’s...disgust and inability to move from the scene of disgust” than unironic visions of future eco-utopia (165). It is curious that Morton brings up cognitive dissonance, as Manfred seems to experience a similar suspension of action when he sees Astarte, who is essentially his guilty conscience, appear in spectral form – namely, he convulses (Byron Manfred 2.1.43, 2.4.159). The psycho-space of Manfred points us to its ecology: barring minimal stage directions, the setting and other natural entities (including the spirits) are often constructed before us by Manfred’s own words throughout the play. “[T]he physical space of the poem” (Sheley 52) is always entangled with human subjectivity. Frederick Garber’s remarks that Manfred “finds himself mirrored, either in the heavens with the star, or in the Alps with its ‘blasted pines’” and discerns that Manfred’s intense pathetic fallacy, within the context of the

4 Byron’s vehemency towards the stage, which likely fuelled Manfred’s incompatibility with theatrical adaptation, nonetheless did not stop from numerous adaptations from taking place (Burwick 3).
mental theatre (McGann 193), constructs a “dreadful continuity of self and place, the ironical linkage of consciousness and the world in which the world becomes a text in which we read only of ourselves” (Garber 130; Sheley 52). With such criticism already in place, readers, wretchedly aware of Earth’s becoming less hospitable to humans, might see themselves in not just Manfred, but in the textual world of Manfred. Once we accept Byron’s ecology is based on our cerebral relationship with nature, we can accept that Manfred is a text about the ego struggling to reconcile with its place in the Anthropocene, with, as typical of Byron, little success.

Scholars have highlighted how the “typical Byronic gesture of resolute irresolution” (McGann 49) finds particular emphasis in Manfred’s unstable construction of knowledge (Meritt; Bernhard Jackson). Byron’s depictions of nature receive no exception. Ecological instability reigns in its representations of nature, the Seven Spirits and the Witch of the Alps, who, rather than existing as inanimate landscapes, possess their own “Mysterious Agency” (Manfred 1.1.28). As the Industrial Revolution ensued, nature’s place became disrupted, once held together by theological certainty and now, at the mercy of philosophical, ontological – and as ecological issues came into play, existential – uncertainty. As McGann states, “In the process they [Byron’s texts] cast not dark shadows but a kind of invigorated negative textual space. So here ‘meaning’ slips free of every conclusion, including the idea of conclusiveness, and fuses with its eventuality” (13). Manfred, like “Darkness,” thrives in the negative; specifically, in the absence of conclusive meaning. Any understanding beyond one’s subjectivity is suspect, including that of nature. As Stauffer insists, Byron is dedicated to the truth (Anger 135). But what is the truth? Byron’s truth is that everything is contradictory, even contradictions themselves (McGann 38). Nature appears not as lack but as spirits, and yet they might be all figments of Manfred’s imagination. Nature is presented with its own agendas, yet its elements are only activated by Manfred’s summons. Truth is person-based, just as nature is person-based.

Hubbell outlines Byron’s perspective of nature, stating, “All of Byron’s major writings display a deep understanding of the fundamental interdependence of human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic” (Byron’s Nature 5). However, I would offer that Manfred does not posit a harmonious relationship with nature, but rather disrupts misguided understandings of nature by questioning where humans end and nature begins. According to Hubbell, Byron’s presentation of humans as “participatory co-shapers of the environment displaced the notion that humans were
either conquerors apart from the environment or harmoniously unified with its organic oneness” (*Byron’s Nature* 10-11). Byron understands that the human-nature relationship has never been simply one of domination or rosy harmony. This thesis agrees with this and many points made by Hubbell and lauds his dedication towards unearthing precisely what Byron’s nature is – but this thesis diverges from Hubbell’s work in discussing *Manfred*’s critique of utopic possibilities.

Byron’s cosmopolitan perspective, Hubbell argues, can help show “how to live with one another in respectful understanding of our shared fragility” and he cites research in urban sustainability to emphasize how cities are not only the loci of environmental problems but also the loci for its solutions ((*Byron’s Nature* 10; Newton & Bai). I would argue that Hubbell over-emphasizes the importance of cities in eco-political progress, thus overemphasizing Byron’s capacity to present productive solutions. Hubbell quotes Byron’s comment that “the Lakers—who whine about Nature because they live in Cumberland—and their under-Sect—(which someone has maliciously called the ‘Cockney School’)—who are enthusiastic for the country because they live in London” (*Byron The Complete* 156) as revealing of Byron’s understanding of the Romantic tendency to aestheticize nature and culture as binary geographies (*Byron’s Nature* 17-18). I would contend that Byron’s statement, in addition to clearly demonstrating his privileged worldview, also conveys his detestation of the hypocritical foundations of mainstream environmentalism. Byron criticized not only binarism, but binarism used without self-awareness by writers who benefit from the opportunities of city-living while pining after an idealistic countryside – not unlike many cosmopolitan liberals today who lament after yet another extinct species on Facebook while cozily sitting in their downtown apartments (such as myself). While cities are important as loci for technological and social solutions, more important sites exist, particularly sites of ongoing protests against pipelines and other fights for Indigenous land rights and sovereignty, where significant solutions are not only imagined, but implemented.

Furthermore, Hubbell may be slightly mischaracterizing Byron’s nature in an attempt to frame Byron’s ecological insights as hopeful. This thesis agrees with Hubbell in that Byron’s ecology is dynamic and interconnected, but contends that, fundamentally, it is also still dark. There are few happy lessons to be learned from Byron, especially in *Manfred*, on how to respect nature or go about solving climate change. Rather, Byron’s eco-strength rests in his capacity to identify the hypocrisy that has led to catastrophe. Byron’s depiction of Manfred wishing for
oblivion after causing Astarte’s death points to how his being intellectually aware does not immediately bestow the capability or even inclination to enact “response-ability.” Byron points to the impossibility for humans to find the right place to act from because all spaces are corrupt under capitalism: including the city, which Manfred rejects, and the wild, which Manfred again rejects after finding no solace with the elemental Spirits, and even the self, as Manfred kills himself due to his inability to live with his guilt. As mentioned earlier, Hubbell concludes from Manfred’s final scene and suicide that the protagonist dismisses his dualistic belief of mind/culture and body/nature – this thesis considers this conclusion dangerously simplistic as it erases the crucial understanding of Byron as a critical, ironic writer. Manfred indeed seems to accept a new, more integrated paradigm in his strangely calm monologue at the beginning of the final scene (Byron 3.4.1-45), but in his suicide, he appears to relish in self-determination not as a mode of reparation, but as an escape from such. To Byron, the only logical step towards ending the agony of the Anthropocene is not “respectful understanding” – it is suicide.

1.3 About Byron

1.3.1 Byron: A Writer of the Anthropocene

Understanding how Manfred operates ecologically offers a basis to consider how Byron presents Manfred as a model of the failed a/Anthropocentric hero, tasked with the daunting psychological journey of reconciling oneself to the violence one has caused. But first we must identify: what is so Anthropocene about Byron and this quest? And why should we, in an era of climate crisis, read a text published in 1817 written by a poet not really interested in environmentalism? Jerome McGann, a key Byron scholar, ruminates on Byron’s relevance to today’s readers:

In our day Byron has emerged, has returned, as a demon of great consequence. We have had fifty years to look back with clarity and horror and an inevitably cynical wonderment at the spectacle of Western Civilization. We have an Imperial view of this scene, we are – as Byron knew himself to be, as Wordsworth (for example) deliberately chose not to be – “citizens of the world.” Byron’s eyes have been here before, have seen all this. Most important of all, Byron saw himself as part of the scene: a player, a participant, “doomed to inflict or bear.” (11)

5 The first investigation on carbon dioxide’s effect on Earth’s climate was presented in 1895 by Svante Arrhenius, in “On the Influence of Carbonic Acid in the Air upon the Temperature of the Ground” (“Svante Arrhenius”).
“Byron’s eyes [being] here before” implies that even key, non-ecocritical Byron scholars such as McGann believed Byron understood and foresaw, if not the technology, at least the emotions of Man that would exacerbate the imbalanced power dynamics and vicious hypocrisies witnessed during the infancy of the Industrial Revolution. Ironically, that Byron foretells how we have emoted ourselves into socially, politically, and ecologically changing the face of this planet to the point of ecological and economic collapse, appears to be a quintessentially Byronic thing itself: Sorrow, indeed, is knowledge (Byron Manfred 1.1.10).

Hubbell’s reading of Byronic freedom realizes McGann’s remarks of Byron’s return to relevance and helps shape the concept of the a/Anthropocentric individual. Hubbell states that Byron’s concept of freedom is very much shaped by his understanding of the shared fragility of interdependent, co-creative relations: freedom is the breadth of possible actions at a specific moment in an interdependent, co-creating world. Freedom requires openness, permeability, porosity; a system that has been organized to produce benefits for a few actors at the expense of the many lacks reciprocity and will eventually collapse by self-suffocation. (Byron’s Nature 8) Byron’s freedom, like his nature, highlights the relationality, dynamism, and co-creation denied by corrupt forms of power. Manfred’s inability to reconcile with Astarte’s fate and honour her memory through repairing his exploitative behaviour induces a horror at his own self-denied freedom. This tragic inevitability appears to mourn the ways in which we all, in our grandiosity, cause harm while attempting to fulfill our desires under capitalism. The ironic lone exceptionality of the Byronic model only highlights how such a hero is interconnected with all and reflects the ostensible independence and self-sufficiency today’s Western and Westernized individuals enjoy. The Byronic hero has become all of us, chained to our pseudo-freedom.

While few writers outwardly suggest Byron to be a nature poet, McGann all but argues that Byron is a poet of the Anthropocene, without using that fraught, contemporary word. Byron was a citizen “of the world,” quite different from most well-known Romantic nature poets, such as Wordsworth, as McGann already noted, or John Clare, who considered himself as local creature and based his poetry on rootedness to place (Bewell 272). Byron’s privileged engagement with worldliness is precisely the reason why his ecology resonates today, as we struggle with issues of climate change, unfettered globalization (for good and for ill), and our anxiety of humanity’s limits in addressing such “wicked problems” (Morton Dark 36). Manfred is the a/Anthropocentric individual: suffering from a superiority and inferiority complex
simultaneously, he is the lone Man who matters above all even as he anguishes over the cost. Through *Manfred*, the Byronic hero has indeed returned “as a demon of great consequence” to reflect back to us the dark turns our ecological anxieties can take if left unanalyzed.

1.3.2 Byron’s Style

We have examined how Byron’s conceptual worldviews and his hero Manfred, an avatarial citizen “of the world,” represents key emotional aspects of the a/Anthropocentric consciousness. This section now turns to consider how Byron’s rhetorical style reflects the robust eco-ethical positioning necessary to live with and through the Anthropocene. Since central Byronic concepts such as the doomed anti-hero, the instability of knowledge, and Byronic freedom inform his eco-ethics, we must investigate how Byron’s rhetoric, as established by key Byron scholars, is also inherent to the ecological textuality of *Manfred*. We now turn to discuss Byron’s style: namely, his contrariness and his use of satire and anger.

1.3.2.1 Byron’s Contrariness

Byron’s self-oppositional style reflects an Anthropocene take on the efficacy of the human mind-body in reconciling ethical conundrums. “Part of the genius” of Byron, McGann suggests, is that his works can be “at once critical and sympathetic,” not least to himself and his own writing career (38). Andrew Stauffer, another key Byron scholar, argues that Byron’s experimental anger in his poetry “provokes both sympathy and judgment” (*Anger* 136). Eco-Byron scholar Hubbell agrees, describing Harold from *Childe Harold Pilgrimage* as a figure “simultaneously inferior and superior to the reader” (“Byron’s Cultural” 190). This “genius” of Byron is also at the heart of *Manfred* – Byron simultaneously understands and disparages Manfred’s struggles in almost every scene and thus, wittily or not, highlights the cognitive struggle of being alive in the Anthropocene. By “cognitive struggle” I mean the routine experience of enduring both pleasure and horror of living under late capitalism: for example, the euphoria of buying a smartphone, an exciting essential for modern life, can be tempered by distress and self-judgment for contributing to pollution, unethical resource extraction and paying corporations to continue these practices.

No wonder Manfred is anti-human. However, McGann suggests that Manfred is anti-human in a manner that is purposeful, so that Byron can “begin his astonishing effort to unmask
and exorcise that fearful anti-human rhetoric,” suggesting that Byron critiques not only society but his own misanthropy (301). His attention to “the audience’s social character” (38) reflects his desire to build this self-critical/self-sympathetic view in his enraptured audiences as well. McGann identifies Byron’s interest in connecting the psychological to the social world to investigate the discrepancy between the authentic self (40) – harkening to Heidegger (123) – and the social self that individuals present in hopes of benefiting from the system (which was Byron’s criticism of his contemporaries, particularly Robert Southey [McGann 42-43]). In Manfred, I argue that this revelatory style is used to consider how the psycho-social influences inform our hypocritical relationships with the natural world. Manfred’s psychological weariness in having doomed his beloved by a social taboo weighs so heavily in his mind that he wishes to disengage from humanity. He ventures into the wilderness for solace and oblivion, only to re-enact the same violent, self-centered behaviour. Byron writes Manfred to be criticized for his egocentrism but also includes powerful moments where he rebels against being condemned or enslaved by external forces, which one cannot help but admire. Judge all you wish, Byron might say, but ask yourself: would (or more saliently, could) you behave any different? How else, after all, is Manfred supposed to act in a textual system in which he is the center of the universe?

1.3.2.2 Byron, Hypocrisy, and Anger

In Anger, Revolution, and Romanticism, Stauffer notes the over-saturation of scholarship on Byron’s satirical flair and instead highlights a crucial rhetoric of Byron’s work: his anger and petty need for vengeance. Stauffer describes Byron’s work as “a combination of satire, dramatic curse, and confessional lyric… [that] opposes Romantic sincerity with its theatricality, Romantic sympathy with its alienating effects, and Romantic transcendence with its commitment to mundane cycles of retribution” (133). As a dramatic poem about an alienating anti-hero who never transcends his “mundane cycles” of violent behaviour, wherein all sincerity is hinged upon the reader’s imagination, Manfred appears to be a key poem through which Byron critiques what he saw as “the hypocrisies of Romantic imagination” (McGann 157).

Byron’s wrath must be considered in this construction of Manfred as the a/Anthropocenic individual. Stauffer makes the claim that Byronic heroes are “vehicles of wrath at once intimate and spectacular” (Anger 148). Byron was not just a satirist – he was a man full
of anger. And often of petty anger, against people whom he thought had slighted him; he was not necessarily possessed by daily revulsion for humanity’s exploitation of the natural world. Stauffer deconstructs Byron’s many vindictive letters (usually to women he knew or critics of his work) whom he believed made his life a living hell (150). Like many other white men crystallized in literary and academic canon, readers may admire Byron, but they might not necessarily like him. He was vengeful, spiteful, and downright mean to those he did not care for, living or dead. Byron’s anger, viciousness, and pettiness appears to be a significant reason for why many scholars believe him to be firmly rooted in the human world and not the natural. Byron channeled his anger at individual persons, his self-righteous beliefs in vengeance, and his self-importance into his poetic persona. Why should one read Byron ecologically when his creative impulses can be explained through the personal, the psychoanalytical, and the political?

This question arises from the dangerous belief that the emotion of anger is alien to nature, thus pointing towards its own answer. Stauffer hints at the ecological potential of Byron’s anger when he remarks how in Byron’s 1821 Cain, the curse for spilling his brother’s blood is placed on the protagonist by the earth. Stauffer states, “the blood curse operates by way of nature’s sympathy with the anger of the injured; hearing a vengeful voice, the world is moved, not to apocalyptic self-destruction, but to memory, and a fruitless future” (Anger 158). Stauffer notes the cognitive role nature plays for Byron – nature records, remembers, and sometimes exacts judgment on the faults of humanity, instead of passively soothing those faults in order for the conflicted human mind to reach epiphany. Nature’s curse occurs more ambiguously in Manfred – after the Seven Spirits take leave of their cruel interaction with Manfred, an unnamed voice places a curse so that Manfred’s “spirit shall not sleep” due to his “shut soul’s hypocrisy,” his “delight in others’ pain” and his allegiance to the “brotherhood of Cain” (Byron Manfred 1.1.203; 245; 248; 249). While the voice is left unidentified, the Seventh Spirit is a likely candidate, since it personally reprimanded Manfred by turning into Astarte just lines before. The repetition of nature as a harbinger of vengeance against the egotistical human indicates that Byron may have channeled his own delight for retribution into the agents of his natural worlds.

Furthermore, Byron scholars seem to point out the natural elementality of anger in Byron’s personal emotions. Beaty describes the inherent elementality of Byron’s quick and vicious anger, which “tended to come quickly, as with a lightning flash” (7); and Stauffer notes
its cyclicity, remarking “Evaporation, lightning, and venting are recurrent natural metaphors for
Byronic rage, implying a sudden movement from a charged to a relaxed state” (Anger 150). His
avatar Manfred appears to enact this cycle of quick, lightning rage – we see it after all, with
Manfred’s sudden rage at the Witch of the Alps when she does not obey him (Stauffer Anger
146) and the cool, musing recess he enters when contemplating suicide. This evaluation gives
new weight to the elemental metaphors in Manfred – the “lightning of my being” (Byron
1.1.155), usually interpreted as a Cartesian understanding of human will (Hubbell “‘Our Mix’d’”
9), may also represent Manfred’s anger. “Self-oblivion” then is an evaporation or release of this
passion, an escape from the a/effects of his own violent aspirations.

Contrary to seeing the personal in the environmental, Byron considers how the
environmental lives in the personal in Manfred. During a time when nature was painted by
human emotion (Meritt 355), Manfred invites us to read humans as amalgamations of elements.
There is a natural cycle to human emotion, even if it manifests through harmful behaviour.
Byron never claims that “natural” is acceptable. One only has to consider the psychological
reality Byron operated in to understand his anger. The early Anthropocene developed
increasingly visible public opinion, urbanization, mobility (Burgess 306), mechanization and
more leisure time. These factors all contributed to the birth of modern celebritydom – Byron is,
after all, considered the first modern European celebrity (MacCarthy x). Byron’s obsession over
his public image, what others think, say, and write about him, and the networks with or against
him in his feuds, are all flavoured by the distinct tang of a new emotional, political, and cognitive
era realizing itself. Time and context construct the self, and the Anthropocene only emphasizes
the difficulty of living as a self-perceived amalgamation of uncomplimentary elements.

Alongside naturalizing human emotions, Byron’s anger appears rhetorically in Manfred
to invite ecological intro/retrospection. Anger is Byron’s sympathy: he utilizes it to uncover
hypocrisy (his snide remarks about the Laker and Cockney Schools come to mind) and to extend
a sense of camaraderie towards his readers. His use of anger activates the “social character” of
his audiences – in his confiding letters, Stauffer notes as an example, Byron would confess deep
hatred for mutual acquaintances in a manner to offer a sense of intimacy, not alienation, to the
reader (145). Byron’s anger reverberates within the cramped walls of Manfred. There are only a
few lines separating Manfred’s scathing remark to the Seven Spirits “the power which brought
ye here / Hath made you mine. Slaves, scoff not at my will!” (Byron *Manfred* 1.1.152-153) from his complete breakdown at the sight of the spectral Astarte, exclaiming, “My heart is crush’d!” (1.1.191). In critiquing the Romantic imagination by depicting Manfred’s ethical shortcomings and his continuous defeats, Byron contradicts his own contrariness (McGann 38) by creating an intimate space for readers to ridicule his pretentious yet all-too-familiar character, thus giving the reader the final say on Manfred’s character. This space may also engage the reader to consider their own hypocrisies and complicity in “mundane cycles” of anger, hatred, and spite.

Green Romanticism might insist that nature poets have a greater capacity for morality due to their intimate connection with nature, and that negative emotions rest in the realm of the human. This prelapsarian ideal positions nature to symbolize all that is good while the human (noticeably, Eve) wastefully exposes herself to complex emotions such as guilt, regret, shame, and anger. While Byron’s truth may be “that the influence of nature cannot prevail against the evil tongues of men” (Stauffer *Anger* 155), he does not discard nature for this. He found other uses in portraying nature beyond as a resource for spiritual fulfillment and the easing of the human soul. In *Manfred* we can see what the human subject wishes or fears to see when looking upon nature, the implications which we can then sympathize with and critique. As Hubbell states, Byron’s nature is a “systems critique instead of a celebration of nature” (*Byron’s Nature* 8-9), focused on the human’s often hypocritical relationship with the natural world. While Byron’s conceptual, rhetorical, and emotional approaches distance him from the well-known nature poets of his time, they do not prevent an eco-ethical reading of his work. In fact, Byron scholarship seems to set the foundation for such a reading. His trademark concepts and styles in fact highlight the naturalness of viewing Byron as a writer of the Anthropocene and of nature.

### 1.4 Situating Byron in Romantic Nature

Thus far, Chapter 1 has outlined Byron’s position in the Romantic canon and potential ecocritical readings in *Manfred*. This section returns Byron into the context of Romantic nature poetry for an exploration of how his contrary ecology fits with those of more established nature poets such
as William Wordsworth and John Clare. How are Byron’s ideas of nature-culture situated proximal to Wordsworth and Clare? How might we reorganize our perceptions of Romantic ecology to incorporate Byron’s a/effective eco-ethics?

In *Natures in Translation: Romanticism and Colonial Natural History*, Alan Bewell describes Romantic writers crafting new perceptions of the natural world as dynamic, away from previous understandings of nature as static, unchanging backgrounds, in a mode of national identity-building in the midst of the quickly changing landscape in Britain. People saw plants as location indicators, “citizens of the world” in themselves, hallmarks of a globalizing colonial consciousness. The likes of Erasmus Darwin encouraged this development, Wordsworth and Clare did not (xiv). The idea of travelling natures is important to Byron’s work as well, but on a more metaphorical scale. For Byron, movements of nature are not external footprints in the physical world – nature instead is found travelling within the vessel of humanity itself, as a presence presiding over thoughts of self-identity and action. Nature creates the dichotomous conflict in Manfred, between lightning and clay. This internal nature does not necessarily describe nonhuman realities in the human body – Byron does not discuss bacteria but rather the intellectual presence of nature in the mind-body. This presence remains, and perhaps becomes heavier, as the natural world is paved, burned, and polluted in most people’s surroundings.

It might be helpful to situate Byron’s nature among the tenses and tensions of other Romantic poet’s natures. As discussed, Wordsworth is frequently referenced to as the standard for Byron’s nature. Bewell posits that Wordsworthian poetry saw nature as a past phenomenon, existing in this time but not “of” this time (269). This understanding carried over to nineteenth and twentieth century concepts of nature that germinated modern environmentalism. There is no nature in the future tense in this reading of Wordsworth, and so wilderness must be preserved as a past to return to. Clare wrote of nature in a more present manner, though still in a nostalgic mode. In today’s terms, we might consider Clare as suffering “solastalgia.” Solastalgia is a psychoterratic illness that “refers to the pain or distress caused by the loss of, or inability to derive, solace connected to the negatively perceived state of one’s home environment” (Albrecht

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6 I discuss Clare as a “canonical” Romantic nature writer due to academic and popular considerations of his work as contributive to green Romanticism and environmentalism (Bate *John Clare* 552; Hubbell *Byron’s Nature* 26; Nianias; Monbiot).
et al. 96). To Bewell, John Clare understood a feeling of homelessness at home, “to be exiled not because you have left it, but because its nature has left you” (Bewell 270), which clearly expresses the agonizing sense of rooted loss, or “place-based” distress, present in solastalgia.

Clare saw himself as stationary, while his contemporaries were mobile in a world driven by globalism. For him, loss of nature was a loss of home. Margaret Grainger mentions Clare’s “rootedness…is one of his greatest strengths” (1; Bewell 272), and that loss, while productive for Byron’s consideration of humanity’s ongoing relationship with nature, does not sit well with Clare’s more localized view of nature. There is value in tracing the connections between Clare and Byron’s natures, as Clare’s ruralized rootlessness offers a foil to Byron’s privileged, cosmopolitan one. Clare admired Byron, having written an extension of *Childe Harold* and his own version of *Don Juan* in order to understand exile (Bewell 271). They had similar ideas regarding the emotional baggage of the ecological. Clare thought of the Linnean naming of plants as “a hard nicknaming system of unutterable words” that shrouded flora “in mystery till it makes it darkness visible” (*Natural History* 117; Bewell 275). Manfred’s claim that “Sorrow is knowledge” (Byron *Manfred* 1.1.10) echoes Clare’s lament that science leads to grief, and instead of clarifying nature, obscures it. While Clare connected to “woods, fields, brooks” (“All Nature Has a Feeling” line 1), Byron beheld nature, in *Manfred*, through its elements: earth, air, water, fire, and more. Clare sought to localize nature, and Byron sought to globalize it.

Clare memorializes nature in his poetry; Byron does so as well, but he makes nature larger than life, giving each of its elemental biomes an unknowable and vastly powerful, personified agent in the form of the Seven Spirits. Clare wrote of the immediacy of enjoying nature, but also often stripped away historicity to mimic “a loss that memory seeks to recover” (Bewell 277). Stripping away histories of relations and its baggage can be an unwise idea, since presenting nature *tout court* erases its catastrophic changes in the Anthropocene (Morton “Byron’s” 162). In *Manfred*, Byron provides a history to nature that extends to its present and future. The Seven Spirits rule over domains and enact nature’s agenda, present in all space-times, since they “are eternal; and to [them] the past / Is, as the future, present” (*Manfred* 1.1.150-151). Unlike nostalgic conceptualizations, the Seven Spirits offer representations of nature that emphasize past and future as presence.
I would argue that Byron imagines in *Manfred* an ecological world Clare would like – where nature’s dominions are still stewarded by its *genii locorum*, the elements. Nature in *Manfred* is not relegated to one enclosure or ecosystem or even landscape. The Spirits encompass all, melding the mobilizing impulse of humanity with a nonhuman, globalized command in which power dynamics are emphasized and ethical relations must be upheld. They represent a nature that can communicate back to us; Clare’s nature cannot, being “blank and recordless” (“Obscurity”; Bewell 286). In *Manfred*, Byron alleviates Clare’s anxiety over the loss of nature, and thus of home, by reimagining nature not being rooted in place but in one’s consciousness. While this notion can be dangerous in its lack of tangibility – you forget what you care for if nature is no longer real – it can also provide a voice for the historicity of nature. Clare’s poetry is not just about nostalgia and lament; it also presents a “critical remembrance” of nature. Nature is a ghost, and so is Clare (Bewell 292). Byron shifts nature’s ghost to Spirit, bringing past to the present, life to the dead, yet enduring with the same spectral essence.

Byron’s is a cosmopolitan nature (Hubbell *Byron’s Nature* 21) – though not a nature necessarily of cities, but of the cosmos, of one’s mind being a citizen “of the world.” This nature is so vast that it can only be seen through generalizations and metaphors, which still only represent an emotional attachment to the physical world we live in. Clare and Wordsworth’s natures help situate Byron’s on a spectrum of past-, present-, and future-facing natures, offering different energies and trajectories through which to perceive nature. While Wordsworth saw nature as a memory of the past, Clare oscillated between the two, cherishing both the memorialization and the immediacy of his environment. Byron, conversely, saw nature as something that stretched the constraints of space and time, an emotional ideation keeping humanity company throughout history as we have built around, with, and against our planet.

1.5 Conclusion: The Importance of Byron’s Nature to Romantic Ecocriticism

This chapter demonstrated Byron’s position on nature and how his personality and politics allow for and inform eco-ethical considerations in *Manfred*. Byron’s “cosmopolitan rootlessness” differs from the rooted, local writings by more conventional nature poets in the Romantic tradition, such as William Wordsworth, whose poetry helped standardize how nature is viewed not only in Romanticism, but environmentalism as a Western cultural and philosophical
movement. Byron’s ability to be rooted in rootlessness, his personal anger and pettiness, and his trademark use of satire and contrariness have allowed him to slip by ecocritical consideration. However, with our changing understandings of place, environment and nature, Byron’s social and political rhetoric become potent for ecological considerations. The “negative” attitudes towards nature in “Darkness” and Manfred provide space to reconsider conceptions of the human-nature relationship in the Anthropocene and incorporate feelings towards nature that are not just happiness or tranquility – such as despair, guilt, and fear. Ecocritical updates to traditional environmentalism must be held to an even higher standard as we hurtle into an uncertain future. Byron’s predilection to uncover hypocrisy may help us learn from mistakes and develop better environmentalisms to tackle the unique, pressing challenges of the Anthropocene.

Byron, out of all of Romantic poets, may have the most dynamic iterations of nature in his writing, weaving together nonhuman consciousness, science, emotions, and the elements that constitute life itself. While not holding all the answers to environmental issues, particularly in complex intersections of environmental racism and Indigenous rights, a reading of Byron as a rootless, ecological writer makes his work resonant in the age of the Anthropocene. Already, individuals may find Byron’s ecology more relatable than the traditional reading of Wordsworth’s: just like Manfred, we are cursed with vast knowledge, uncomfortable in the wild even with all the accessibility to the highest mountaintops and the deepest caverns, even as we must care for these spaces in order to survive. While many are still Wordsworthian nature-lovers, we are increasingly encapsulated by the cosmopolitan dwellings that provide perceived stability that nevertheless make us more anxious about the fragile ecosystems we harm every day. Green Romanticism often considers the human and non-human as either inherently harmonic or disconnected; Byronic nature focuses on human relationships with nature to identify what social, political and emotional baggage we bring to human-nature power dynamics. Particularly in Manfred, the titular character’s exploitative encounters with agential elemental Seven Spirits during his quest to escape his guilt for dooming Astarte follows the map of the a/Anthropocentric individual, who struggles to reconcile with their place in the web of intrinsically unethical relations in a globalized era. Byron “returns” as a writer of the Anthropocene to offer with texts like Manfred the impulse to constantly re-evaluate our capabilities and complicities and provides a valuable standpoint from which to observe and participate in the environmentalist project.
Chapter 2: Elementality

2.1 Introduction

“Manfred presents us with a startling paradox,” Morton states in “Byron’s Manfred and Ecocriticism.” In the dramatic poem, “Nature appears most truly as disembodied spirit(s) and as the darkness of the night. Yet conventional ecological criticism tries to name it, to gaze on it directly” (165). Manfred plays with the need for and the implications of beholding nature’s face. This chapter aims to investigate the faceless elementality of Manfred’s Seven Spirits, who represent what Morton identifies as “disembodied spirit(s) and as the darkness of the night,” to arrive at the text’s understanding of human-nature relations. The Seven Spirits, who appear in no form, name themselves as rulers of “Earth, ocean, air, night, mountains, winds, thy [Manfred’s] star” (1.1.132) but few scholars have analyzed the posthuman implications of their elementality. The first section compares the implications of a disembodied, globalized nature represented by the Seven Spirits against localized natures through a consideration of Indigenous ecocritical critique, which will highlight the paradox that settler environmental discourses must reckon with: to make nature ‘relatable enough’ to encourage behaviours of care, while without making nature too knowable and desirable, thus exploitable (Morton “Byron’s” 162).

Integration of Indigenous theory gives rise to the solution of particularized nature, which sees human-nature relationships centering on concern and care for “site-specific” environments (Green & Raygorodetsky 239). In the second section, we will consider how this lesson of connecting to tangible natures is presented in elemental ecocriticism, a branch of eco-scholarship that calls for a resuscitation of the Presocratic philosopher Empedocles’ theorization of the four classical elements (earth, air, water, and fire) as touchpoints to inspire individual environmental action. However, elemental ecocriticism often excludes serious engagements with Indigenous understandings of the elements, which I contend puts into question the validity of wholeheartedly embracing eco-ethics that, like other unconventional environmental scholarship, unwittingly replicate the colonial impulses they seek to remedy (Todd 8).

Indigenous critiques importantly highlight the issue of environmentalism predating on human emotions rather than practicality. The third section will consider how Manfred similarly challenges elemental ecocriticism’s proposition that reverting aesthetic paradigms from resource-
to element-based will necessarily drive ethical change. While at first Byron’s depictions of the Seven Spirits appear to present the non-anthropocentric ethics posited by Empedocles, Manfred’s exploitative behaviour in his interactions with the Spirits, in addition to the Spirits’ own agendas, problematizes the belief that shifting the “face” of nature will automatically improve human-nature relations and inspire ecological action. When the Spirits refuse to aid him, Manfred lashes out, believing his ability to summon them entitles him to control them as resources, thus diminishing their nonhuman agency and power to their use-value. An aesthetic refocus, I argue, does not attend to the foundation of everyday human routine and reality founded on extractivist principles that enable disconnected, unethical relations with our planet.

Byron appears to pattern Manfred’s behaviour on the contradictory sentiments of geologist James Hutton, who postulated, similar to Empedocles, that the earth runs upon vast elemental cycles of deep time; yet paradoxically, Hutton also espoused beliefs that the Earth was made for human pleasure. Hutton’s theory has inspired contemporary environmentalisms such as the “Gaia Paradigm,” which, while valuable, have not secured systemic change. The chapter will conclude that the change in discourse cannot be rooted in shifting a cosmetic understanding of nature. Eco-discourse cannot continue to attempt “to gaze on [nature] directly” as Manfred does, particularly since he demonstrates that aesthetic understanding can always be manipulated to justify behaviour. The shift must be in behavioural change – of putting the onus on the human to fully embrace their place in a web of exploitative relations and still enact ethics of reparation.

2.2 The Problem with Localized and Globalized Natures

Byron’s nature in Manfred has been identified as a mirror or a reflection of the human psyche, since it does not appear with an observable face (Garber 130; Sheley 52). But facelessness is not the same as a mirror: sentience can still exist beneath facelessness. If the natural world is faceless, we are presented with the ethical conundrum that when humans observe, write, read, praise, denounce, or in any other way mediate nature, we only impose a subjective truth upon something which contains a multitude. Nature with a face – a forest, a deer, the ocean – reveals an imposed truth of nature that is aesthetically and economically legible, vulnerable to the whims of human intention. For example, a University of British Columbia study found that participants considered the carbon impact of littering equated to that of a trans-Pacific flight, despite air
travel constituting a huge portion of the average individual’s footprint, while littering causes negligible carbon emissions (Wynes et al. 1527). While littering is a serious environmental problem, the conflation of environmental and climate issues suggests that green aesthetics predominate objective realities. Thus, people might care more about littering than air travel because litter is visible; conversely, we cannot immediately see the effects of fuel combustion being ensconced in an airplane. An aesthetic, face-value understanding of the natural world often offers a limited and often skewed view into the truths of human-nature relations. If the natural world boils down to what people wish to see, nature may just as well be a mirror.

Speaking to self-centeredness, Métis scholar Zoe Todd identifies how Western scholars and researchers erase climate as a “blank commons” (8) on which to theorize their environmentalisms. This criticism can extend to both globalized and localized views of nature. Localized natures presented by green readings of Romantic poetry often pin down the amorphous concept of “the environment” onto identifiable components, legible only through scientific and economic registers (i.e., resources) or as relics of a nostalgic past, a narrative that centers human sentience and concerns. Localization can eliminate the impenetrability, what Clare called “mystery,” of the natural world’s agency. Nonhuman agency is crucial to the dissolution of human/nature binary in ecocritical studies, as it reimagines agency as “a lively power” (Bennett 358) that not only human individuals possesses but rather is a relational quality contingent upon human and nonhuman “assemblages.” Thus, all entities carry agency in the way they interact with others (360). Manfred’s formless Seven Spirits hold powerful nonhuman agency as conscious of and “Mysterious” (Byron Manfred 1.1.28) to human understanding.

Yet, Todd’s critique of “blank commons” could also be made against Byron’s rendering of a globalized, faceless nature. I agree that my reading of Byron’s nature does hold this threat if isolated from an essential component: it speaks back. While the Seven Spirits are incorporeal, their poignant voices reveal their immaterial materiality, at once present in the text yet out of sight from our protagonist’s eyes. Their voice represents nature’s will and the elemental constituents they rule over. But while viewing nature as global forces as may preserve agency,

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7 This experiential complexity is compounded by the spectral possibility of the Seven Spirits’ presence being embodied on stage. Theatrical adaptations have the option to instrumentalize the Spirits as corporeal entities or to present them as the text's Manfred experiences them, as voices coming from a "clear large star" (Byron 1.1.178)
such paradigms also threaten to erase the particular sentiences of plants, trees, animals, and, through this material disengagement, manifest capitalistic constructions of “global webs of exploitation and appropriation” (Moore 620). Depictions of globalized natures, such as Byron’s amorphous elemental spirits, can also remain insensitive to the very real physical realities of “place-based distress,” such as that experienced by John Clare and many people today whose “home environments” are deteriorating due to the effects of climate change and unsustainable extractive practices (Albrecht et al. 96). While nature may only be perceived, its material essentiality to human wellbeing is no less tangible. I contend that Manfred allows for the “blank commons” critique to coexist with the Seven Spirits’ eco-utopic system, demonstrating that no matter the way in which nature is presented, humans can always view nature as a resource to exploit economic or spiritual advantage. Morton presents the stakes of this paradox simply as, “If we name [nature] directly, we lose its essence” (“Byron’s” 162). What frames of reference – or, since we are thinking in geospatially, scales of reference – can maintain the multiple truths of nature at local and global levels at once?

2.3 Indigenous Theory and Elemental Ecocriticism

An answer might be found in what I consider “particular natures,” which can be found in various systems of thought, including elemental ecocriticism and philosophy. Scholars such as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert in the introduction of the collection of essays, Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire, and David Macauley in his book, Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas, are key proponents of elemental ecocriticism. They posit that the four elements, as postulated by Presocratic scholar Empedocles, provide a bridge between the human subject and the intangible enormity of the natural world. Thus, the elements act as powerful tools to galvanize empathy and action (Cohen & Duckert 13; Macaulay 4-5). Macauley offers that elements both invite aestheticization and resist commodification, since we live with the elements and can know them for their agential qualities (fire can burn, water can soothe, etc.) without stripping away their environmentality (233). In this way, the elements embody both the intangible global and the tangible local qualities of nature, thus encouraging “[m]aterial affinity” between human and natural worlds (Cohen & Duckert 12). The elements are understandable to all as they appear in cultural
practices, philosophies, religions and spiritual thinkings around the world. For elemental philosophers and ecocritics, elementality is the ideal paradigm – they invite humans to engage ethically with the natural world, since they bear aesthetic, historical, and particular values to many, and also dismiss dualistic notions of the human body and the world body.

However, this line of thinking is already activated in Indigenous thought and remains mostly unconsidered by settler elemental scholars. In his “Kinship with the World” essay published in 1999, Standing Rock Sioux author Vine Deloria remarks that traditionally, Indigenous people “do not talk about nature as some kind of concept or something ‘out there.’ They talk about the immediate environment in which they live. They do not embrace all trees or love all rivers and mountains. What is important is the relationship you have with a particular tree or a particular mountain” (74). For millennia, Indigenous peoples have theorized nonhuman agency in philosophies for navigating life and the human-world relationship (Rosiek et al 342).

It is already understood in many Indigenous ways of knowledge that human relationships with nature are cerebral and thus entangled with our subjective experiences, not something that is separate from us at individual or collective scales (332). This established principle refocuses the need for human-nature relationships away from self-individuation processes (which still prioritizes the human) and onto the ethical dimensions of such relationships (343). Elemental scholarship repeats an important point already established by Deloria and many Indigenous writers: that sensorial particularity is important in generating realistic human-nature relations.

The scarcity of Indigenous knowledge and scholarship on human-nature relationships in Western thought is not uncommon – in fact, it appears to be the norm. In “An Indigenous Feminist’s Take on The Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ Is Just Another Word for Colonialism,” Zoe Todd considers the extent to which the blatant silence on Indigenous thought exists in new materialist scholarship, even as such scholarship reiterates Indigenous thought as if it were new.

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8 I use the term “Indigenous” with wary awareness that this term tends to create a monolithic identity for individuals who descend from the original peoples of lands all around the world and may not encompass all such individuals.

9 In the original statement, Deloria says “Indians do not talk about nature…” (74). Because my interest in Deloria’s statement is conceptual (i.e., there are Indigenous ideations existing that treat human-nature relations as such), I omitted implying the sweeping and contested sentiment connoted in the word “Indians” that I would bring in as a non-Indigenous scholar. Additionally, this rewording aims to validate Deloria’s point of view while also emphasizing that not all individuals who identify as Indigenous or “Indian” may think this way (for example, see Tommy Pico’s Nature Poem).
and revolutionary. This exclusion ranges from Bruno Latour missing any citation of Indigenous thought in discussing climate as “a common organizing force” (Todd 6) to the Academy allowing, rewarding, and profiting from such exclusion. The currently minor intersections between Indigenous studies and elemental philosophy seem to replicate Eurocentric perspectives of Indigenous knowledge as additive rather than already fundamental. This contrasts the calls to acknowledge and include in new materialist scholarship the Indigenous thinkers, creators, and scholars that have studied such topics for generations (Todd 8; Rosiek et. al 332).

For example, Macauley does mention some Indigenous perspectives of the elements, such as those of the Apache and Maori peoples, in their own valences and how such valences can overlap with ancient Western thought (79). However, this section takes up about one page in a 433-page book. I highlight this not as a particular criticism of existing elemental ecocritics, but rather, as Todd reminds us, to highlight the structural issues of the Academy that allow for practices of “minimally nodding to Indigenous intellectual and political players” without due consideration and citation of the history, depth, influence and centrality of Indigenous “parallel discourses” on such topics (8). Elemental ecocriticism must do more to significantly attend to how elemental “material affinity” already operates in Indigenous realities and acknowledge that contemporary elemental philosophy is partly a Western reimagining of what “many an Indigenous thinker around the world could have told [us] for millennia” (8). Until then, an unquestioning implementation of elemental ecocriticism as an ethical antidote to anthropocentric thinking may be compromised, as these “ecological turns” (Vansintjan) replicate the violence they seek to remedy by centering familiar subjective truths instead of attempting to comprehensively understand a multitude (Todd 8; Rosiek et. al 332).

2.4 Indigenous Theory and Byron

Manfred, with its ironic and critical take on green environmentalism, may point to the same call for scepticism towards earnest re-configurations of environmentalism. However, I am not here to “rescue” Byron (Tuck & Yang 3), nor to reify the power and value of white settler and Western perspectives by seeing how parts of its canon align with Indigenous ways of knowing, a la what Dene scholar Glen Coulthard names as “the politics of recognition” that still reproduce “the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples’ demands for
recognition have historically sought to transcend” (3). My aim here is to normalize the application of Indigenous critiques with reading Romantic literatures in order to highlight how limited traditional and progressive Western environmentalisms can be, without seeking to “absolve or resolve” discrepancies (Harvey). Byron was a British nobleman who capitalized on his enormous privilege, was complicit in the imperialist project of the British Empire, and advocated of democracy insofar as it involved the seat of white liberal democracy, Greece. But while he obviously did not align with Indigenous knowledge and ways of life, Byron’s project to view nature as emotional, subjective truths of its human viewers can be read in interesting tensions and congruences with Indigenous critique.

*Manfred* in particular highlights the complicated relationship between the Westernized human subject and the natural world, which can oscillate between enacting reparations and inciting violence, regardless of the human’s intentions. This oscillation occurs because globalized human-nature relations are predicated on use-value. For extractive industries, the use-value is economic. For mainstream environmentalism, the use-value is cultural, emotional and spiritual – the natural world is consistently positioned as a space in which, as explored in Chapter 1, humans can feel good and recenter their emotional and cognitive stability, i.e., to slow down in a rapidly developing world (Williams; Robbins). The increasing separation of human and nature in the Industrial Revolution through the rapid development of enclosures, the commercialized venture of botanic gardens, and the class stratification of parks are the inheritances of mainstream environmentalism, wherein nature becomes a peaceful and/or productive space “over there” only accessible to wealthier classes (Brockway 451; Carducci 638; Lee et. al 445; Cranz; Distrito Castellana Norte). The key project of environmentalism to get people to “care” about nature through its use-values pushes away the possibility of human-nature integration because the option to *not care* still exists. Conversely, Indigenous understandings of human existence tend to not preclude the natural world. Instead, environmental wellbeing is seen as necessary to the wellbeing of the self, thus economic, emotional, and spiritual relations with nature can be ethical and sustainable for generations. The difference then is that Indigenous human-nature relations tend to not completely predicate on emotions such as love or joy – which can always sour – or empathy – which can always be withdrawn – but instead on practical existence (Whyte 58; Michell 38; Ross et. al 239; Silko 1003). Thinking with nature on an
everyday basis becomes not an option, but a necessity for navigating life. There is no space for oscillation.¹⁰

Manfred replicates this Western oscillation between violence and desire towards the environment in his attempt to bend the Seven Spirits, the *genii locorum* of the natural world, to his will. Once Manfred realizes that the Spirits cannot aid him, he scorns their power by saying, “Ye mock me – but the power which brought ye here / Hath made you mine. / Slaves, scoff not at my will!” (Byron *Manfred* 1.1.152-153). Manfred believes his entrapment of the Spirits entitles him to full access of their powers and their absolute loyalty. He enacts social violence in demeaning them to their use-values that does not consider the power they have accumulated as entangled elements over eons. Yet after he dismisses them, Manfred rather demurely suggests, “yet stay – one moment, ere we part – / I would behold ye face to face” for he only hears their “voices, sweet and melancholy sounds” (1.1.174-175; 176). In doing so, he replicates the irresistible desire entrenched in Eurocentric environmentalism to constantly visualize nature as a way of becoming intimate with the world. Thus, he evokes the paradox of environmentality: no matter whether nature is presented, the exploitative framework of the human subject will cause them to alternate between idealizing and committing violence against the natural world due to that framework’s prioritization of human emotion and intention. Here, *Manfred* aligns with critiques of environmentalism by acknowledging the danger of this behaviour; a curse is placed upon Manfred for his “hypocrisy” in attempting to exploit the Seven Spirits (1.1.245).

I contend that the refusal to acknowledge the problematics of Western environmental thinking has created a gap of knowledge that allows for certain Romantic readings to operate under outdated notions of nature. In turn, this gap of knowledge places greater labour on Indigenous studies scholars to make visible their ecocriticisms in an intellectual system already set against them. It is easy, for example, to discuss nonhuman potentialities in *Manfred* without considering the colonial contexts that created both the text and author. It is easy to discuss Byron’s rootlessness without paying attention to an Indigenous sense of rootlessness, which invokes the much higher stakes of cultural displacement incurred by genocide (Fortier 23) and thus sidestep conversations of how Byronic eco-ethics will always be steeped in privilege due to

¹⁰ I thank Karlene Harvey for this crucial comparison of Indigenous and Eurocentric understandings of nature.
his worldview. Likewise, it is easy to believe that environmentalism must be postcolonial at this point, given all the unconventional environmentalisms and “ecological turns” in current scholarship and ignore key voices with the most at stake in conversations on nature, knowledge, and justice. I consider Manfred as a valuable text in which to consider how conventional and unconventional Western conceptions of nature alike can be hypocritical and limited; I do this in an active attempt towards decolonization within colonial structures to complement the more important work that Indigenous and postcolonial scholars and creators do within, between and without these structures (L. Simpson 192). I consider this thesis as an addition and basis for future decolonization projects in British Romantic nature poetry (Rigby 124).

While Indigenous ecocriticisms may have little in common with Byronism, I contend that they agree on one thing: environmental aesthetics are useless if we do not address the exploitative drives that fuel pervading institutional environmentalism that only seeks to preserve nature to further human economic and spiritual purposes. For Byron, this drive is inherent to the tragedy of the human condition; for Indigenous thought, it is contingent on colonialism. Manfred sees any address of this condition as an impossibility, which is where Indigenous theory would diverge. The next sections will consider how Manfred depicts Western elemental philosophy through Empedocles’ theorization of the elements in tandem (and not in absence of) with Byron’s ironic style. This reading will reveal in Manfred eco-ethics that are sympathetic to radical materialist thinking on human-nature relations, but ultimately concludes the impossibility of sustaining such thinking for an individual mired helplessly in the complex web of exploitative relations of the Anthropocene. I bring up Indigenous critiques of new ontologies and materialism not to consider Indigenous materialisms in Manfred. As a response to Todd’s call for non-Indigenous scholars to credit but not appropriate Indigenous thought (9; 19), I employ Empedoclean readings of Byron’s elementality since the two European thinkers have historical and textural valences that overlap. Indigenous theory and concerns will return at the conclusion of this chapter to explore the synergistic implications of its critique of ecological turns with Byron’s ironic visions of Eurocentric environmentalism.
2.5 Western Elementality’s Call to Action

In Rob Nixon’s account of climate change’s “slow violence” against the world, he suggests that environmentalism needs a “star,” a protagonist that could create engaging, fast-paced narratives out of the excruciatingly slow and uncertain Anthropocene reality that is global ecocatastrophe (3). It appears that the elements could be Nixon’s requisite “stars.” Indeed, one needs to look no further for such aestheticized ecopolitics than the 1990 animated television series, Captain Planet. Captain Planet, made of earth, air, water, fire, and a fifth element called “Heart,” is a superhero who is “gonna take pollution down to zero…fighting on the planet’s side” against eco-villains and corporations “who like to loot and plunder” (McFadden et. al).

Byron certainly aestheticizes the Seven Spirits in Manfred: while taking no form, the Spirits describe themselves in their introductory monologues as their respective element, earth, air, ocean, and so on, as nature’s record of unfathomable deep time. However, Manfred is no such protagonist as Captain Planet. He demonstrates the problem of believing that individual “stars” can defeat intangible environmental issues and that individuals with such power would automatically use their power for “good.” Despite knowing their unknowability, Manfred seeks to instrumentalize the Spirits instead of demonstrating respect and reciprocity.

Chapter 1 explored how Byron’s critical use of irony to highlight hypocrisy can point out what earnest, “sometimes naive” (Morton “Byron’s Manfred” 157) green ecocriticism cannot: for example, the false equivalency of environmentalism with individual moralism. Indeed, Manfred challenges the necessity of heroism in environmental rhetoric. Western eco-discourse prioritizes the human ego (or "heart"), in that we must first care for the environment (Harvey). The false moral equation of the environment with altruism in environmental rhetoric ignores the reality of nature as integrated with all human existence, regardless if one is eco- or elementally-conscious. While at first the Seven Spirits appear to anticipate an answer to Nixon’s and elemental thinkers’ calls for eco-action, Manfred demonstrates that an elemental mindset does not necessarily enable ethical action.

11 Many “elemental hero” shows appeared afterwards in North America, including 1992 American superhero franchise Power Rangers (Saban & Levy), the 1995 Japanese magical girl anime Sailor Moon (Sato, Ikahara, & Igarashi), and more recently, the 2005 American animated television series Avatar: The Last Airbender (DiMartino & Konietzko), although most of these shows do not carry forward the ecopolitical overtones.
2.6  The Elements in the Seven Spirits

2.6.1  Who are the Seven Spirits?

Understanding the critical overtones of *Manfred* does not erase the eco-potentiality of its depictions of the elements. Indeed, a reading of its adaptation of Empedocles’ eco-elemental principles will reveal the extent to which Manfred transgresses and thus the extent to which this text challenges Western environmental hypocrisies. The interactions between Manfred and the nature are, in Meritt’s words, “far from easy” – both in that Manfred’s relationship with nature’s agents are never secure nor productive. In Act 1, Scene I, Manfred uses a “tyrant-spell” to summon the Seven Spirits to the gallery in his castle upon the Alps (Byron *Manfred* 1.1.43). The Spirits oblige, though appearing only as “steady aspect of a clear large star” with voices like “music on the waters,” since they “have no forms, beyond the elements / Of which we are the mind and principle” (1.1.178; 177; 181-182). When Manfred demands for “Oblivion, self-oblivion” (1.1.145) they refuse to aid him, confessing that this is not in their power; they can only give him power “O’er earth” of which they are “the dominators, each and all” (1.1.141; 143). They also cannot provide death, which is Manfred’s next request. As Twitchell notes, the Seven Spirits “are executors of nature only, not helpmates for man” (608). The Seven Spirits subvert the archetype of nature existing only to aesthetically please and alleviate existential issues for humans. Instead, they refuse to appear in corporeal form and go beyond the limitations of their powers, which—much like our planet—are not infinitely resourceful.

Thus far, few scholars have written about the Spirits substantively outside of their supernatural and psychological framework in *Manfred*. Twitchell, noting that the Spirits, like other supernatural spirits in Romantic poetry, “are included more for adornment than for actual thematic consequences” considers their supernatural positioning as part of a Neoplatonic order (602). Spence reads how the Spirits allow for a “double perspective” of the supernatural and psychological simultaneously since they appear subjectively through the imaginations of those who summon them (7). To my ecocritical reading, whether the Seven Spirits are supernatural or not is of little importance. As highlighted by both scholars, the elemental Spirits represent Manfred’s delving into his inner world (Twitchell 603; Spence 7). I investigate the radical materialist system through which the Spirits operate and what Manfred’s interactions reveal about the possibility of non-anthropocentric human-nature relations.
2.6.2 The Seven Spirits in the Empedoclean System

Byron’s Seven Spirits are undoubtedly elemental – they name themselves as the representatives of “Earth, ocean, air, night, mountains, winds, thy [Manfred’s] star” (Byron Manfred 1.1.132) during their introductory monologues. Higgins has already identified that the “relationship between the human and the elemental is also profoundly important to Manfred” in the question between the power of the human imagination against cosmic forces (84-5). But few Byron scholars have sought to critically define the elements and what they might reveal about Manfred’s eco-ethics. Much like how the meaning of materialism “is more often assumed than explained” (Levinson “A Motion” 370), much of scholarship that evokes elementality assumes general and individual understandings to suffice. Morton is a partial exception to this – in his ecocritical reading of Manfred, he speculates on the phenomenological quality of the elements and that the Spirits’ “voices, forces that rule the elements, could refer to some kind of natural philosophical knowledge” (160). I aim to specify what kind of knowledge their elementality posits and the complex ethical implications they provide for readers of Manfred through a reading of the Seven Spirits as agents of an Empedoclean elemental system.

Empedocles was a fifth century BCE philosopher, “naturalist, poet, religious prophet, philosopher, and perhaps even shaman-healer” (Macauley 104). He is considered a “distinctly important figure who has been widely ignored” during the little-studied time of the Presocratics (103). He was not the first to coin or discuss the four elements, but he is considered the first European philosopher to create a cohesive political cosmology of how earth, air, water, and fire operate together to create the natural world (337n14). Empedocles posited that the cosmological forces of Love (philia) and Strife (neikos) arise from and animate the elements in a continuous cycle. Contemporary elemental scholars Macauley, Cohen and Duckert center their theories upon Empedocles’ work. Macauley postulates that Empedocles’ non-hierarchical rendering of the four elements as tangible representatives of Nature can help galvanize more empathetic environmental thinking (115). “Matterphors,” for Cohen and Duckert, describe the ontology of the elements as both metaphor and matter, since “their ability to bond materiality and narrative” connects the tangible aspects of nature to its intangible vastness and historicity (11). This idea
lends a valuable ecocritical reading to Manfred, as the elements do not simply occupy aspects of
the setting but are sentient agents of nature that dictate the course of the Byronic hero’s quest.

There has been little scholarship on how Empedoclean thought manifests in Manfred
despite the references to the elements in the Seven Spirits. There is admittedly negligible factual
evidence that Byron read Empedocles, but Mervyn Nicholson notes that Matthew Arnold’s
Empedocles on Etna (1852), a dramatic poem based on legends of the philosopher’s death,
“could not have been written without Manfred” (341). There is reasonable scholarly interest
(Nicholson; Dietrich; Farrell) in how Arnold continued the Byronic tradition through
Empedocles on Etna by relying heavily on Manfred “to define [his portrayal of] Empedocles’s
bitterness and despair” (Farrell 5). Dietrich also notes the “confluence” of Romantic and
Presocratic thought in Arnold’s work (28). Arnold’s thematic connection to Byron might suggest
at least that Empedoclean thought and Byronic nature are “unlikely allies” (Banerjee 62) in
outlining worlds in which emotion is paramount to map human-nonhuman relations.

The parallels between the Empedoclean elemental system and Byron’s form run deep. To
Empedocles, the elements rest in “equipoise” and are equal in respect to “origin and age,”
strength and capacity to rule (Macauley 114). Similarly, the Seven Spirits, while separate
entities, operate as a single force. After their individual introductions, the Spirits speak in the
collective “we” (Byron Manfred 1.1.139; 143; 149; 150; 159; 166; 173), signifying that they
present as distinctive agential textures held together as a singular, unified force in a cycle of
elemental interdependence. Empedocles saw the world physically and spiritually constituted by
earth, air, water, and fire, a philosophy that similarly animates the Seven Spirits’ active existence
as the mind-body apparatus of their respective elemental domains. With the onset of molecular
worldviews in Western science, worldviews that emphasized the elements were dismissed. The
periodic table, for example, has arguably stripped ecological intimacy and materiality from the
elements and thus encourage resourcism to shape our modern perceptions of the natural world,
so that air is now oxygen, wood is now timber, fire is now fossil fuel (Cohen & Duckert 5).

Byron’s Seven Spirits actively reject such reductionism. When summoned, the First Spirit
exclaims “Mortal!... From my mansion in the cloud / Which the breath of twilight builds” (Byron
Manfred 1.1.52; 53-54), thus immediately establishing a self separate from its observable, thus
objectifiable, domain. The First Spirit is not just “cloud” and “twilight” but refuses to expound on what “it” is, focusing rather on the relations that bind it to the domain of air as sovereign.

The next six Spirits employ the same approach in their introductory monologues, grandly describing the elemental locale they rule, from which Manfred stole and yoked them to him. “We have no forms,” the First Spirit says after their introductions, “beyond the elements / Of which we are mind and principle;” speaking almost directly to Cohen and Duckert’s Empedoclean understandings of elements as “[s]maller than Nature, larger than quarks and leptons…[they are] the animated materialities with and through which life thrives” (13). The Spirits are perfect iterations of “matterphors,” existing simultaneously as local and global natures, the particular elements and the faceless genii locorum, a utopic enmeshment of all ontological levels of the natural world that elemental scholars argue is needed to operate a productive eco-ethics (12). Their formlessness prevents human control, yet their voices still hold particular stories of nature, inviting empathy and awe. Empedocles’ system melds the natural and supernatural (i.e., spiritual) readings of Manfred, since as Macauley explains, Empedocles saw “the rhizomata [roots] to be immortal deities (daimones)” ready to be understood as powerful forces of the world, just like Zeus or Hera (106). Neoplatonic readings of Manfred such as Twitchell’s become compatible with this elemental reading – the Empedoclean system imbues an ecological awareness to the Spirits as natural agents that have and are made up of their own minds.

2.6.3 The Seven Spirits, Manfred, and the Huttonian Paradox

The Seven Spirits and their operational similarities to Empedoclean elementality as a complete, nonhuman system blends the natural and spiritual worlds in a manner that suggests the utopic possibilities of an agential nature that contemporary elemental philosophers claim are embedded in elemental thinking. However, a reader of Byron and Manfred would know that both author and text are not so easy to pin down. While the Spirits seem all-powerful, they are still bound and subject to the violence of Manfred’s exploitative behaviour. Because of their enmeshment in nature and time, Spirits require discussion of geologist James Hutton’s theory of deep time. Hutton’s geology, I argue, grounds us more firmly in Romantic science to which Byron may have been responding to in his depiction of the Seven Spirits. Hutton’s work posits that the earth is vast and unknowable, but still exists for the pleasure of human inquiry and enjoyment (Furniss
While Hutton’s deep time helps unpack the Spirits’ formative relationality, his contradictory anthropocentric moralism is also repeated by Manfred’s entitled behaviour. *Manfred* highlights the hypocritical illogic of Hutton’s humanist worldview, which survives to this day in extraction industries and even eco-philosophies that follow Hutton’s principles.

The debate of geology during Hutton’s time was elemental at its core. Hutton’s proposition that rock strata were created by “subterranean heat and pressure” directly contrasted the ruling geologic paradigm of Neptunism, which posited that the earth’s surface precipitated from ancient oceans (Furniss 306). Here we already see Byron evoking Hutton through the Fourth Spirit, who represents “Earth” as a destructive-creative force of rock and lava (Byron *Manfred* 1.1.88-95). Seemingly building on Empedocles’ theory, Hutton’s articulation that air circulation, water cycles, and subterranean fire constantly move to form and reform the planet contributes one of the most important findings for modern geology (Furniss 312; Craig et. al 5).

The literary influence of Hutton’s geologic aesthetic upon first- and second-generation Romantic poets has already been established. Furniss connects Wordsworthian ecology to Hutton’s “active universe” (308), which he characterizes as “conscious, intentional, wise, and benevolent” (312); while Geric sees the slow, cyclical revolutions of deep time reifying Percy Shelley’s ideal of “political and intellectual reform” (41) in *Prometheus Unbound*, a closet drama with deep aesthetic and thematic resonances with *Manfred* (Stauffer Dark; Higgins 87). There has been little comparison of Huttonian geology to *Manfred*, most likely due to Byron’s absence in Romantic ecocriticism and his refusal to reiterate conclusions about nature compatible with deep ecology or green Romanticism. Indeed, I aim to elucidate how Byron subverts Hutton’s “benevolent” visions of nature to arrive at a darker conclusion of the natural world’s functioning.

First, we must see where Byron’s elements and Hutton’s geology converge: at the Seven Spirits’ matterphorical representation of deep time. Hutton’s work connects the immaterial concept of time to the tangible layers of rock sediment beneath the earth, each connoting a different era in the Earth’s millions of years. These layers are the result of deep time, crafted by the slow, “infinitesimal” changes Hutton hypothesized the earth undergoes in forming and reforming itself (Furniss 315). The Seven Spirits tell the stories of their respective domains through the passage of time and movement. While the Seven Spirits operate on Empedocles’s equalizing elemental structure in terms of age, power, and rule, they also appear to meld
subjective and objective passages of time. The Seven Spirits’ introductory monologues establish each entity’s power of their natural domains and tell the story of their ancient, lived experience. However, their introductions vary in detail and depth, suggesting that while the Seven Spirits all encompass an equitable perception of the passage of global time, they also inhabit personal times that emphasize their relational differences. This is most apparent with the Sixth Spirit, who only says “My dwelling is the shadow of the night / Why doth thy magic torture me with light?” (Byron *Manfred* 1.1.108-109). The Sixth Spirit’s short introduction reflects its being the oldest element of darkness, bearing no dependence on other elements to form its own. Conversely, the mountain-ruling Second Spirit has the second longest speech at 16 lines (1.1.60-75)\(^{12}\) that reflects its relative youth due to its reliance on wind, water, and subterranean fire to build its domain of which it was nevertheless “crown’d… long ago” (1.1.61). As Cohen and Duckert remark, “the elements connect epochs through the time-storm” (17), rendering time just legible enough for humans to understand its incomprehensibility. Together, the Spirits represent a time system that hinges upon the convergence of objective time and relational time—a formulation of deep time—in a manner that emphasizes how power and relations are intrinsically connected to age, particularly age that does not conform to human time.

The Seven Spirits are keepers of storied nature, made partially legible through the cosmo-planetary logics posited by Empedocles and Hutton. However, contradicting the Empedoclean echoes of his own work, Hutton proposes an anthropocentric teleology of our planet in his *Theory of the Earth*. He posits, “The globe of this earth is evidently made for man…he alone is capable of knowing the nature of this world, which he thus possesses in virtue of his proper right; and he alone can make the knowledge of this system a source of pleasure and the means of happiness” (Hutton). While the elements move according to the “Mysterious Agency” (Byron *Manfred* 1.1.28) that shapes our world, for Hutton, they do not express sentience that parallels Man’s consciousness, thus entailing that their powers exist to be appropriated. Whether this philosophical addition was done to gain a modicum of respect from his undoubtedly shocked

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12 After the Seventh Spirit, the supposedly strongest Spirit. It luxuriously details in 22 lines Manfred’s monstrous star (Byron *Manfred* 1.1.110-131). The formation of the Seven Spirits is called into question by the Seventh – is it superior because it is the ruler of Manfred’s star, who has summoned them? The co-constitutional nature of Spirit-to-Spirit and Spirit-to-Manfred relationships highlights how subjectivity influences power and time.
religious readership or to reflect the common belief of entitled scientific imperialism, Hutton intellectually contradicts his own findings by minimizing the unknowable history of Earth’s deep time into the pocket of human use and enjoyment. From a contemporary viewpoint, Hutton’s work embodies both nature’s economic use-value to extraction industries and its emotional use-value to environmentalism, thus warping its insight into a natural world operating on its own time and praxis might provide to non-anthropocentric environmental aesthetics.

Similar to Hutton, Manfred acknowledges that the Spirits do have an agency that he cannot understand but still believes he is entitled to extract. I use the term “extract” as opposed to “exploit” to invoke the concept of “extractivism,” which activist Naomi Klein describes as “a nonreciprocal, dominance-based relationship with the earth, one purely of taking” (Klein 169; L. Simpson 73). I argue that Manfred’s behaviour counts as extractivist, since he views the Spirits purely as resources, “Slaves” to his “will” (Byron Manfred 1.1.153). Further, Manfred hints that his powers arose from imperialist interactions, stating, his power “[w]as purchased / …by superior –science – penance – daring – / …when the earth / Saw men and spirits walking side by side” (1.1.114; 115; 117-118). Manfred gestures to a utopic past between human and nonhuman entities that nevertheless allowed for colonial intent and action: the purchasing of his power from spirits occurred not through compensation and reciprocity but by force and conquest.

Concurrent to Manfred’s anthropocentric behaviour, the Seven Spirits are not perfectly earnest depictions of nature, either. As stated earlier, the Empedoclean universe operates on the forces of Love and Strife ruling the cosmos in succession. The Seven Spirits focus more on imparting Strife rather than the harmonious aspects of Love through tactics of intimidation, isolation, and—to our protagonist’s eyes—mockery. The Seventh Spirit openly proves the futility of Manfred’s desire for absolute control by turning into his sister, mocking his fierce command for the Spirits to “As unto him may seem most fitting—Come!” (1.1.187). The presence of the Seventh Spirit mixes strangely with the objective reality operated by the other six Spirits – it is the agent of nature most clearly co-constituted by Manfred as his ruling star who yet considers the other six “weak spirits” (1.1.129). The Seven Spirits’ presence as objectively equal yet subjectively unequal points to Byron’s understanding that nature manifests differently depending on the individual. Would the Seventh Spirit be as powerful and mean-spirited if it did not represent Manfred’s place in his own cosmos? And finally, while the Spirits present as
“matterphors,” the Spirits themselves are not “matter” – they only aurally matter, speaking their existence into life to Manfred and the reader through the text. “Elements are lively as language,” say Cohen and Duckert (8). To Byron, elements are only language, brought to life and given shape by our reflected needs and desires. Ultimately, Manfred presents an alienating vision of Empedoclean-Huttonian geo-cosmology, a far stretch from modern conceptualizations that such elements necessitate harmonic or even respectful engagement from humanity.

Macauley proposes that the elements, which Empedocles also considered as rhizomata (108), if applied to environmental thinking, will help Western culture, “uprooted increasingly,” to become more aware of its material relations and establish more particular ethics towards the environment (104). I agree with Macauley that the elements lend a valuable physical and socio-historical materiality to what we consider “nature,” but exploring Manfred has demonstrated that this endeavour is far more complex than simply re-rooting our aesthetic focus from resourcism to elementalism. Even popular contemporary re-rootings of environmentalism have not galvanized the necessary shifts in global paradigms. James Lovelock, the inventor of the “Gaia Paradigm,” was inspired by Hutton’s work to frame the planet Earth as “a massive organic body that functions as a macrocosm of the microcosmic plants and animals that it supports” (Furniss 309). This understanding of Earth, Lovelock argues, justifies our distress for the degradation of the environment – the Earth is a sentient being that deserves to be treated with respect (488). James Lovelock is now 101 years old and is still advocating for climate justice, though in slightly more disenchanted tones (Watts). The tiresome cyclicality of promising “revolutionary turns” that never break through the monolithic “Business as Usual” capitalist paradigms suggests that something is missing. Environmental ethics thus necessitate critique of capitalism and of the self as an (unwilling or willing) actant of capitalism. Such critique can be found in Manfred.

It is not the view of nature, I conclude, that needs to change, but our behaviour towards it. Sceptical texts like Manfred (Morton “Byron’s Manfred” 157) propose that an aesthetic shift in environmental thinking to elemental thinking does not guarantee ethical behaviour. This is because eco-conscious individuals and movements still operate under exploitative frameworks, often in unintentional ways. One of the fundamental ethical faults of Manfred is that he wishes to outsource his problems onto other, more powerful entities rather than making ethical reparations to Astarte. This counters Leanne Simpson’s ideas of Nishnaabeg society as “a society of makers,
rather than a society of consumers” (80). This is an obvious point to make – that an Indigenous perspective would be quite different from the quintessentially selfish, imperial Byronic figure. But the concern remains that settler environmentalisms re-enact Manfred’s refusal towards enacting behavioural change. They continue the colonial mode by imposing slightly deviated ideologies of nature that do not acknowledge long-established and robust Indigenous knowledge on this subject, and thus not moving forward with lessons in intersectional environmentalisms. For example, Cohen and Duckert make a call for readers to be not “onlookers, but makers, companions in whirl” (19), similar in sentiment to Simpson, but do not follow their own call by making with and accrediting Indigenous scholars who have been “in whirl” for a long time. Elemental philosophy and ecocriticism appear to be geared towards already eco-conscious Western readers in its focus on Eurocentric thinking and familiarities. Environmental discourses must embody the same itch to constantly re-evaluate one’s eco-ethics that is suggested by Manfred’s depictions of the Seven Spirits as simultaneously utopic and exploitable.

2.7 Conclusion

Elements allow us to take our bearings in the global environmental situation today, “not just to ask what steps we should take to avoid or prevent disasters but to ask where we, as collectives, are going” (Cohen & Duckert 15). For Manfred, the elements can demonstrate just how dangerous our path is. Manfred reveals that the elements do not stop its protagonist’s wish for oblivion and may not stop ours. While it is true that materiality connects the natural world to the human world, the paradox of Western environmentalism remains: identifying a part of nature serves to eliminate its mystery and ecological history, thus rendering it another resource for our supposed little human universe (12) to dominate. Byron’s globalized nature, presented via the Seven Spirits as faceless, distant, and/or hostile to Manfred’s demands, demonstrates the double-bind of localized versus globalized nature. Localized natures can still be exploited, their histories erased, yet globalized natures may risk losing the “material affinity” required to establish connections of care. Indigenous ecological theorizations present the solution of particular natures, through which humans establish connections to the natural world through specific environments (Deloria 74). Further, Indigenous scholarship illuminates the complexity of environmentalism’s paradoxical and therefore unhelpful focus on human emotion and visual
aesthetics. Its critique of new materialism’s “revolutionary turns” in human-nature thought highlights the concerning absence of citation and accreditation for ideas already posited by Indigenous thinkers. One of these fields, elemental environmentalism, places value on the elements for thinking “against the reduction of the world to commodity (resource, energy) [as] a powerful aid to activism” (4), an agenda that Manfred critiques by showing just how difficult such thinking is to enact. Manfred acknowledges Seven Spirits are powerful and listens to their aural self-creation as the keepers of nature’s agency and history, but he still dismisses ethical ties to them because they hold particular use to him in his quest for “self-oblivion,” replicating the contradictory argument posited by Romantic geologist James Hutton that Earth is beyond human understanding and yet still exists for humanity’s pursuit for knowledge and pleasure.

As Cohen and Duckert say, “The elements oblige, but they do not solve” (20). Contemporary scholarship on the four classical elements offers a theoretical center for a “new” environmental system of thinking, which the Seven Spirits appear to represent through embodying the utopic possibilities of the Empedoclean elemental system. Morton’s call that ecocriticism must slow down in order to find “anomalies, paradoxes, and conundrums in an otherwise smooth-looking stream of ideas” (Ecology without Nature 12) appears more crucial than ever to the ecocritical project after examining the limitations of both traditional and new environmentalisms. “Gaia Paradigm,” like many other eco-philosophies, failed to inspire systemic change to address the “slow violence” of ecocatastrophe, perhaps in part to do with its inspiration from Hutton’s work. The meeting of the Seven Spirits and Manfred is the epitome of “cosmopolitics” that ecocritics are attempting to imbue in environmental thinking (Adamson & Monani 7) but in the classic Byronic style, this meeting does more to show the dangerous hypocrisies of earnest ecologies than to validate them. There is no “particular” ethical relation (Rosiek 339) that Manfred understands or is compelled to participate in with the Seven Spirits in this text that centers around his self and needs. This iterates the violent complicity of this text, which highlights its own problematic framing. Nature has a voice through the elements, Manfred hedges, but it is still continually silenced in favour of the protagonist’s extractivist quest and his exploitative considerations of relationships with humans, the natural world, and the sister he doomed. The frame forces an ecocritical reader to find fault in Manfred’s approach, pushing us to subsequently critique such behavior and the systems that allow for it.
Chapter 3: Futurity

3.1 Introduction

In light of Manfred’s lack of ethical commitment to the natural world, an investigation is required to explore his reasoning for questing after “self-oblivion” and what he might be seeking beyond death or spiritual transcendence. This chapter explores Manfred’s desires through an elemental lens, which is particularly salient considering Manfred views himself elementally, as a body of clay and a spirit of lightning. The first section of this chapter will explore, through Empedocles’ philosophy and his life and death, how Manfred’s quest for “self-oblivion” connotes his anti-materialist desire to become a “viewless spirit” (1.2.53) to escape the e/motional turmoil of existence. This reading contrasts with existing arguments that propose that Manfred’s taking his death into his own hands connotes his belief of the superiority of human consciousness or, conversely, an acceptance of human-nature independence. The second section will tackle the implications of reading Manfred not as a noble Byronic hero who from the outset wishes to enact his author’s well-known trope of “making Death a Victory” (Prometheus line 59), but rather as a desperate individual scrambling to find any avenue of escape from accountability for his unshakeable exploitative behaviour. This reading attempts to crystallize the aspects of Manfred’s quest that reflect the conflicts faced by a/Anthropocentric individual, who live with the conflicting guilt of living under spectral, daily complicity in a myriad of deeply unethical relations against both human and nonhuman agents. Manfred’s escape from accountability will be explored through a close reading of his final words, “‘tis not so difficult to die,” (Manfred 3.4.151) which I suggest, conveys the ease of death compared to enacting behavioural change when faced with the extent of one's ethical transgressions. Reading Manfred ecologically can, this chapter ultimately posits, showcase the importance for developing an eco-ethics that embodies the Byronic style: that is, to be constantly self-evaluative and ironic. This chapter will conclude by enacting this very eco-ethic upon itself by challenging the concept of reading Byron “ecologically,” why such a practice reiterates the supplementary essence (Rajan) of the environment in Western understandings of self and society – thus suggesting that to read Byron ecologically is to arrive at the question of why such a practice is still required.
3.2 *Manfred* on Mind versus Matter

In Act 1 Scene 2, after the Spirits leave Manfred, he ventures alone to the inaccessible Jungfrau summit, where he laments on what he perceives as humanity’s primary conundrum: that we are

Half dust, half deity, alike unfit
To sink or soar, with our mix’d essence make
A conflict of its elements (Byron *Manfred* 1.2.40-42)

To Manfred, the human condition necessitates a binary between the lightning consciousness that allows us “to soar,” beyond mere survival on the planet, and our earthbound bodies of “low wants” that restrict the actualization of our “lofty will” (1.2.44). Existing Byron scholarship tends to agree that *Manfred* is a text that addresses the “incommensurability” of the mind and body (Levinson “Reflections” 361), but they do not arrive at the same conclusion of its verdict on this debate. In *Byron and Place: History, Translation, Nostalgia*, Stephen Cheeke presents the more established understanding of the dramatic poem’s conclusion, which holds that Manfred perishes holding onto mind-body dualism and “the possibility of a triumphant Prometheanism, a mind rising above its place and time” (89; Hubbell “‘Our Mix’d’” 6). Hubbell argues otherwise: that in his commitment to self-judgment, Manfred accepts mind-body interdependence in acknowledging his personhood’s being affected by placeness: “I / Am what I am, but that I ever was / Or having been” (Byron *Manfred* 3.1.152-153). To Hubbell, *Manfred* as a text is “not just critiquing the philosophical dualism that branches into the oppositional discourses of Cartesian Mind versus Wordsworthian Nature;” it also considers the touchpoints where mind and natural world integrate (“‘Our Mix’d’” 6). Manfred does appear to accept the mind-body construction in this statement, in his emphasis that “having been” in a place informs his sense of self. Yet this reading does not account for why this radical acceptance does not affect his desire to *lose* his sense of self, which he seeks from the onset of the dramatic poem unerringly until its end.

When read through the lens of Empedocles’ life and philosophy, Manfred’s quest for “self-oblivion” may reveal an ironic take on the mind versus matter debate that rationalizes Manfred’s recalcitrance to continue living. Unexpectedly, Empedocles’ own death may help us arrive at a surprising synergy between the implications of his elemental cosmological system and Manfred’s motivations. In Act, Scene 1, when the Spirits refuse to serve him, Manfred angrily elementalizes his own mind and body: “The mind, the spirit, the Promethean spark, / The lightning of my being, is as bright,” he claims, “Pervading, and far darting as your own, / And
shall not yield to yours, though coop’d in clay!” (Byron *Manfred* 1.1.154-157). Previous to this outburst, only the Seventh Spirit refers to human elementality, dismissively calling him “Child of Clay” (1.1.134). Ever after, Manfred and other spirits continually return to the concern of his “mix’d” elemental status (1.2.41; 3.2.166) that leads to states of convulsion (2.4.160). Manfred elementalizes himself in order to relate, and ultimately prove his worth, to the spiritual world. “Self-oblivion” is, to Manfred, means the shedding of his stifling clay-lightning entanglement.

Empedocles may have met his end through a mode of elemental “self-oblivion” himself. He reportedly died by suicide by jumping into the volcano Mount Etna. He was possibly attempting to experiment with his own theoretical musings on the existence of a spirit being shuffled from one elemental domain to another, thrown from the earth into “beams of radiant Sun,” a locus of fire similar to volcano and lightning (Empedocles fr. 115; Macauley 118). Manfred’s quest seems to echo Empedocles’—to lose oneself to the elements in rebellion or experimentation to test his own philosophy: “From what-is-not what-is can ne’er become” (fr. 12). However, while Empedocles ostensibly jumped to pursue existential wisdom (Macauley 119), for Manfred, the triumph of what he calls the “Promethean spark” is only valuable in that it can provide the psychic relief he so desperately seeks. Manfred is not so much concerned with what he receives in transcendence. Rather, he wishes to escape his current predicament: the “barrenness of [his] spirit” – the very same spirit he powerfully proclaimed as “Pervading” and “bright” in attempting to yoke the Seven Spirits (1.2.26). The contradiction of his spiritual self-assessments points not to an agenda to prove the value of the “Promethean spark;” instead, this contradiction points to Manfred’s utilizations of multiple self-truths (his mask of superiority and his mask of anxiety, both equally and simultaneously true) in order to dominate the Spirits or elicit sympathy from the reader. Manfred’s cunning use of contradictions reveals the extent of his desperation to attain his ultimate goal: to “rest for ever” (1.2.19).

One of Empedocles’ most well-known texts, *The Purifications*, describes “an ‘impure spirit’ (*daimon*)... banished from the realm of contentment and peace to experience a series of incarnations in various earthly forms (vegetable, animal, human)” to “[reach] a final state of ‘purity’” (Macauley 105). This narrative could be imprinted onto Manfred, who may represent the final mortal state for this fiery *daimon*, seeking “self-oblivion” in an attempt to find a Buddhist-like *nirvana*, in which suffering ceases to exist and the entity’s cycle of reincarnation
ends. The Empedoclean system emphasizes movement as a mode towards spiritual rest. Empedocles espoused notions that certain movement engenders characteristics in entities through “attraction (like to like)” (Macauley 135).\(^{13}\) I posit that what Byron denotes with the conflict between the lightning mind and the clay body is a visuality of velocities – one fast element jarred by one slow. One processes ideas extremely quickly, while one is slow to act upon them. Manfred’s “attraction” to the Seven Spirits lies in his desperate need to “power up” – to transcend into a being so complex, he may finally be at rest.

Lightning is a material of such molecular speed that it almost appears as rest, as “self-oblivion,” due to the intense vibrations of its atoms; its phenomenological state reflects its relational and categorical attributes. Lightning, importantly, occurs due to electrical conflict between clouds and the earth. Striking quickly, it appears as pure light and releases up to one billion volts with one strike (“Lightning”). Lightning embodies conflict itself, between earth and sky, between its mind-numbing speed and its static, light-like appearance. Perhaps in Manfred’s self-evaluation of his own spirit as lightning, he sees these conflicting qualities uncomfortably coalescing: his sharp, abrasive and dangerous personality, his anger at his mental potential being bottled in his earthly body, and, above all, his longing to embody an elemental state of rest. Manfred’s choice of “lightning” to describe his soul successfully conveys its intimidating power, but it also points to his conflicted inner state that yearns for both disruptive transcendence and mental/physical stasis simultaneously. With all his fiery, awful heart, he wishes to become e/motionless, and that is the ironic tragedy of his story.

Being e/motionless would allow Manfred’s weary spirit to “rest for ever” with no more concern over his guilty conscience. One could argue that this turn to elemental transcendence might be his method of attending to his transgressions and guilt, but Byron even ironizes Manfred’s belief that such transcendence would enact such correction. Manfred believes that through death or “self-oblivion,” he will blissfully become a “viewless spirit,” a state of existence that precludes suffering in the absence of relationality based on visual desire (Byron

\(^{13}\) Key to the conceptualization of this idea of Empedocles’ power and movement was Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza’s understanding of being through their proportions of speeds and slowness, “a complex relation between differential velocities, between deceleration and acceleration of particles” (123), what Levinson calls the “motion-rest ratio” (“A Motion” 382).
This stance is later juxtaposed by a nameless Spirit’s remark to its peers: that Manfred would in fact make “An awful spirit” (2.4.163). The descriptor “awful” can be read as an indication of the Spirit’s belief that Manfred would have been both powerful enough to strike terror into other supernatural beings (i.e., awe-striking) and, in a more modern sense of the term, miserable to be around. Byron positions Manfred as a being who would never cease in creating strife, no matter his elemental form. The irony of Manfred’s belief that transcendence would end his agony and not simply replicate it in a different elemental state pushes towards an understanding of this anti-hero as a failed model of ethical behaviour who cannot enact utopic principles, even as he desires them, precisely due to his self-centeredness.

Manfred’s pathetic motivations\(^\text{14}\) reflect Byron’s tendency to, wittingly or not, corrupt Empedoclean philosophy in a way that affirms its validity. While his ultimate concern to become e/motionless confirms that mind-body interdependence is fundamental to his quest, the irony of a Spirit’s suggesting Manfred could never simply be a “viewless spirit” implies a less rosy outlook for the a/Anthropocentric individual’s ability to enact change. *Manfred* appears to posit that acceptance and embodiment of mind-body interdependence is an ideal that can never be reached by the a/Anthropocentric individual. Manfred’s elemental coding of his own existence as a conflict of clay and lightning, together with the conflicted nature of lightning itself, presents an ecological understanding of his quest for “self-oblivion” and an escape from life as he currently knows it, not for knowledge or glory, but for peace from material commitments. The elements present a reading of Manfred’s quest that more clearly aligns with Byron’s style of contrariness and scholarship on *Manfred* that posit it as a text built on the slipperiness of knowledge (Bernhard Jackson 820). We will explore from what consequence Manfred attempts to escape and the eco-ethical implications of Manfred’s successful “self-oblivion” in the next section.

### 3.3 “Death a Victory”

In reading Manfred’s self-elementalization as a reflection of his desperate quest to “rest for ever” rather than to prove his existential superiority, we arrive at the need to re-evaluate the implications of his decision to die. Existing readings understand Manfred’s death as a reiteration

\(^{14}\) By “pathetic” I mean both pitiful (evoking readerly judgment) and moving (evoking readerly sympathy).
of Byron’s trope, “making Death a Victory” (*Prometheus* line 59), which sees the Byronic hero self-destruct to thwart the desires of all those who oppose him (Higgins 87; Dennis 149). I contend there is space to read Manfred’s death as an ironic critique of this Byronic trope. Thus, importantly to this thesis, Byron the author and the Byronic style of *Manfred* exist separately – earnest readings of Manfred’s death are likely informed by a hyperconsciousness of Byron’s life experiences, while a reading of his death through a Byronic style can invite meanings of *Manfred* that reify Byron’s return in the Anthropocene as “a demon of great consequence” (McGann 11). Manfred feels the guilt of unethical relations for desiring and destroying Astarte, but in choosing death, he opts to release himself from the moral obligations of rectifying his behaviour, thus presenting a grim view of our similarly conflicted state in the late Anthropocene.

In Act 3, Scene 4, Manfred’s wish for death is finally granted: ensconced in his tower, Manfred is confronted by the Abbott, who offers salvation, and a demonic Spirit, who enters to judge Manfred’s soul. Manfred rejects both Abbott and Spirit to die of his own accord, as his life-force is presumably drained after a battle of wills with the Spirit. With his dying breath, he proclaims “’tis not so difficult to die.” Higgins outlines a common understanding of Manfred’s death, which reads an earnest tragedy to the final image of his Byronic hero. Higgins remarks

> Like Byron’s ‘Prometheus,’ Manfred makes ‘Death a Victory’ through his defiance of cosmic forces and his assertion of the power of the human mind to stand against the brute contingency of the universe (IV, 33, l. 59). It is a pyrrhic victory, of course, for while he will not kneel to Arimanhes, he prostrates himself to his ‘own desolation’; nonetheless, this seems to me the most anthropocentric of all the texts produced by the Diodati Circle in 1816. It presents human destinies, however ill-starred, as profoundly different to those of nonhuman creatures and heroises Manfred’s refusal to bow down to the elements. (87)

It is futile to object to Manfred’s death scene as anything but “anthropocentric” – Chapter 2 of this thesis illuminates how Manfred dismisses the utility of nature in aiding “human destinies” during his encounter with the Seven Spirits and their egalitarian ontic system. But I contend there is space to read Manfred’s death as a Byronic critique of his own anthropocentric trope. The phrase “Death a Victory” summarizes a trademark behaviour of Byron’s “victim-heroes” who deliberately thwart their oppressors by spurning their own existence and desires in order to taste the ultimate satisfaction: revenge (Dennis 147-149). Manfred’s death is an exemplary scenario of Byron’s “Death a Victory:” while throughout the play he desires “self-oblivion” or death, he rejects such possibility presented by the demonic Spirit, who would seek to enslave his soul, and
instead prioritizes self-will over the Spirit’s desire to exact judgment. This final image of a rebellious yet self-judgmental Manfred is read by nineteenth century reviewers and scholars alike as noble (Roberts) or “heroic” (Hubbell “‘Our Mix’d’” 15) – a reading that ultimately aligns with Cheeke’s argument that Manfred embodies a champion of human consciousness and agency.¹⁵

Such readings validly identify Manfred’s self-absorbed behaviour, typically concluding that *Manfred* is a significant iteration of Byron’s victim-hero praxis. This reasoning is not illogical, considering the whole poem, its title, and the agency of its characters orbit around Manfred. However, with an elemental understanding of Manfred’s motivations in seeking transcendence, the implications of “making Death a Victory” must be re-evaluated. Manfred does not wish to prove the human mind’s superiority (least of all because he despises humans), but instead simply seeks eternal rest from his conflicted existence, spurred by his guilty conscience. Moreover, by poem’s end, a person who was harmed by Manfred’s sins remains overlooked, from whose very unforgiveness Manfred yearns to escape: his sister, Astarte. Astarte exists as a spectre, literally to Manfred and textually to the reader in the punctual lacunae of “—” which Manfred and other characters use to substitute mentions of their likely incestuous relationship that led to her death (Byron 3.3.47). The spectre of Astarte throughout the dramatic poem reminds Manfred and the reader that Manfred’s transgressions do not conclude with him. “Death a Victory” can only be viewed as triumph if readers are sympathetic to Manfred’s plight and ignore the harm that he causes other entities. Foremost on this list is Astarte, who by poem’s end is still left “without a tomb” (2.4.83). Manfred’s noble suicide can thus be read as pure selfish relief. The dual positioning of Astarte in the text as dismissed yet haunting opens a space to reread Manfred’s death critically: namely, how “Death a Victory” dissolves ethical responsibility in favour of celebration of individualism and self-determination and is ultimately used to refocus reader sympathy from victim to perpetrator.¹⁶

¹⁵ Cheeke’s “mind rising above its place and time” can point to an implicit understanding in mind/body dualism that the entrapments of “place and time” chain human consciousness to the cumbersome ethical responsibilities associated with material existence. Such a viewpoint can enable entitled behaviour such as extractivism.

¹⁶ The gendering of Manfred’s guilty conscience is no coincidence. As Julie Ellison states powerfully in *Delicate Subjects: Romanticism, Gender, and the Ethics of Understanding*, “Romantic protagonists suffer as woman…it is perceived to be caused by…the lack of woman and also by her disturbing presence” (14) Astarte’s simultaneous lack of presence and spectral haunting makes her spirit the “natural” object to absorb Manfred’s guilt and blame, since her perceived role, like that of nature’s, centers around nurturing, producing, and generosity, is lost. This
Byron’s contrariness allows us to peel back the “sincerity” (Stauffer *Anger* 133; McGann 152) of Manfred’s self-righteousness in death, particularly of his final words – “’tis not so difficult to die.” Why, after undergoing this arduous quest, would he ultimately proclaim that what had eluded him all along was in actuality not difficult to achieve? The slipperiness of these final words arises from various possible interpretations of the infinitive verb “to die.” A reader can surmise from “to die” that Manfred means either to find avenues towards death or, what is rather more contextually sensible, the actual act of dying. For most humans, the distinction between the method of death and the act of dying may be quite minimal – however, for Manfred, as a human cursed by nature to find all methods of death ineffectual, this distinction is as vast as his existence. I contend that once Manfred accesses his method of death by battling the demonic Spirit, the “ease” he experiences in letting go is the dissolution of his intense guilt in harming Astarte and the release from enacting reparations. Manfred’s final words might as well be “’tis not so difficult to not care.”

Manfred is a despicable but understandable model of the a/Anthropocentric individual precisely because his whole quest for spiritual/material transcendence is predicated on a self-prioritizing desire to escape ethical responsibility. He elementalizes himself as lightning, a force that embodies conflict. His view of his spirit as both “bright” and barren points to him possessing both a superiority and inferiority complex, a man who understands himself as a powerful being who just wants to die. It is easy to despise Manfred, but it is also easy to sympathize with his expression of pain: the detachedness in his observation that “Powers, passions, all I see in other beings, / Have been to me as rain unto the sands,” echoes as a symptom of depression (1.1.22-23). The conflicting emotion of guilt reflects this Byronic contrary style well. As Jennifer Jacquet argues in “Human Error: Survivor’s Guilt in the Anthropocene,” guilt “can be debilitating and self-destructive. But…it can also motivate people to make reparations for their transgressions” (“Human Error”). *Manfred* imagines the darker route an individual would take

understanding of Astarte as Manfred’s gendered guilt falls directly into Ellison’s understanding that “feminine victimage clarifies the role of suffering in romantic understanding as more differential than substantive” (14). Manfred codifies suffering onto Astarte’s life and death in order to fashion a one-dimensional rendering of guilt that abstracts the need for behavioural change. This thesis operates on this flattening of Astarte (and thus, other wronged entities) as victims to highlight the anthropocentric/egocentric viewpoint of the anguished a/Anthropocentric individual, whether it is Manfred or the Global North.
when faced with guilt. Its hero rejects Haraway’s call for “response-ability” during “times of urgencies without the self-indulgent and self-fulfilling myths of apocalypse, when every fiber of our being is interlaced, even complicit, in the webs of processes that must somehow be engaged and repatterned” (35). Manfred self-indulges in his debilitating guilt in an admirably self-critical manner, stating that he has always been his “own destroyer, and will be / [his] own hereafter” (Byron Manfred 3.4.160-161), but ultimately he refuses to “[stay] with the trouble” (Haraway 54) and make amends to the harm he was complicit in causing. Haraway suggests that responsibility must be enacted in the face of “unprecedented looking away” (35) from the networks we are tied to and continually harm. But Manfred does more than look away – he self-destructs.

One could argue against mapping Manfred onto the struggling individual in the late Anthropocene, since Manfred only ostensibly harms Astarte, not a web of relations, and escapes life because he has no way of enacting reparations to a dead woman. However, this thesis suggests that Manfred’s self-centered behaviour, which led to Astarte’s demise, extends to his dismissive, exploitative encounter with the Seven Spirits. In Manfred, violence is enacted through visual exposure. When Manfred is prompted to describe Astarte, he begins with her physical appearance. He emphasizes that “she was like me in lineaments,” placing his possession of her as central to her identity (Byron 2.2.105). When he asks the Spirits to “Approach me as ye are” (1.1.179), he appears to attempt a similarly possessive move. Manfred thus continues the same unethical behaviour that wrought his guilt, and does not seek, as an act of redress, to fix this behaviour. Instead, he seeks to depart life in apparent avoidance of accountability.

Self-destruction, dangerously, may be an appealing option for the a/Anthropocentric individual. As we struggle to reconcile how our everyday behaviours translate into planetary destruction, headlines such as “Greenland's melting ice sheet has passed the point of no return” (Rice) or scientific assessments such as the 2018 IPCC report, which strongly recommends that global carbon dioxide emissions must decrease in order for the planet to remain below 1.5 degrees Celsius of pre-industrial level emissions (IPCC), vie for our attention. All demand drastic, immediate and individually impossible change to the point of recommending self-erasure. As Sarah Jaquette Ray suggests in her book A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety, “self-erasure” is at the brunt of most climate communication on individual action, which for example suggest cutting out meat and other perceived luxuries in order to protect the environment (25).
Such thinking proposes mere existence as immoral, which may be true since we live within an extractive system that most cannot afford or do not wish to leave. Regardless, the framing of individuals and general “humanity as the problem” in eco-communication has fostered a psychosocial understanding that imminent and arrived ecocatastrophes are vast and impossible to individually address, “[presenting] challenges to emotional and social wellbeing” in communities affected and concerned about our local and global situations (Hayes et al. 7). One does not even have to be as overtly vicious and self-centered as Manfred to feel guilty – arguably, the inherently unsustainable practices that inform our habits make every decision to live in modern society vicious and self-centered. The feeling of no escape from the inconceivably complex tangle of unethical relations we participate in every day can erode our mental health and encourage a distressing sense of inertia (Ingle & Mikulewicz; Padhy et al.; Obradovich et al.). Thus, taking ownership of the spectral guilt imposed by society through a vengeful act of self-control seems, compared to solving climate change singlehandedly, feasible.

Making one’s death a victory against the guilt enforced by life in the Anthropocene appears much more satisfying, even logical. Indeed, a purely logistical summation of the global situation may encourage individual or mass death, since vertices in the web of exploitative relations would be removed, loosening pressure on resource extraction and other oppressive operations of consumption. Manfred is a model of failure in the most satisfying of ways, gaining the escape he desires from any need to rectify his earthly behaviour – a much more difficult endeavour, indeed, than to die. With his final words, Manfred takes on the anthropocentric positioning of radical posthuman ethics suggested by Elisabeth Grosz, centering around a “(non)moral ontology of Darwinism, which mourns no particular extinction and which waits, with surprise, to see what takes the place of the extinct” (221n4). This nihilistic spin on the inherent uncertainty of the planet’s future is what Alaimo calls a “liberation from mourning and moralism” (157), absolving individual humans from their modicum of responsibility and counterintuitively reinforcing anthropocentrism in its dismissal of how human activity significantly impacts the autonomous processes of the natural world. Ultimately, such a

17 Mass culling of human life to preserve resources has become a popular agenda perpetrated by the sympathetic villain model in pop culture media, including in the wildly successful 2018 and 2019 installments of the Marvel Comics films, Avengers: Infinity War and Avengers: Endgame (Tures).
philosophy promotes a specific anthropocentrism that is essentially misanthropic, in that it normalizes the unethical practices that led to ecocatastrophe as tough-love evolution, leaving the victims of such practices to bear the brunt of the pain – whether it is Astarte or the Global South (Sen Roy 2). For Manfred, there is nothing one can do but evaluate and enact self-judgment. He is unable to even face the nature of his relationship with his sister and the doom he caused her, let alone seek to enact reparations. Whether Byron realized it or not, Manfred’s quest is a microcosm of the ethical conundrum faced by individuals living in the Anthropocene.18

However, Manfred does not present solutions to this conundrum. The text only points towards it, which reinforces the problem of ecological readings: in order to be meaningful, they must be didactic. Manfred reflects its modern audience’s guilt-ridden “social character” in order, as McGann suggests, to “reflect upon’ that reflection in a critical and illuminating way” (38). Particularly for eco-conscious readings, the “way” in which a reader reflects on a text absolutely needs to result in a certain outcome – a reconsideration of one’s values and behaviours. However, the very nature of reader interpretation guarantees only one thing: uncontrollability of interpretation. We can reflect on our own positionality through Manfred’s central “straw man” (Hubbell “Our Mix’d” 7) and ask ourselves: would I intend to enact reparations or try to escape? And can this reflection inspire personal behavioural change in my current reality? This is the point to any piece of contemporary environmental communication – be it academic literature, climate science reports, or social media post sharing climate information: they attempt to inspire a more informed repositioning of values in hopes that this will translate into action. Reading Manfred ecologically can suggest the importance of constantly ironizing and critiquing one’s eco-ethics. But suggestion, I argue, is tragically the most integral concept to all environmental communication – tragic, because it does so little to address the intensifying threats of ecocatastrophe. Suggestion can reveal the situated point from which we understand, reflect, and take action. The suggestion of the a/Anthropocentric individual in Manfred presents a triangulation of the psychological, social, and ecological that points to one’s own situatedness – but it cannot enforce action from that point of being.

18 While the scope of Byronic nature may not present solutions for the tragic a/Anthropocentric individual, Sarah Jaquette Ray’s A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety may be a good start to understanding how the powerful emotions elicited by environmental issues can fuel individual reparations without centering one’s ego.
The benefit of reading Byron ecologically is the realization that you will always need a “supplement” to read his work ecologically (Rajan). You would need to read Byron’s “Alpine Journal” to catch glimpses of how he saw his miserable self “in the face of nature” (Sheley 52); you would need elemental ecocriticism to understand the depiction of the Seven Spirits as ironically eco-utopic; you would need Wordsworth to understand that Byron wrote against earnest depictions of nature as harmonious and moralistic. One cannot read Manfred or any of Byron’s texts ecologically without pre-conceived ecological understandings in order to reconstruct the text, as Tilottama Rajan observes, to “bridge the gap between conception and execution, and to supply a unity not present in the text” (2). Rajan speaks here more generally about Romantic texts as an ideological canon, but the idea of the reading supplement is particularly salient when considering that the act of reading texts ecologically must result in action for the survival of our species. Realizing that to read Byron ecologically requires supplement is beneficial because it opens the door to consider how all ecological literature requires supplement, since the environment itself is still considered supplementary. The conundrum as to why environmental communication can only suggest action parallels the frustrating situation of Byron still being only considered as a social and political writer. As explored in Chapter 2, the Western subject’s attitude towards the natural world can oscillate between remedial or violent because the idea of nature exists outside of the idea of self and society. Because environmentalism requires care in a manner that centers the human, the natural world becomes an add-on, fixable to any text as long as one has interest in caring for and understanding nature, and not inherently integral (Harvey).

The absence of discourse on nature-human interdependency in public socialization guarantees that value and behaviour change will only occur at individual levels when one reads the environment into a text, at which point the exercise becomes self-indulgent. Indeed the necessity for persuasion to read the environment into texts points to three realities: that scholarship on non-anthropocentric human-nature relations (which would incorporate nature as essential to life and self) is being gate-kept away from everyday understandings, shared only in academic or “educated people’s” circles; that such discourse may be flawed in operation because it still exists overtop of imperialist, capitalistic paradigms; and that scholarship and ways of knowing written and shared by Indigenous scholars and creators must hold larger spaces in both
conventional academic and public discourses on environmental action to address the previous two realities. Despite providing important eco-ethics, ultimately, reading the environment in *Manfred* points to the futility of reading *anything* ecologically. When we approach the text from an environmental standpoint, in a classic Byronic mode of sympathy and judgment, *Manfred* turns and responds back: *why* is there still a need to read ecologically?

### 3.4 Conclusion

The final chapter aimed to illuminate, through an elemental ecocritical lens, how Manfred’s quest presents a microcosm of the conflicted struggle of the *a/Anthropocentric* individual. The first section applied the philosophy of Empedocles to Manfred’s self-elementalization as a conflict of clay and lightning in his attempts to equalize himself to the Seven Spirits he tries to exploit. Empedocles’ philosophy might further suggest that to Manfred, the superiority of his spirit over his body and other spiritual subjects is only valuable in that it may render him *emotionless* – that is, unentangled from the conflicted elements that force him to contend with his guilty emotions. The implications of Manfred’s ultimate aim re-evaluate the existing readings of Manfred’s death as a typical iteration of the Byronic trope "making Death a Victory," a vengeance-seeking form of self-destruction. As a man who is confronted by the weight of his unethical behaviour in leading his sister Astarte to her death and receiving no forgiveness from her, he seeks a mode of escape accountability. This reading gives new light to his final words, “’tis not so difficult to die,” as a proclamation of the ease of dying compared to making impossible behavioural changes. This chapter concluded with the proposition that Manfred provides a model of failure for the *a/Anthropocentric* individual who is keenly privy to the sorrowful knowledge that to exist in such times is to be entangled in unethical and unsustainable relations. As a final note in considering the ecological dimensions of *Manfred*, I proposed that this dramatic poem does present a useful premise for re-evaluating eco-ethics in the Anthropocene, but its meaning may become lost as *Manfred*, like all texts, requires “supplement” to be read ecologically, thus pointing to the Byronic futility of ecological reading under the capitalist and imperialist paradigms when our everyday understandings are still influenced and trapped by our need for escape and convenience.
Conclusion

This thesis has explored Lord Byron’s perceptions of nature, particularly in his 1817 dramatic poem *Manfred*, to consider an unconventional eco-ethics for the late Anthropocene. Reading Manfred ecologically appears to suggest that, in order to address and withstand ecocatastrophe, mainstream environmentalism needs to promote more diverse eco-ethics, particularly ones that ironize, subvert and ask us to constantly re-analyze our position in a complex web of global and local relationships. The first chapter evaluated Byron and *Manfred’s* peripheral position in ecocritical Romanticism and considered how Byron’s personal and stylistic predilections towards negativity, contrariness, critique and anger, rather than prevent, may indeed inform a dynamic eco-ethics that reveals how the human constructs “nature.” For Byron, nature exists in the cerebral plane, mimicking the “rootlessness” of his own life and oeuvre, which contrasts nature poets such as William Wordsworth and John Clare who posit more localized eco-philosophies.

The second chapter evaluated functional issues with both globalized and localized nature paradigms in mainstream environmentalism. Manfred’s titular character and the geologist Hutton’s paradoxical understandings render nature both mysterious and exploitable, justifying extractivism and ecological inaction. These critical evaluations reinforce the need for more diverse understandings of nature to decentralize moralistic Western understandings of nature from the forefront of environmental discourse. In particular, Indigenous scholars and creators present ways of knowing and living that do not consider nature as an “add-on” to human existence, but its prerequisite. The third chapter demonstrated how Manfred’s quest for “self-oblivion” reflects the ethical conundrum of the a/Anthropocentric individual, through his search for e/motionless rest from the conflict of his “clay” body and “lightning” spirit and escape from accountability towards amending his exploitative behaviour, which brought about his sister Astarte’s death. The a/Anthropocentric individual may similarly experience eco-anxiety due to their conflicted battle between daily self-preservation and idealistic eco-action and must make a decision of whether to address this conflict or too seek “self-oblivion.”

While *Manfred* can point to our hypocrisies, the text cannot “absolve or resolve” them for us (Harvey). The map of Manfred as a/Anthropocentric individual is only ever a map. Byronic eco-ethics are stage directions to reconfigure one’s own mental theatre, but, much like public environmental communication, is only ever suggestion. The eco-ethics in *Manfred* needs the
reader to participate willingly to imagine its implied meaning. In the text’s encouragement to judge and sympathize simultaneously, we are left with the paradoxical realization that only those who care can read ecologically. This realization calls for a shift in understanding the environment as not an extraneous entity but as a concept rooted in human consciousness, thus integral to one’s lived existence on this planet.

This thesis is not alone in calling for such a paradigm shift – the question remains as to how to implement this shift, which I believe falls under what environmental scholars call “transformative change.” Transformative change is a leading eco-paradigm that suggests “a fundamental, system-wide reorganization across technological, economic, and social factors, making sustainability the norm rather than the altruistic exception” a practice that opposes the accepted idea of incremental change (Díaz et al. 7). Transformative change is discussed ubiquitously in academic spheres, but the real challenge is how to enact such in our everyday lived experiences. This thesis will part by considering literary ecocriticism plays in cultivating “transformative change.” Byron asks of us to consider potential hypocrisy in how we go about reading nature. This thesis suggests that we must read and reconsider the hypocrisy embedded in scholarly practices that envision utopic human-nature relations but do not prioritize nor are institutionally rewarded for the dissemination of such literary theorizations for public consumption to begin informing a new lived norm.

Academic understandings of non-anthropocentric philosophy must be presented in forms that are accessible and practical, otherwise we do not honour their full potentialities as constructive research. As UBC ecology and ethics academic Kai Chan observes, “Behaviour changes lead the way, and value changes mostly follow” (IPBES). In light of this, ecocritics eager to suggest change through value paradigm shifts might be putting the proverbial cart before the horse. Ecocritics must then consider: does the way I present theories of nonanthropocentrism, anticapitalism, and inanimate vitality encourage such thought in my everyday behaviour and thinking patterns? Can I see clearly how my scholarship can inform everyday behaviour or thinking patterns of my colleagues and readers? How can I present my findings in a manner accessible and digestible to non-academic communities? What are the academic barriers I face that de-incentivize public dissemination? If these questions are unanswerable, then perhaps the way we go about presenting literary criticism – perhaps as siloed, precious sources of knowledge
unsullied from their inability to be applied to lived experience – needs to be reconsidered, especially as people worry about their closing options in securing a livable future.

Ecocriticisms that entangle with new materialisms are in a unique position to push for “transformative change” through considering how the emotional and ethical spheres of thought can empower the individual to push for consumer, political, and social change. I think this is salient particularly for Indigenous and Romantic ecocriticisms. Romantic ecocriticism focuses on the era that is commonly agreed upon to have engendered the Industrial Revolution and a systematic understanding of human separate from nature. This field thus can put forward valuable understandings of the origins of current environmental thought in institutional and public levels that deter us from seeing transformative change and suggest alternatives. Indigenous ecocriticisms continue to theorize and cultivate ecologies that will and have enacted transformative change. Their voices must be amplified. In the understanding that addressing ecocatastrophe is indeed an emotional and paradigmatic issue, humanities scholarship must play a greater part in helping individuals – fellow academics, the public, ourselves – to be part of the solution. The good news is that there is not only way to succeed, but many. Collective and individual eco-action can be seen as a “choose your own adventure” quest (IPBES), but unlike Manfred, we must choose paths beyond apathy or blissful ignorance while allowing ourselves the space to continue making imperfect, hypocritical moves as we overall try to dismantle an unsustainable system and build anew.
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