

“A BIRD, OR BOAT, OR ANY THING”: WEEDY ENTANGLEMENT AND OCEANIC FREEDOM IN ELIZA COOK’S ANTHROPOMORPHOUS WORLD

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Abstract: Victorian poet Eliza Cook (1812-1889) once wished to be a “bird, or boat, or any thing” to inhabit the seascape she loved. Achieving this elision of human, object, and environment poetically, if not practically, Cook produced several anthropomorphising and animating it-narratives which adopted nonhuman perspectives as her own. This article examines the creation of plant voices in two such poems, “Song of the Hempseed” (1843) and “Song of the Seaweed” (1844), which offer contrasting yet intertwined negotiations of human–environment relationships. To foreground and theorise these texts’ plant/algal protagonists, I adopt an EcoGothic lens which pays particular attention to Cook’s use of key nonhuman EcoGothic tropes in “Song of the Seaweed,” namely her evocation of uncanny vegetal agency, multi-species monstrosity, and transcorporeal and sympathetic entanglements. Through these means, I argue that Cook’s “Seaweed” offers an education in shedding plant indifference, an opportunity to imaginatively identify with the nonhuman, and an encapsulation of the struggles of animating plants without erasing their alterity. An EcoGothic approach to Cook thus allows “Seaweed” to afford a poetic route through concepts key to current environmental thought and points to as yet uncharted territories which may prove fruitful in the expanding field of ecocriticism.

Keywords: Eliza Cook, EcoGothic, ecocriticism, plant-thinking, anthropomorphism

Like so many now-forgotten Victorian writers, British poet Eliza Cook (1812-1889) was once assured of an “undying reputation” by contemporary critics, and her work’s encapsulation of a cosy, if unoriginal, “spirit of home” assured her popular

favour.¹ Cook cultivated this domesticised reception of her verses through frontispiece portraits featuring the old armchair which gave its name to her most famous poem and through epigraphs promising a muse “homely in attire”; the resultant persona proved a persuasive one.² So well did it convince her contemporaries that even readers who admitted, “true, her imagination will sometimes soar with the lark above the clouds; or skim the ocean, in calm or storm,” dismissed these moments as anomalous flights of fancy from a domestic norm.³ Thus, the very works which, as her obituaries reminisced, gave Cook’s name “the familiar sound of a household word” also made it a byword for that same sphere, orchestrating an erasure, both contemporary and modern, of her frequent engagements with the natural world.⁴ Yet an alternative view of Cook, which this article will propose, is both necessary and possible, as testified by a contrasting portrait which circulated as a ballad-sheet illustration.⁵ Here, Cook trades in her armchair to perch on a shoreline rock with paper and pen at the ready, offering a rare glimpse of the environmentally inspired Cook this article will trace: a poet for whom the sea engenders such an “ecstasy of joyous fear” that she declared she would barter her very selfhood, become “a bird, or boat, or any thing,” to call it home.⁶

This wish was granted after a poetic fashion; Cook transformed herself into many different objects throughout her career in a mode of verse which Fabienne

¹ “Eliza Cook,” *The London Journal* 1 (1845): 376; “Eliza Cook’s Poetry,” *The Anglo American* 9, no. 15 (1847): 342.

² *Melaia and Other Poems* (London: Charles Tilt, 1840) and many later editions of Cook’s collected *Poems* borrow this epigraph from Robert Burns. Cook’s branding was so effective the phrase reappeared as unquoted and descriptive fact in J.H. Ingram’s review of her career in *The Poets and Poetry of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. A.H. Miles, vol. 8 (London: George Routledge, 1905-1907) 269.

³ “Eliza Cook’s Poetry” 342.

⁴ [Untitled Obituary], *The Glasgow Herald*, 26 September 1889, 6.

⁵ Lithographic prints of J. Watkins’ sea-side portrait of Cook were drawn by H. Brittan Willis and printed alongside a verse paying tribute to Cook’s “Ocean Altar.” This likeness gained wider circulation as a cover for “Song of the Dog,” *Musical Treasury* No. 660, just as T. Smart’s portrait of Cook with her mother’s armchair was mimicked across the ballad sheets of “The Old Arm Chair.” For a detailed examination of the signaling at work in Cook’s portraits, see Alexis Easley’s *New Media and the Rise of the Popular Woman Writer, 1832-1860* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

⁶ Eliza Cook, “Stanzas by the Sea-Side,” *Family Herald* 3, no. 122 (1845): 1.7; Eliza Cook, “The Waters,” *Melaia and Other Poems* (London: Charles Tilt, 1840) 1.20. Contemporary printings give both “any thing” and “anything”; *Eliza Cook’s Journal* has the latter, *Melaia* has the former.

Moine, in one of the few pieces of recent Cook criticism, has grouped as her “biographies [...] or autobiographies of things—of a goblet, a seaweed, a church bell, a faggot.”⁷ Although Moine does a great deal in advocating for consideration of Cook’s neglected works as sites of socio-political commentary, her list re-enacts and reinforces the nineteenth-century erasure, seen above, of Cook’s environmentally engaged verses; ranking a living organism alongside inanimate objects due to a cultural habit of overlooking vegetal being – a tendency termed “plant indifference” by Michael Marder – Moine pushes it down the final rung of the *scala naturae* into lifelessness.⁸

Lifting its speaker out of this objectifying position, I will examine “Song of the Seaweed,” first published in *The New Monthly Magazine* in December 1844, alongside “Song of the Hempseed,” also treated by Moine, which first appeared in *The Northern Star* in October 1843.⁹ In each poem, one landed, one aquatic, Cook offers a prosopopoetic autobiography in the style of an object narrative. In order to foreground and theorise these poems’ nonhuman protagonists, I will approach them by way of the “EcoGothic.” Since both subfields colliding in its creation – ecocriticism and the Gothic – are, as Tom J. Hillard has noted, themselves characterised by many diverging definitions, it is hardly surprising that this term has had something of a predilection for shapeshifting from tool to text descriptor and back again – sometimes within the same volume in the case of Andrew Smith and William Hughes’ edited collection, *Ecogothic*.¹⁰ Prompted by these variants to give increased stability to the term, Elizabeth Parker argues persuasively that although “EcoGothic” has some remaining merit as a mode or “flavour” uniting an otherwise indefinite body of texts, it is most usefully employed as denoting a framework or method, and such is its primary role in the following discussion.¹¹

⁷ Fabienne Moine, “The Politics of Objects: Eliza Cook’s Biographies of Things,” *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 83 (2016): 3.

⁸ Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁹ Eliza Cook, “Song of the Seaweed,” *The New Monthly Magazine* 72, no. 288 (1844): 448-52 and “Song of the Hempseed,” *The Northern Star* 6, no. 310 (1843): 3.

¹⁰ T.J. Hillard, “Gothic Nature Revisited: Reflections on the Gothic of Ecocriticism,” *Gothic Nature* 1 (2019): 26-28. This fluctuation across *Ecogothic*, ed. Andrew Smith and William Hughes (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013) has been noted by both Suzanne Roberts, “Review,” *Pacific Coast Philology* 50 (2015): 131-34 and Elizabeth Parker, *The Forest and the EcoGothic: The Deep Dark Woods in the Popular Imagination* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) 18-22.

¹¹ Parker, *Forest and the EcoGothic* 33-36. Original italics.

EcoGothic criticism is ultimately unified by the same central concern as its otherwise disparate Gothic parent; having evolved from Simon C. Estok's exploration of ecophobia (a "contempt and fear" of the natural world), "[v]irtually every critic who has written on the ecogothic," as Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils summarise, "describes its principal function as expressing fear."¹² Given the plant speakers operating in "Seaweed" and "Hempseed," I will examine Cook's generation of environmentally focused unease through techniques featured in Keetley and Sivils' description of "the nonhuman ecogothic": namely, nonhuman agency, monstrosity, and an entanglement of human and world. This strand of the EcoGothic not only encourages the decentring of human perspectives, but also recognises our enmeshment with the nonhuman as a means to "account for [the] agency of 'things'" – a fitting lens for Cook's it-narratives.¹³

The extent to which Cook's nonhumans are able to execute independent thought and action will therefore form the basis of this study. For Keetley and Sivils, it is a short hop from such agency to monstrosity, a predatory other hunting the human.¹⁴ Recognising with Estok that anthropocentrism leads to imagining monsters at the (human defined) margins, I will appropriate plant horror for algal purposes to explore the potential of new margins, implicit in plant perspectives, in making new monsters.¹⁵ Such agential monstrosities inevitably come to entangle Cook's human characters in the vegetal, allowing the Seaweed¹⁶ to render bodily boundaries meaningless in true Gothic transcorporeal style.¹⁷ Yet beyond this corporeal dimension, I will also propose that Cook's Seaweed threatens to infiltrate human identity, enmeshing readers' sympathies with the more-than-human world in a manner which draws upon another dimension of the Gothic: a desire which often accompanies the fear. This is not to disagree with Estok that "ecoGothic [is] always ecophobic," but rather to say that EcoGothic does not have to be *solely* ecophobic; indeed, we return to the "flavour" because of a strange,

¹² Simon C. Estok, "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia," *ISLE* 16 (2009): 207; Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils, "Introduction: Approaches to the Ecogothic," in *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, ed. Keetley and Sivils (New York: Routledge, 2018) n2.

¹³ Keetley and Sivils, "Introduction: Approaches to the Ecogothic" 11-12.

¹⁴ Keetley and Sivils, "Introduction: Approaches to the Ecogothic" 7.

¹⁵ S.C. Estok, "Theorising the Ecogothic," *Gothic Nature* 1 (2019): 34.

¹⁶ To prevent elision of Cook's constructed, anthropomorphised plants with real nonhuman lives and the erasure this would enact, I capitalise her characterised plants throughout.

¹⁷ Fred Botting's definition of the Gothic as "a writing of excess," straining at boundaries of all kinds, is almost universally quoted. Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996) 1.

fascinated desire for the monsters it holds.¹⁸ Having constructed an agential and opinionated EcoGothic Seaweed, I will close with a brief attempt to nuance the violence inherent in writing nonhuman perspectives by contextualising Cook’s poem in light of contemporary specimen books. I do not seek to suggest in all this that Cook was anything resembling a modern environmentalist, but rather that as the ecologically aware reader traverses the smooth sands of her collected works, they may just find themselves caught at by the sudden coldness of nonhuman perspectives capable of entangling them in new ways of thinking, beyond landedness and beyond humanness, even today.

First published a year before “Seaweed,” “Song of the Hempseed” provides an interesting benchmark. Although its title seems to promise extensive engagement with landed plant life, the vegetal is rather rendered conspicuous by its absence, as the Hempseed’s autobiography passes over its time as a living and growing organism within the first few lines:

Ay scatter me well, ’tis a moist spring day,
Wide and far be the Hempseed sown;
And bravely I’ll stand on the autumn land
When the rains have dropp’d and the winds have blown:
Man shall carefully gather me up;
His hand shall rule, and my form shall change.¹⁹

From this point onwards, the narrating Hempseed instead dwells upon the assorted human uses for rope, its posthumous form. The Hempseed’s very body as we encounter it is thus proudly manmade – “His hand shall rule,” not its own – as are the identities this form generates: throughout its afterlife, the Hempseed carries flags, makes toys, secures ships, hangs criminals, lowers coffins, rings church bells, and gathers harvests, fish, and water.²⁰ All too literally tied up in national agendas, education, colonialism, capital punishment, religious services, and the overuse of environmental resources, the Hempseed becomes the agent of all that seeks to impose culture as the antonym and shaping hand of nature. With no subjectivity beyond these functions, Cook’s Hempseed does indeed stay a “thing;” it is defined by and – from its first compliant utterance, “Ay” – revels in its literal objectification, despite its narrating role.²¹ Any potential for reading in

¹⁸ Estok, “Theorising the EcoGothic” 48. Parker’s EcoGothic is also “often somewhat tinged with desire,” Parker, *Forest and the EcoGothic* 36.

¹⁹ Cook, “Hempseed” ll.1-6.

²⁰ Cook, “Hempseed” l.6.

²¹ Cook, “Hempseed” l.1.

an EcoGothic discomfort is thus effectually quashed; since the Hempseed is afforded no agency outside or beyond the human, no otherness is permitted to enter the poem or challenge its anthropocentrism. This disregard of nonhuman life reappears in other poems; Cook instructs the eponymous addressees of her earlier poem “The Forest Trees” (1833) to “wave proudly” precisely because of their utility to humans.²² Constraining her supposed plant perspectives within these human value systems, Cook reduces the Hempseed to a mere puppet of plant life through which a noticeably human voice declares it “a goodly thing” because it “serve[s] from the play-ground to the grave” – in other words, that its sole virtue is its socioeconomic function.²³

When Cook writes about the sea, however, even critics who found her poetry “risible” and endowed only with “a lumbering elephantine sportiveness” were forced to acknowledge an unaccountable shift.²⁴ Characterising the ocean as a “fathomless,” “free” companion for her “own bond-hating soul,” a sudden celebration of liberty bursts forth with an intensity of feeling no landed home seems able to match.²⁵ Cook compares the land and sea in fourteen separate poems, and each time solid ground comes up short; even when warned that the sea air would likely prove fatal, she declares in a letter quoted in the preface to an American edition of her works that she “would sooner dwell in a ship than a castle” all the same.²⁶ Across her sea-centred verses (over thirty in total), the human–nature power dynamic of “Hempseed” and “The Forest Trees” is thus rewritten and reversed; in a suddenly agential world, it is the human poet who is held a worshipping “captive” in Cook’s littoral spaces, bewitched by the ocean “as the bird is charm-bound by the snake.”²⁷ In a promisingly EcoGothic entanglement, she is now the willing and consumed resource at risk of losing her authorial powers to the sea which “subdues [her verse] to a low and whisper’d dirge.”²⁸ Perhaps this is why the Hempseed takes the time to declare its service as ships’ ropes will not turn it “into aught that is ‘rich and strange’” – the aquatic

²² Eliza Cook, “The Forest Trees,” in *Melaia and Other Poems* (London: R.J. Wood Dispatch Office, 1833) ll.2, 38.

²³ Cook, “Hempseed” ll.103-104.

²⁴ L., “Remarks on Various Late Poets, No. IV. Eliza Cook,” *Southern Literary Messenger* 11 (1845): n.p.

²⁵ Cook, “The Waters” l.9; Eliza Cook, “The Mother Who Has a Child at Sea,” in *Melaia and Other Poems* (London: Charles Tilt, 1840) l.42.

²⁶ Letter from Eliza Cook quoted in the “Preface to the New Edition,” *Poetical Works* (Philadelphia, PA: Willis P. Hazard, 1856) xi.

²⁷ Cook, “Stanzas by the Sea-Side” ll.60, 65.

²⁸ Eliza Cook, “Stanzas to an Old Friend,” *Eliza Cook’s Journal* 28 (1849): 1.4.

spaces of Cook’s poetic world threaten to dissolve the anthropocentric value systems the Hempseed holds so dear.²⁹ Yet in its very denial of Ariel’s song, the Hempseed invites the question, would such a sea change allow modern readers to find an EcoGothic flavour in Cook’s creation of nonhuman voices?

In a politically and economically focused reading of “Song of the Seaweed” like Moine’s, there is no change to speak of. The poem follows the titular Seaweed from its birth and breaking of its holdfast through a series of nautical adventures – encounters with ships, storms, rockpooling children, whalers, sunken riches, and various creatures – until it is washed up on the strand and burned by Vraic harvesters. Interpreting this narrative as a form of algal Bildungsroman, Moine argues that Cook’s Seaweed learns to willingly surrender itself to a human, Chartist common good, and that this is “the true meaning of its existence.”³⁰ Stopping short of acknowledging the anthropocentric nature of this “common” good where commonality does not extend to the rest of the ecosystem, she assumes the use-based morality espoused in many of Cook’s works applies uniformly across her poetic world. Yet Cook’s fascination with liberating oceanic spaces suggests, I think, that her treatment of land-based lives may not translate directly to their aquatic counterparts. Therefore, although Moine sees the Seaweed as a convert investing its bodily “treasure” in a human economy, I would suggest that Cook repeatedly accentuates the otherness of her Seaweed:³¹ it thrives on salty seawater where dying mariners cannot, shows no enthusiasm to become fertilising treasure, and does not even touch the vast riches it passes under the waves. Engineering a gulf between our perspective and the Seaweed’s, Cook rather creates the unsettling sense that her object-subject has broken the holdfast connecting it to the anthropocentric world of her other it-narratives and become independent of us. The Seaweed follows its own agenda outwith human control – and from such anxieties about control, Estok argues, stems ecophobia.³²

The EcoGothic potential of “Seaweed” is accentuated by juxtaposition. Since the Seaweed is gathered “to quicken the grain of the earth,” its song is open to interpretation as a form of critical prequel to “Hempseed,” a doubling back of narrative thread that intertwines two divergent styles of it-narrative.³³ The Seaweed is, very pointedly, not the Hempseed, and staunchly defends its claims to vegetal life independent of anthropocentric frameworks:

²⁹ Cook, “Hempseed” l.8.

³⁰ Fabienne Moine, *Women Poets in the Victorian Era: Cultural Practices and Nature Poetry* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015) 41-42.

³¹ Cook, “Seaweed” l.211.

³² Estok, “Theorising the Ecogothic” 46.

³³ Cook, “Seaweed” l.192.

I am born in chrystal bower,
Where the despot hath no power
To trail and turn the oozy fern,
Or trample down the fair sea-flower.
I am born where human skill
Cannot bend me to its will.³⁴

In an inverted echo of the Hempseed's opening request that humankind put it to use, "scatter me well," the Seaweed's being "scatter'd abroad" as fertiliser brings death and poetic closure, implicitly critiquing its compliant predecessor: refusing to participate in the narration of the product rather than the plant, this poem goes no further.³⁵ Various human characters operating as though "Seaweed" were an it-narrative risk or lose their lives by failing to respect its animacy; a sailor seeing a "saving rope" chokes on it as he drowns, a foraging child seeking a toy or decoration teeters on the shoreline trying to reach it.³⁶ More threatening still, in setting out to "match" a ship's ropes – a role once filled by the reliable Hempseed – the Seaweed implies that it *could* put its "rich curling threads" to the same use as the Hempseed's suggestively similar "fine threads curl'd."³⁷ That is, in a moment of extra-textual awareness unique in Cook's it-narratives, it could be a "saving rope," but chooses instead to leave humanity to its own devices.³⁸ Courting the realisation that "the sea-weed creeps" across the background of the Hempseed's service as an anchor rope, this retrospectively significant cameo allows the Seaweed to overwrite the Hempseed's good deeds with dramatic irony, drowning those it once saved.³⁹ "The Forest Trees," too, seems undone in this shipwreck as the "cloud-crown'd pine," there cut down to enable human naval dominance, is here felled a second time.⁴⁰ Now a mast, the Seaweed's "pine" falls under "the heavy axe below," an unusual choice of wave metaphor which completes the image of reversed human-nature power dynamics.⁴¹ Slipping through the generic straitjacket of a typical Cook it-narrative and refusing to be another appendage to anthropocentric ends, the Seaweed defiantly proclaims the alterity and independence of its poetic voice.

³⁴ Cook, "Seaweed" ll.1-6.

³⁵ Cook, "Hempseed" l.1; Cook, "Seaweed" l.204.

³⁶ Cook, "Seaweed" ll.71, 98-105.

³⁷ Cook, "Seaweed" ll.27, 99; Cook, "Hempseed" l.10.

³⁸ Cook, "Seaweed" l.71.

³⁹ Cook, "Hempseed" l.21.

⁴⁰ Cook, "Forest Trees" l.11.

⁴¹ Cook, "Seaweed" ll.49-54.

Before tracing this mental and narratorial freedom into a potentially monstrous physical agency within the narrative, it is worth saying that, of course, “Song of the Seaweed” does not contain a genuine reflection of more-than-human “thought” any more than “Hempseed.” It cannot. Such anthropomorphisms are particularly contentious within the plant sciences; with varying definitions of “behaviour,” “intelligence,” and “consciousness,” many phytologists argue that such terms obfuscate the issue by conjuring the Darwinian idea of a plant “brain” in a literal and animal-like rather than a metaphorical, or here poetic, sense.⁴² By contrast, Catherine Packham’s study of Erasmus Darwin’s *The Loves of the Plants* (1789) has also argued compellingly that poetic personification can function as a means of, rather than hindrance to, scientific thought by encapsulating specimens’ vitality and raising ideas or questions in ways beyond the reach of standard and rationally bounded scientific writing.⁴³ Even in obviously literary contexts, as Keetley summarises, “plants exist on (and beyond) the outer limits of what we know” – their experiences can only be guessed at, and in that approximation (especially when assuming the very voice of plants) such narratives strain under the weight of their anthropomorphisms.⁴⁴ Marder, Natania Meeker, and Antónia Szabari agree that plants also sit outside our notions of agency and selfhood, and Marder in particular traces a species of “violence” in misguided attempts to confer status on plants (within human parameters) by attribution of these qualities; their otherness suffers once again.⁴⁵ And yet these same projections of autonomous identity simultaneously open new doors. By prompting us to recognise vegetal life as life, moments of pathetic fallacy carry a potentially powerful antidote to plant indifference that may prevent other violences – like the listing of our seaweed as an object. In fact, Lawrence Buell suggests that our urge to protect the more-than-human world might cease to exist without them.⁴⁶ In navigating this

⁴² Michael Pollan’s “The Intelligent Plant: Scientists Debate a New Way of Understanding Flora,” *The New Yorker*, 23 and 30 December 2013, brings together many phytologists’ opinions in a balanced account of this ongoing debate attentive to the role of metaphor in scientific enquiry and the lasting influence of Charles Darwin’s *The Power of Movement in Plants* (1880).

⁴³ Catherine Packham, *Eighteenth-Century Vitalism: Bodies, Culture, Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 149-59.

⁴⁴ Dawn Keetley, “Introduction: Six Theses on Plant Horror; or, Why Are Plants Horrifying?” in *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*, ed. Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) 6.

⁴⁵ Marder, *Plant-Thinking* 55; Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari, *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019) 7.

⁴⁶ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1995) 218. This said, first-person writing does not necessarily produce real-world behavioural changes.

double-bind, not all approaches to writing more-than-human perspectives are created equal. In some texts, such as “Hempseed” or another “Song of the Seaweeds” (1869) by Charlotte Elliott in which an allegedly algal voice is commandeered to preach the greatness of God, the speaker is simply a vegetal guise for an overtly human view that adheres to its own ideologies and value systems.⁴⁷ There is no attempt to get beyond oneself. Others, however, despite also being pieced together from authorial projections and fantasies, generate a nagging sense of difference, a “something else” that exists outwith the human, even as it self-consciously demonstrates the futility of the narrative exercise it undertakes. Cook’s “Seaweed,” in defying the expectations of human characters and readers alike, is of this type. In both cases, the plant becomes a palimpsest for human thoughts, but only the second attempts to write around the veins and tendrils so that, if we could, we might read those for ourselves in parallel, and since we cannot, directs attention to these speaking silences.

With a defiantly nonhuman perspective and an unsettling sense of agency established, Cook’s Seaweed is readily vilified within an EcoGothic framework. It bears too strong a resemblance to the triffid-inspired stars of modern plant horror, a mode with – Keetley notes – the primary hallmark of defining vegetal lives through avenging monsters, for it to be otherwise.⁴⁸ Given Cook’s predilection for including destruction and death within “Song of the Seaweed,” the Seaweed could play the monster with minimal contortion; untold numbers of wrecks and drownings occur in its presence and an ominous wave approaches just as a child is lured by the Seaweed to lean from the slippery rocks, leaving a deathly possibility hovering over the line break:

All earnestly gazing, he stretches to reach,
But a swift-spreading wave has roll’d over the beach;
It hath carried me back from the sun-lighted strand,
And the young child beholds me far, far from the land.⁴⁹

It also has wrongs to avenge. Unlike many of Cook’s other prosopopoetic narrators, the Seaweed demonstrates a consciousness of the destruction caused by the human “despot” in refusing a Hempseed-like cultivation, repaying the wrongs done to the forest trees, and dwelling on “writhing” and “weltering” whaling victims.⁵⁰ We might expect the human qualities inherent in an anthropomorphised

⁴⁷ Charlotte Elliott, *Thoughts in Verse on Sacred Subjects and Hymns* (London: William Macintosh, 1869) 97-98.

⁴⁸ Keetley, “Theses on Plant Horror” 20.

⁴⁹ Cook, “Seaweed” ll.102-105.

⁵⁰ Cook, “Seaweed” ll.2, 114-25.

Seaweed to ease this mounting sense of threatening otherness; however, to transplant Lynn Festa’s telling words into a specifically Gothic context, the process of anthropomorphism itself “spawns monstrosities” by conjuring hybrid amalgamates of human and subject.⁵¹ There is, therefore, rage enough to make a monster, and sufficient exposition of humankind’s endless consumption to put the *moneo*, the warning, into its monstrosity.

However, Keetley also explains that by confining plants to human narrative arcs and leaving the real scope of human–vegetal difference unexplored, such plant horror writing offers a step sideways rather than forwards in understanding plant perspectives: narratorial pretence aside, the guiding voice is still ours. Arguing for a straightforwardly monstrous Seaweed hell-bent on revenge would, therefore, do Cook’s poem a disservice. Indeed, Moine’s thoroughly supported reading of a Seaweed devoid of agency stands testament to the fact that both constructions are possible: the monstrous *and* the will-less weed. Unlike the EcoGothically macabre and purposeful protagonist of Cook’s “Song of the Carrion Crow” (1833) for whom “Revenge was sweet,” I would suggest the uncanny power of the Seaweed rather rests in its ambivalence; an active revenge plot is only ever implied, while the possibility of seaweed as object remains in play throughout.⁵² To return to the shipwreck as a notable example, her Seaweed narrates:

Still I twine about the pine,
Till a wild and bursting cry
Tells the fearful work is done,
The ship leaps up, the mast is gone,
And away with it go I.⁵³

Is the Seaweed carried off alongside the mast by the storm, or does it bear the mast off triumphant? Cook makes it impossible to say.

The resultant uncertainty, for those inclined to read both ways, results in a flicking backwards and forwards between perspectives like a thaumatrope, two distinct images overlapping for the reader into a new hybrid whole.⁵⁴ In this, Cook

⁵¹ Lynn Festa, *Fiction without Humanity: Person, Animal, Thing in Early Enlightenment Literature and Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019) 131-34.

⁵² Eliza Cook, “Song of the Carrion Crow,” in *Melaia and Other Poems* (London: Charles Tilt, 1840) 1.39.

⁵³ Cook, “Seaweed” ll.53-57.

⁵⁴ Meeker and Szabari also recognise plants’ capacity for simultaneously active and passive existence to human perspectives, characterising it as a kind of “oscillation” (*Radical*

creates a sort of EcoFantastic, for want of a better phrase, which allows for and depends upon the coexistence of both possibilities – active *and* passive vegetal life. Thus, Cook's verse can at once engender an EcoGothic fear of attack by monstrous plant to haunt the reading experience, yet avoid stamping this human-engineered plot upon her Seaweed's inner life, thereby preserving a degree of its unknowability. Doubling is in itself a staple of Gothic criticism dating back to Sigmund Freud's "The Uncanny."⁵⁵ As if to encourage such doubled readings, "Seaweed" abounds with words carrying the weight and potential of two meanings: the "shrouds" in ships' rigging echo winding sheets; the "reef," part of a sail, rings of the underwater rocks; the "cleaving" whale could be either dividing or adhering before it "dyeth" the coral with its lifeblood; "spar" promises either ship beams or shining crystals; a "troll" is as much a fishing method as a round song; and a "tiller" can tend fields as well as steer a ship.⁵⁶ The Seaweed's song thereby creates a string of alternatives, its own textual doppelgängers, that ensure a fluid, ambiguous text capable of retaining its narrator's alterity even as it gives the Seaweed's autobiography.⁵⁷ In an obscurity that serves Gothic and ecological purposes simultaneously, our Seaweed thus may or may not have physical agency, and may or may not be guilty of human-hunting monstrosities. Through a non-hierarchical logic, which a seaweed or algal thinking might recommend, both readings are two branches of the same poetic body: Cook does not force readers to privilege one version over the other, and in refusing to present a unified truth displaces the human perspective from the centre of the world.

The very ease with which the possibility of an agential Seaweed, self- rather than tide-directed, lends itself to monstrosity is worthy of note for the way that it pushes at the land-born limitations of current plant-thinking. Although seaweeds are technically algae or protists rather than plants, Cook's "sea-flower," complete with "root," "bloom," and "fruit," writes itself into the purview of the typically landed plant studies.⁵⁸ Moreover, many of plant-thinking's core tenets apply to algal perspectives: at least equally overlooked, protists are no more disposed to conversation than plants and their perspectives just as unrecoverable. However,

Botany 8), but stop short of drawing out the specifically Gothic potential of the resultant in-between space.

⁵⁵ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17 (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974) 234-36.

⁵⁶ Cook, "Seaweed" ll.28, 40, 69, 117, 123, 137, 188, 207.

⁵⁷ Festa describes such puns as offering "a switchpoint for one-track minds" in pointing to alternative valid contextual frameworks that might be used. Festa, *Fiction without Humanity* 154.

⁵⁸ Cook, "Seaweed" ll.4, 7-8.

Marder and Keetley concur in making a root-bound immobility the foundation of much of their thought;⁵⁹ this “profound unfreedom,” to borrow Keetley’s neat encapsulation, could not be more at odds with algal lives and bodies which, as one Victorian naturalist put it, “seem to float about quite unattached.”⁶⁰ Rooted or not, a seaweed’s life is one in motion and within motion, an embodiment of undulation and entanglement; stillness means not just death, but decontextualisation, a removal from the water. Grounded within a land-oriented perspective, Keetley equates plant movement with plant monstrosity in a manner inapplicable to aquatic worlds, pointing to the wild and wonderful means that plant horror writers invent to counteract their subjects’ usual determined fixity, from triflids to airborne particles.⁶¹ In other words, in hydrophasic thought, an animate plant is an item of horror.⁶² Though there is not space to develop it here, a specifically weedy, algal thinking is needed to avoid this blanket monstrosity and conceptualise unlanded forms of plant life in the multi-directional and non-hierarchical modes necessitated by the environments that shape them.

To better wrangle with these interrelated notions of agency and monstrosity, I have so far allowed the delusion that “Seaweed” presents a concrete “us” and “them.” However, while human consciousness is unable to pass into plant bodies, Cook cultivates the uneasy sense that our materiality cannot do otherwise, opening up the EcoGothic potential of transcorporeal entanglements. The poem contains two viscerally unsettling moments: the Seaweed choking a drowning sailor, “gurgling through his teeth,” and a vampiric, thirst-maddened crew “beginning to think / of a messmate’s open’d vein.”⁶³ That these are both centred around disordered consumption is, I think, no accident. Food is, as Stacy Alaimo notes, “Perhaps the most palpable trans-corporeal substance.”⁶⁴ Just as suddenly stopping a ticking clock makes us eerily aware of the sound we had all but filtered out of our conscious experience, Cook’s dramatic derangement of the normal inter-bodily flow of matter in these episodes haunts readers with an increased sensitivity to who is eating whom. As a result, the poem’s underlying ecosystem

⁵⁹ Keetley, “Theses on Plant Horror” 9, 13; Marder, *Plant-Thinking* 19. Meeker and Szabari’s *Radical Botany* touches upon the harvesting of kelp during their discussion of twentieth-century film; however, they do not make theoretical space for the differences of aquatic or algal life.

⁶⁰ “Sketches in Natural History,” *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* 90 (1845): 182.

⁶¹ Keetley, “Theses on Plant Horror” 13.

⁶² A term coined by Margaret Cohen’s “Literary Studies on the Terraqueous Globe,” *PMLA* 125 (2010): 657-62 encapsulating the propensity of scholars and critics to overlook the ocean even as it occupies a leading role in a text.

⁶³ Cook, “Seaweed” ll.75, 161-62.

⁶⁴ Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010) 12.

of transcorporeal absorption is suddenly exposed:⁶⁵ without water, the stranded seaweed dries and is harvested for fertiliser; the fertiliser commingles with the growing grain; humankind eats the grain; men drown and decompose in the water; the seaweed dries without the water and is harvested – and so on, and on. Through this circulatory logic, Cook's otherwise conventional *memento mori* ending adopts a more ecosystemic guise; all things, not just objects as in Moine's reading, are "recycled," and so we will not only "mingle at last with the good Seaweed" on the fields, but indeed already have the gurgling seaweed and the blood of our messmates' veins within us.⁶⁶ We have already swallowed them. And so, as the soliloquising Seaweed is anthropomorphised, Cook's opening of the transcorporeal floodgates renders her human readers less solid, less discrete, less centralised – less human and more seaweedy in both content and concept.

When the enmeshment of human and algal bodies is thus foregrounded by an EcoGothic lens, the usual notion of marginality is rapidly rendered meaningless and humans are revealed to be just as monstrous as any other species. Worth quoting in full for the light it casts on the world of Cook's "Seaweed," Agnes Scherer's ideal candidate for the role of "monster plant,"

grows rapidly, often menacingly so; it walks around and chases its human victims with snatching arms like a predator; it often sucks their blood or eats them, occasionally with a mouth full of fangs; and sometimes it even wants to merge with the human body.⁶⁷

The Seaweed itself would, I think, fail to raise an interview: its growth is never mentioned after it detaches from its holdfast; its agency in entangling humans is, as we have seen, readerly speculation, and it never causes animals harm; fangless, it eats nothing; and it is only subsumed by human bodies after being burned against its will. The humans of the poem can, however, put forward a much richer resume: the "young naked feet" trampling the Seaweed as it withers seem well in training for the adult harvest; sailors, children, and Vraic collectors seem

⁶⁵ Now tied up with the environmental crisis, the concept of an ecosystem – an interdependent and interacting network of life forms and landscapes – is contemporary with Cook. William Henry Harvey's *A Manual of the British Marine Algæ* (London: John Van Voorst, 1841) xliii expressed a sense that "there is such a mutual dependance between one living creature and another, that none but the All-wise can dare to determine whether one, the most minute, can be spared without endangering the destruction of all."

⁶⁶ Moine, "Objects" 32; Cook, "Seaweed" 1.218.

⁶⁷ Agnes Scherer, "The Pre-Cosmic Squiggle: Tendril Excesses in Early Modern Art and Science Fiction Cinema," in *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*, ed. Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) 31.

perpetually “snatching hold”; only humans evince a desire for others’ veins and, by carrying off the Seaweed to be consumed by their own food source, they ensure a future amalgamation with plant bodies.⁶⁸ Scherer’s monster plant description is, then, ironically more applicable to the humans of “Seaweed.” This human monstrosity, supplemented by mention of other human violences such as whaling, has significant implications for the alignment of readers’ identifications. Listing methods for promoting reader–character sympathies, Vera Nünning warns that figures intended to spark identification “should not violate important cultural values, norms, and feeling rules in major ways.”⁶⁹ Therefore, in staging the taboo-breaking vampiric cannibalisms of their in-poem human counterparts, Cook drives readers to make abject others of themselves – to eject their own species from the sphere with which they identify, making anthropocentrism momentarily impossible. It is not a desire to merge with a “loving nature” that Estok emphasises has no place in the EcoGothic that we feel at the close – the Seaweed is too bound up with death for this; but nor, in this moment, is it nature that we are afraid of.⁷⁰ Creating a desire for the vegetal through fear of the human, Cook momentarily facilitates the fullest extent of entanglement – a rejection of the human in favour of the plant.

As Nünning, Suzanne Keen, and others have rightly cautioned, readers empathise to varying extents, respond to widely different stimuli and are hindered by unique biases:⁷¹ in short, different readers will be pulled in by different identifications. As an opportunity to discover the extent of their entanglement with the more-than-human, the poem’s close can be taken as posing a form of identification test to its readers. Cook’s ending is essentially an anthropocentric retelling of “Song of the Seaweed” sung by newly arrived Vraic harvesters in which the biography of “the good Seaweed” – a phrase emphatically repeated at the end of the last three verses – consists of being fed to other Hempseed-like goodly things and absorbed into economic and moral usefulness:⁷²

No more will you dive in the fathomless cell,
Or leap in the sparkling foam; [...]

⁶⁸ Cook, “Seaweed” ll.170, 63.

⁶⁹ Vera Nünning, “The Value of Literature for the ‘Extension of Our Sympathies’: Twelve Strategies for the Direction of Readers’ Sympathy,” *REAL* 36 (2020): 88. While her discussion focuses upon inter-human identification, the logic applies equally well here.

⁷⁰ Estok, “Theorising the Ecogothic,” 39.

⁷¹ Nünning, “The Value of Literature for the ‘Extension of Our Sympathies’” 87; Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 68.

⁷² Cook, “Seaweed” ll.198, 208, 218.

The land must be till'd, the tiller must feed,
And the corn must be help'd by the good Seaweed.⁷³

We could, therefore, pick up our old perspectives where we left off and read this return to human narratorial structures as authoritative closure and an imposition of order. The harvesters' "lightsome" tune is, however, also our Seaweed's "death-dirge": leaving its world behind, its body is burned and ashes scattered.⁷⁴ "Dust to dust."⁷⁵ As Keetley notes, neither life nor literature asks humans to peer through vegetal eyes very often, but from the opening, first-person words, "I am born," until this final scene, Cook's "Seaweed" has made just such a call upon readers' imaginations.⁷⁶ Through sharing the Seaweed's perspective, many readers will have come to identify with it, developing an increased consciousness of its individual value and lively presence;⁷⁷ the harvesters' "merry strains" of funereal allusions may thereby sound off-key.⁷⁸ Cook's readers thus implicitly choose their own ending depending on their current position on the plant awareness–plant indifference spectrum. For readers no longer able to identify with the plant indifference of the new human narrators' song, their mourning betrays the extent of their newfound more-than-human sympathies, while their heightened awareness of the vegetal narrator's sudden disappearance recreates something of the plant silence ever present in the world outside the text.

Sympathetic readers are left in this deafening silence to wonder what the seaweed might have said if left to finish its story on its own terms. The absence of these concluding vegetal remarks is made all the more conspicuous by the Seaweed's moralising of others' exploits during its adventures:

I am gone, my fair boy, I am gone, and for ever;
Thou wilt covet full many bright things, but take heed,
They elude not your grasp like the pretty Seaweed,

quietly directing attention to the existence and potential of plant narrators in themselves.⁷⁹ Plants as authors, writers, and tellers of tales in the conventional

⁷³ Cook, "Seaweed" ll.201-208.

⁷⁴ Cook, "Seaweed" ll.187-88.

⁷⁵ Cook, "Seaweed" l.214.

⁷⁶ Keetley, "Theses on Plant Horror" 6; Cook, "Seaweed" l.1.

⁷⁷ Buell, for example, notes the causation between anthropomorphism and the reader's ties with nonhuman characters. Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* 196.

⁷⁸ Cook, "Seaweed" l.183.

⁷⁹ Cook, "Seaweed" ll.107-109.

sense are, of course, an impossibility in nature. As a basis for his model of plant-thinking, Marder argues that real-world plants externalise via chemical signals, bodily form, and movement; “the silence of vegetation is unbreakable and absolute,” and in this silence plant experience is held incontrovertibly beyond us.⁸⁰ Cook’s singing Seaweed is, quite intentionally, a long chain of anthropomorphisms removed from this raw vegetality and it is undeniable that, for all its many rebellions, it fulfils more human purposes than fertilising grain. Outwith the narrative, the Seaweed serves readers’ ends in being made to speak to and entertain them; it serves Cook in bringing her financial gain and visibility before a reading public; it serves editors and publishers in circulating across the wider textual economy of the Victorian periodical press. In being made to “speak” it seems to lose itself, becoming more objectified than ever.

And yet I would like to close with an attempt to counterbalance the commodification of Cook’s Seaweed, to find space for the “agency of ‘things’” characterising the nonhuman EcoGothic, by siting the poem within its original context, specifically the popularity of seaweed books using pressed specimens as illustrations throughout the 1840s–50s.⁸¹ In her study of an offshoot of these books, Anna Atkins’ *Photographs of British Algae* (1843–1853), Ann Garascia argues that the impact of plant bodies upon the finished products – through specimens’ individualities and the absence of a human agent drawing the final plant form upon the paper – is such that the plants functioned as authors.⁸² Yet the dynamics at play in this translation from plant body to plant author are, I think, more problematic than she allows: whether dried and pressed or submersed in chemical reagents, the algae in this situation are only authors in so far as a corpse is an author. Seaweeds in particular, as established above, live a life of perpetual motion; it is only through our habituation to an apparent vegetal stillness – remember Keetley’s moving monsters – that the arrested lives of seaweeds are more easily overlooked than those of more animated beings, like an insect or a bird shut between the pages. What specimen books offer are fragments of plants without context, shaped by human hands, arbitrarily flattened, and slowly discolouring. Recognising this violence, it becomes increasingly telling that the

⁸⁰ Marder, *Plant-Thinking* 74-75. It is also a foundational, first-page fact in Keetley’s “Theses on Plant Horror” that vegetal life is silence made tangible; however, recent studies have recorded and attributed meaning to plant-produced sounds: I. Khait et al., “Sounds Emitted by Plants Under Stress Are Airborne and Informative,” *Cell* 186 (2023): 1328-36.

⁸¹ Keetley and Sivils, “Introduction” 12.

⁸² Ann Garascia, “‘Impressions of Plants Themselves’: Materializing Eco-Archival Practices with Anna Atkins’s *Photographs of British Algae*,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 47 (2019): 267-303.

text-substituting bodies of these supposed co-authors are inherently opposed to the materiality of the media they are made to inhabit; were such a book to get wet enough, the paper and ink would be destroyed but the algae might just regain its animation, its movement, and its third dimension.⁸³ Its unmediated expression comes in the destruction of, not via, the page.

It is amongst such other commodified algal “authors” that Cook’s “Seaweed” entered the literary world, and in many ways the verse form seems to double a real plant body as a textual decoy for the speaking subject. As well as altering the pace, Cook’s wide divergences in line and stanza length allow the poem to twist and morph its shape upon the page, with lines narrowing and flaring between four and twelve syllables, and stanzas fluctuating from four to twenty-two lines. Of particular note is Cook’s choice to mark these shifts with four hard section breaks – solid lines between the verses – which appear rarely in Cook’s poetic output and mimic the larger indicators dividing one periodical article or poem from another.⁸⁴ The momentary illusion this creates – that these are, in fact, five different poems among the miscellany of a periodical or collection – presents an apparently self-fragmenting poem, each break allowing another part the possibility of splitting off from the whole.⁸⁵ The poem looks, in short, something like the textual equivalent of a pressed specimen, undulating, inconsistent, and in danger of cracking, but remains untouched by both physical pressing and the quiet violence of taxonomic naming. As we have already seen, Cook’s poem also mimics the entanglements of preserved seaweed specimens beyond their allocated page – wrapping around page edges, ghosting through onto other sheets, over-running printed borders – in the way it forges connections with and incorporates parts of Cook’s larger poetic output. Allusions to “Hempseed” and “Forest Trees” can be read in. Yet “Song of the Goblet,” “Song of the Beggars,” “Song of the Carrion Crow,” and Cook’s other “Song of—” pieces are also each conceptually interlinked with “Seaweed” through the repetition of titular structure and

⁸³ W.J. Hooker’s *Flora Scotica; or A Description of Scottish Plants, II* (London: Constable and Co., 1821) 74 notes that rehydration could return some pressed algae to their original state.

⁸⁴ Including “Seaweed,” only nine of the 383 pieces in the 1861 Routledge, Warne and Routledge *Poems* feature printed in-poem breaks (two being the unusually lengthy opening poems).

⁸⁵ The degree of resemblance between section breaks and article divides naturally differs from periodical to periodical. This variable confusion also translates into volume form: the in-poem breaks in the 1861 Routledge, Warne and Routledge and the 1848 Simpkin, Marshall and Co. *Poems* are the same as those marking transitions between poems. Other publishers, e.g. Frederick Warne and Co, create a sharper visual distinction.

autodiegetic narration, thereby constructing a continuum of perspectives encompassing and interlinking objects, humans, animals, and plants alike. The poetic body of Cook’s “Seaweed” might even be said to fall prey to the textual “recycling” that, in Margaret Beetham’s ecologically apt words, characterised the Victorian periodical market, allowing its continued circulation in other forms.⁸⁶ “Song of the Seaweed” is, then, also a promising song *in place of* the seaweed. Since its twisting, entangling, and fragmenting pseudo-body allows the algal speaker to replace the susceptible plant body with an uninjurable textual substitute, it evades the objectification of collectors (paradoxically for a plant) by becoming all voice.

In turning an EcoGothic lens upon such an unlikely candidate as Eliza Cook, this short piece has sought to show that this framework’s potential to dig up the often overlooked negative and terrifying side of nature writing, which Hillard has called “the body buried in the basement” of ecocriticism, can be applied much more broadly than it has been to date – even within the cosy walls of Cook’s apparently domestic idyll.⁸⁷ By tracing the uncanny vegetal agency, the multi-species monstrosity, and the transcorporeal and sympathetic entanglements at work in “Song of the Seaweed,” it becomes apparent that Cook not only “sang for the people” as J.H. Ingram believed.⁸⁸ She also sang against the people, willing both to make herself into “any thing” and to make room for any thing in anyone.⁸⁹ A modern EcoGothic approach thus allows a Victorian author known for “beautiful conservatism” to offer unusual tools for negotiating current human–environment relationships and the questions continuing to vex plant studies.⁹⁰ In an EcoGothic “Seaweed,” we find an education in shedding plant indifference, an opportunity to imaginatively identify with the nonhuman, and an encapsulation of the struggles of representing plant voice and agency without violence. And perhaps most usefully, we also come up against the edges of the still-evolving fields of EcoGothic and plant-thinking through the limited applicability of existing landed frameworks in conceptualising life in aquatic spaces. Perhaps a cross-pollination of ecocritical plant studies and the nautical Gothic or wider Blue Humanities would prove a fruitful direction for further theorisation of these much-neglected marine plant lives.

⁸⁶ Margaret Beetham, “Periodical Writing,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women’s Writing*, ed. Linda H. Peterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 223.

⁸⁷ Hillard, “Gothic Nature Revisited” 24.

⁸⁸ Ingram, “Eliza Cook” 270.

⁸⁹ Cook, “The Waters” 1.20.

⁹⁰ “Miss Eliza Cook,” *The Illustrated Review* 2 (1871): 227.

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